



**VANISHING
EDENS**

**Responses to Australia
in the Works of
Mary Gilmore, Judith Wright
and Dorothy Hewett**

by

SHIRLEY WALKER

FOUNDATION FOR AUSTRALIAN LITERARY STUDIES

1992

The Colin Roderick Lectures: 1991

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PREFACE

The Colin Roderick Lectures, sponsored by the Townsville Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, are delivered annually by a distinguished Australian writer or academic at James Cook University, and subsequently published by the Foundation. The series is named for Emeritus Professor Colin Roderick, Foundation Professor of English at James Cook University and distinguished Lawson scholar. Colin Roderick also established the Foundation in Townsville in 1966 and continues in his retirement to play an active role as its Vice-Patron. The publication of the Lectures makes them available not only to members of the Foundation but to the world-wide literary and academic community interested in the study of Australian literature.

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Professor A.J. Hassall
Executive Director

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INTRODUCTION

The three women writers whose work is discussed in the chapters which follow have this in common: they are, all three, strong and radical women who have been closely involved in political and social causes in Australia. They have another and perhaps surprising feature in common: their tender and eulogistic images of Australian childhood. Although these images are similar in that they emphasise the beauty, plenitude and sensual appeal of Australian nature, they provide, for each writer, a completely different point of departure. For Gilmore they are a reminder of an Australian past, of a 'scented' land, clothed in wildflowers and inhabited by a race of noble Aborigines and upstanding pioneers. Her recognition, at the same time, of the destruction of the environment and the massacre of the Aborigines lends considerable ambiguity to her work.

Wright too, particularly in her last three volumes of poetry, produces pure and beautiful images of a carefree pastoral childhood. She is, however, too much a realist, and too politically aware, to dwell upon them. Instead they are seen in the context of a revaluation of her family relationships, and in contrast to the completely different childhood of Aboriginal children. Both were 'dreamtimes', for the reality is that of a society in confrontation — 'The knife's between us' — and a ruined environment. Related to Wright's concern for the environment is her commitment, in these last poems, to a poetic which expresses that 'reverence' which she considers to be the correct attitude towards nature. Her new poetic is spare and imagistic, and, although her admiration for Persian and Japanese poets and poetry finds expression in her use of Eastern forms such as the haiku and the ghazal, the images are consistently those of Australian nature.

Childhood images, paradisaical and otherwise, dominate Dorothy Hewett's writing and provide the basis for her mythic and fantastic constructions of the self and its struggle for sexual and artistic autonomy. Hewett is clearly committed to a belief in the self as a unified speaking subject - a Romantic position - and this belief provides the dynamic for her poetic and autobiographical works. The quest for recognition of the self, and its realization in the concluding sequences of *Alice in Wormland*, is also a Romantic one. The use of fairytale and storybook characters, such as Rapunzel and Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*, provides exciting analogues to the feminine struggle for individuality. Hewett's autobiography, *Wild Card*, is discussed, but more exciting alternatives are provided by the verse sequence *Alice in Wormland*, which is also clearly autobiographical.

A nostalgic commitment to the past, in particular to paradisaical images of a lost childhood, is obviously common to all three writers, but the interesting and exciting feature of their work is the way in which each, in a completely different way, utilizes her images of the vanished Eden of childhood and subordinates them to her dominant themes: the construction of the past (Gilmore), a reconsideration, in old age, of the national and poetic tradition (Wright), and various constructions of the feminine self (Hewett).

Chapter 1

MARY GILMORE: CONSTRUCTING THE PAST

I saw the beauty go,
The beauty that, in a stream,
Flowed through the breadth of the land
Like the fenceless foot of a dream.
*'I Saw the Beauty Go'*¹

Over the first sixty years of this century Mary Gilmore constructed for Australian readers an ideology of the past, one in which 19th century Australia is seen as an impossible Eden, teeming with wildlife, clothed in wildflowers, the scent of which reached the 'flower-starved' immigrants before they even caught sight of shore. This construction of the past, pervasive in the poetry, found its focus in the autobiographical writings of 1934-35: *Old Days: Old Ways* and *More Recollections*.² Primeval Australia (the adjective is Gilmore's) is presented as the body of a woman, richly sensual and inexhaustibly fertile. In the prose piece 'She Was a Scented Land', Australia is seen as a perfumed Aphrodite rather than an indigenous mythical figure. Gilmore's lavish images counter the bloodless and emasculated iconography of scentless flowers, songless birds and so on, which was so prevalent in the early, largely male, accounts of Australia. In Gilmore's construction of the past the Aboriginal people were the acolytes who paid homage to this virgin yet fertile land, treasuring and hoarding her riches. The white man, on the other hand, plundered the land, destroyed her vegetable and animal life and her Aboriginal servitors, and left her, in Gilmore's words, a

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‘widowed’,³ a ‘naked’ land.⁴ The change is from an active order of natural plenitude to a passive one of husbandry and cultivation; a change accompanied by destruction and death. Gilmore, on several occasions, justifies the change by a feeble recourse to ‘necessity’, the keyword of that social Darwinism which was so prevalent in 19th century thought.

There are a number of striking inconsistencies in Gilmore’s vision of the past.⁵ Though a radical socialist, she was very much an establishment figure, the spokesperson for the exciting and even utopian potential of this country. Why then this nostalgic longing for an untouched Australia? The strength of her paradisaical images, and the sense of loss engendered in poems such as ‘I Saw the Beauty Go’ (p.191), are in marked contrast to her pride in family and race, a race which was responsible for so much destruction. Moreover, the sensuality and love of beauty which the Edenic images reveal are very much at odds with the rigidity of a family creed — that of stoicism and self-denial — which Gilmore consistently professed. On a political level there is an even more obvious inconsistency. Though passionately involved in contemporary radical causes, Gilmore’s vision of Australia — at least by 1918, when she published her finest collection *The Passionate Heart*⁶ — is essentially an elegiac one, celebrating a mythic Australia, with which neither the present nor the future could possibly compare.

These inconsistencies are most obvious in Gilmore’s writings on social and political affairs. For over sixty years she was the spokesperson for the finest of Australian values. She consistently argued for an equal and just society and for the rights of those who were underprivileged because of poverty, gender or race. She was one of the first to champion the cause of the Aboriginal people, emphasising their spirituality, their culture and their management and conservation of their natural world. During the First World War, hers was the pre-eminent voice of pity for the dead, and in the second war, when Australia was under threat of invasion, her patriotic writings, especially the poem ‘No foe shall gather our harvest/ Or sit on the stockyard rail’, thrilled and rallied the nation. At the same

time, Gilmore was a prisoner of some of the most constrictive ideology of her time. Her passionate commitment to racial purity — almost a mind-set with her — was shared by most of the white community, as was her support for the White Australia Policy. Both were totally at odds with her belief in absolute equality and justice. Her horror at any suggestion of miscegenation and racial impurity led to her failure to recognise the value of Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929), which she saw as a 'vulgar and dirty' novel,⁷ to her comments on 'mongrel' races in *Hound of the Road*,⁸ and to her ambivalent attitude towards the destruction of the Aboriginal race. William Wilde, in his biography *Courage a Grace*, quotes a revealing passage from one of Gilmore's columns in the *Worker*:

That there are inferior races no one doubts. Given equal numbers it is the inferior which always dies off before the advance of civilization... If this be so the white man as the most highly civilized of all peoples, is the strongest, individually, and the one who, of all others, *should be permitted to survive*; ... he, who would sink him in the sea of another's colour, stands in the way of progress, and scuttles the ship that would bear us yet further on.⁹

The inconsistencies in Gilmore's thought can perhaps best be approached through certain binary oppositions which frame and structure her texts. According to H el ene Cixous and others, such oppositions are embedded in patriarchal culture and language. Binary oppositions relentlessly structure our thinking, feeling and speaking. Each opposition is hierarchical, one term being privileged and the other relegated to a structural relationship of 'less than' or 'other than' the privileged term. The obvious example is male/female, where 'female' has a hierarchical relationship to 'male'; it is 'other than', or 'less

than' male. All other traditional binary oppositions such as civilization / wilderness, self / other, intellect / intuition, realism/romanticism are similarly hierarchical, one term being privileged and the other relegated to a subservient place, although there are, of course, reversals of precedence in line with ideological shifts.¹⁰ The underlying paradigm is always the male/female opposition, and this is made obvious through metaphors which bestow sexual attributes on either term (consider for instance intellect/intuition). In practice oppositions are not always twofold or entirely clear-cut; and this is certainly true of Gilmore's constructions of Australia. Although she consistently privileges that side of the opposition which is traditionally the weaker, hers is a shifting and at times a double allegiance. What she does recognise more strongly than many others is that, at the transition point between one term and another, there is always turbulence and violence, either physical or psychological.

The binary oppositions which structure Gilmore's attitude to the Australian bush may be seen as: the wilderness as opposed to civilization; natural growth and fertility as against cultivation; primitive Aborigines as against 20th century Aborigines and, subsuming all this, mythic Australia versus 20th century Australia. Moreover, these oppositions are consistently seen in female/male terms, the wilderness and the natural fertility of primeval Australia being privileged over the controlled cultivation and social organization of 20th century Australia. At the same time the destruction which has accompanied the transition from one state to another is clearly recognised. When one attempts to deconstruct these oppositions the overwhelming bias in Gilmore's thought towards the primitive, the mythic, is clearly seen.

Kay Schaffer, in *Women and the Bush*, has argued that the Australian bush is construed in the symbolic order as a female body, the object of both desire and fear to the male explorer or settler.¹¹ The male attitude is centred upon acquisition, mastery and 'knowing' the land — the sexual metaphor is pervasive. This is complicated by the male fear of the loss of individuality, the absorption of the psyche into the

amorphous impersonality of the bush — seen by Schaffer as a regression to the Lacanian state of the imaginary. The bush to Schaffer ‘becomes the space in which the native son plays out his primal fear of and love for the mother’,¹² and she is at pains to emphasise the difference of the female attitude to the land, as evidenced by writers such as Richardson, Prichard and Durack who ‘displace the narratives of mastery which stem from man’s impossible desire for unity and self-presence’.¹³ Gilmore’s reaction is much more intense and sensuous than this. In fact her texts suggest a narcissistic identification between the feminine psyche and the bush; if you like, a regression into and a Lacanian absorption into a natural environment, the bush, which she has consistently seen as feminine. In ‘She Was a Scented Land’ Gilmore lingers, in a completely erotic way, on the feminine attributes, the luxurious sights, smells and sounds of the land before it suffered the touch of the white man:

The air was full of the scent of life and honey, of the warm rich smell of feathers and fur ... the hills and shores of Sydney Cove were sheets of flowers ... Where the streets of Sydney now are, the very stones grew rock-lilies; the flannel flower and the boronia covered every inch that was not just bare rock...¹⁴

This is a land of ceaseless generation, the land of Yeats’s ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ where ‘Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long/ Whatever is begotten, born, and dies’. The teeming birdlife of ‘The Old Bogan and Barwon Swamps’, described in *Old Days: Old Ways*, demonstrates its fertility in the hyperbolic terms which Gilmore reserves for the old Australia:

Eagles sailed continuously in the upper air; the grass was alive with seed eaters; parrots were moving lawns of colour, and cockatoos were like white fleeces on the trees. Only the wild creatures had eaten the grass, only the bird the honey in the tree. The richness of unbroken centuries of an untilled land sapped through everything. Life teemed in the water, life teemed on the earth, life teemed in the air. Life fed upon life in balance; bred, multiplied, and knew no famine.¹⁵

In both the poetry and the prose the black swans, uniquely Australian, symbolise both the plenitude of paradisaical Australia and its destruction. In the poems of *The Wild Swan*¹⁶ the swan is diverted from its earlier signification. The white swan is traditionally an image of ordered, civilized European life, and its stateliness and grace, its decorative function, are appreciated. In Yeats as well the swan is a symbol of the human soul and its permanence in time. All such values are jettisoned by Gilmore, and the wildness of the black swan, and the instinctive drive which orders its life, are emphasised. Moreover, there is no human signification as in Yeats, for the swan is 'other' to the human. A representative of wild, instinctive and primeval Australian nature, it is a superb indigenous symbol of the beauty and plenitude which once 'flowed through the breadth of the land', but which are now lost. In *More Recollections* Gilmore writes of the swans on Lake George that they

... were so dense in the water that a dug-out or a canoe had to push them out of its way in order to furrow its path between them. Then at every place of permanent water the grass wore feathers as a coat or a carpet, and the noise of

padding feet sounded like constantly
running water.¹⁷

A determined campaign on the part of the settlers destroyed this abundance. The process of ‘swan-hopping’, of smashing the thousands of eggs, embryos and nestlings with shovels and waddies, was, according to the settlers, a ‘necessity’, for the swan feathers contaminated the pastures and killed the cattle. In the name of progress the transition from one binary state to another — from mythic wilderness to controlled nature — was achieved and, in Gilmore’s words, the ‘land made naked (*even necessarily so*)’¹⁸ (the emphasis is mine).

The poems of *The Wild Swan* depict both plenitude and loss. The multitude of the swans is established through hyperbole: they were ‘like a cloud above the lakes, and like a cloud/ Above the river reaches and the long lagoons’; through ‘eternities’ they had ‘ploughed the plains of heaven’. Now each flight has become a ‘shroud’ and the swans the ‘ghosts of lost platoons’. The imagery of death and the elegaic mood are pervasive, for these poems are laments for the fallen. The swans were like the flowers of the forest — ‘like petals they fell’ (‘A Song of Swans’). The negative constructions of the poem ‘Never Again’ are common to this series:

Never again will the moonlight gleam on the wing;
Like a blast of the desert we came, and we slew;
We burned the reeds where the nestlings lingered, till spring,
That sang in the bird, came in like a dull dead thing!
Now only the dreamer dreams of the hosts we knew,
That trembling died in the flame of our passing through.

The biblical terminology, and the echoes from Byron’s ‘The Destruction of Sennacherib’ — ‘Like a blast of the desert we came’ and ‘the flame of our passing through’ — preserve the high seriousness of the subject, as well as reinforcing the inevitability and destructiveness of the forces of what Gilmore calls ‘necessity’.

The passing of the Aborigines is linked with the disappearance of the wild swans. Always the Aborigines are seen as a part of primeval nature. In 'O Race the Forest Knew' (pp. 68-70), for instance, 'The brolga called you brother, and the swan/ Declared your name on high;/ The lizard wrote your shadow on/ The rock at noon; and when the night came, wan,/ Your starry symbol lit the sky'. In 'The Aborigines' (pp. 57-60) they are 'like the river's flow;/ Like leaves that thickened on the bough...'. Now they are 'gone as these are gone./ Ah, whither?' The lament for the fallen is once again the preferred mode:

O the fern, the bonny, bonny fern!
 With what shall we bind you,
 O scattered tribes, forsaken?
 Whither turn to find you,
 And from what darkness waken?
 Down from your tree the blossom has been shaken.
 O the fern, the bonny, bonny fern!

Here the imagery of the refrain, 'the fern, the bonny, bonny fern!', and the rhythms of the ballad, a reminder of Gilmore's Scottish heritage, suggest the parallel between the destruction of the Aborigines and the breakup of the clans, the flowers of the forest. Both are casualties of so-called 'necessity', of the forward progress considered inevitable by social Darwinism. This is made clear in the poem 'The Ring-Barked Tree' (pp. 63-65), where the disappearance of the Aborigines is given the same inevitability as the setting of the sun and the clearing of the land:

Turn to the setting sun your lonely face,
 And read your history in a ring-barked tree.
 O shadowy wanderer on a twilit shore,
 Return no more! Ask not again to trace,
 With sad and ravaged fingers,
 Where upon the rocky face

The totem sign still lingers!
The happy days are gone, and none them shall restore.

There is obviously some tension between Gilmore's absorption in a lost and primeval race of Aborigines, Rousseau's noble savages epitomised, and her assumption of the 'necessity', indeed the inevitability, of their destruction. They are consistently compared to other noble but vanquished warriors, to the clansmen or, in a glaring act of cultural appropriation, to Greek warriors. This is both a distancing of the Aborigines and an absorption of them into the long view of history, victims together with other warrior races of the onward march of a superior civilization, and therefore hardly unique. There is also a face-saving in her recourse to what she calls 'necessity', to social Darwinism, given her admiration, elsewhere, for the pioneers. Gilmore's strong belief in racial purity has some bearing on this matter, and the poem 'The Wild Plum' (p. 212) sums it up. The poem sets up an opposition between the 'wild' yet pure tree and the impurity of the grafted or selectively bred specimen. The opening assertion, 'Race counts!', makes it clear that Gilmore is not simply referring to the vegetable world:

Race counts! The beauty of the wild
Plum lives not less because
The gardened more profusioned grows!

The winds of ages, sweeping down
The terraces of time,
Still mark it, where it stands unchanged
Upon its ancient mountain steeps,
As when it blossomed first
Upon a changing world.

Race counts. Enduring and resistant still,
The beauty of the wild plum lives.
The grafted and the gardened goes.

Gilmore's primeval Aborigines, then, are stereotyped as noble primitives, distanced by time. They are now, to Gilmore, all gone (an extraordinary statement when you think about it) and they are always referred to in the past tense. Gilmore is much less interested in 20th century or urban Aborigines and their problems. As a displaced and sometimes racially 'impure' people, they probably correspond to the 'grafted' and the 'gardened' of the poem 'The Wild Plum'. Nor is she, surprisingly enough, at all interested in the quite considerable beauty of the contemporary Australian landscape, preferring the lost landscape of the past.

When Gilmore speaks, as she does with great indignation and passion, of the brutality and bloodshed which accompanied the transition from one stage to another, from noble savage to a despised race dwelling on the fringe of 20th century life, there are also unresolved contradictions. These stem from her weak protestations of 'necessity' and her obvious ambivalence about her family's involvement. On more than one occasion Gilmore concedes the so-called 'necessity' for the destruction of the Aborigines in the context of family involvement. She had seen, she says in *Old Days: Old Ways*, 'many acres of dead blacks, slain as part of life's necessity'¹⁹, and her father endured 'in common with all other men of the day, what actually the need of the times compelled', for

It was then that the men said in fear; 'If once the blacks procure arms...' [the women] having for their only comfort the knowledge that, when the time came, enough bullets would be saved for each of them and their children; as I knew they would be saved for my mother and me. Those were the old days when, by those who knew them, the blacks were still reckoned as an Australian population of several millions. And millions meant power.²⁰

A number of chapters in *Old Days: Old Ways* deal with the ideal social organization, the intelligence and culture of the Aborigines. At the same time, there are indignant accounts of the Myall Creek massacre (pp. 103-104) and, in *More Recollections*, of the Clarence River massacres where, according to Gilmore, 'the water was so polluted with human debris that no one drank it without first boiling it; and ... the dingoes ceased to attack calves and fattened on babies'. There are individual instances of horrible and gratuitous violence such as the recollection passed on to Gilmore by her grandmother. The Grandmother was making scones and listening to the cries of the hunted Aborigines outside:

As she mixed up the dough she heard the dogs, the guns, the shouts of the horsemen, and the cries of the hunted who were being driven to the river. It was not the first time and she went on with her work. Suddenly the door was pulled open and a girl of about twelve rushed in, fell at her feet, clutched her skirts and with agonized eyes and broken words pleaded for protection. There was nothing that could be done, for immediately 'two gentlemen' entered the room, dragged the girl out, and beat in her head at the door. The blood was still there when Grandfather came home.²²

Joy Hooton, in her consideration of this passage in *Stories of Herself When Young*, comments that 'There can be no reconciliation between this and the earlier glorification of white settlement', and further that 'the acceptance of the contrast between the white woman doggedly mixing her dough ("It was not the first time") and the fatalism of "There was nothing to be done", are insensitivities which the modern reader cannot fail to find shocking'.²³ More chilling again are the off-hand remarks

which Gilmore drops from time to time, such as 'A (white) woman without a man was defenceless against womanless men once the aboriginals had been destroyed',²⁴ or, in regard to half- or quarter-castes: 'of course none of the latter was descended from any *white* woman' (the emphasis is mine).²⁵ Both of these comments suggest a tacit recognition of the predatory behaviour of the white male. The virtue of white women, it seems, was only protected until the black women, the natural prey, had all been wiped out. Intercourse between a black man and the idealized white woman was unthinkable to Gilmore, and the sad mixed-blood consequences of miscegenation were to be despised and pitied.

All of Gilmore's accounts of Aboriginal massacres are in some way qualified by distancing techniques. They have the patina of age, of legendary tales to be believed or not and, in most cases, they are at second or third hand, the hearsay recollections of others. I am not implying that these accounts are fictional; far from it, although W.H. Wilde, in his biography *Courage a Grace*, suggests that they are 'very much a mixture of fact and fantasy',²⁶ and many contemporary readers, quite predictably, demanded the details of times, places and so on. What I am suggesting is that Gilmore presents the distillation of folkloric recollections of atrocities against the Aborigines, the subject of familial and racial guilt, and that her art distances the reader, and herself, and smooths over important ambiguities.

The story 'The Whip', from *More Recollections*,²⁷ illustrates this well, for it may be read as a parable of the rape of both the land and its inhabitants. The story attempts to distance Gilmore's family from the guilt associated with the massacre and rape — a distancing which only partially succeeds. The story shares the attributes of myth: the representative function, the stateliness of diction and, above all, the ambiguity of myth. At the same time it has all the artifice of a well-constructed short story. The narrator is Mary Gilmore who, about sixty years earlier, as the child Jeannie Cameron, leaned against her uncle's knee while he reconstructed a

valuable and beautiful whip, originally made in Sydney, and a great treasure in the outback because of its skilful construction. She overhears his account of the finding of the whip, in which her uncle is the discoverer, not the perpetrator, of an atrocity (thus preserving her family's honour). In search of lost cattle the uncle has penetrated the primordial forest (in the symbolic order this is an act of male imperialism), has caught the whiff of death on a 'zephyr', has searched for its origin and has come upon a horrifying tableau, one reminiscent of classical myth, but at the same time decidedly indigenous. The nymph is Aboriginal, and she is tied to the tree (imprisoned) by a stock-whip, the symbol of white cruelty and domination:

It was a little girl perhaps ten years old, perhaps twelve. She stood with her back to a small and partly hidden tree, her arms drawn backward from the shoulder-blades round the trunk, her hands tied behind it.

The narrator, Mary Gilmore at age sixty-five, then comments:

And there she had stood — stood in the terror of a virginity regarded under native tribal law so much more strictly than that of the white people: stood while the brute who had tied her there had forgotten her in other victims: stood while the ants and the flies had worked their will on her: stood while thirst tortured, and the crows found her.

In Gilmore's account there is, as well, the unpleasant odour of community and family complicity. The listening men deplore the act but, even though they know the culprit, they do nothing to punish or prevent more of the same, and go on to discuss in cold blood the best kind of stirrup iron to use in future massacres: 'the talk ... wandered to skulls, where thick and

where thin, and how to hit with a stirrup iron in order to get a “clean” kill’. ‘Necessity’, according to the men, demanded the cohesion of white against black no matter what horror occurred. The saving of the whip for further use also has chilling connotations:

The work was finished. My uncle stood up to try his new possession. ‘It was too good to waste,’ said one of the men, all eyes on it. ‘It was,’ said my uncle. ‘That is why I brought it home.’

There is considerable ambivalence then, in Gilmore’s treatment of the Aboriginal massacres. It is much safer, after all, for her to concentrate upon the nobility of past Aborigines, now supposedly all gone, than to deal with either the violence which accompanied the transition, or the problems of 20th century Aborigines. When she does address these problems, it is always in an abstract fashion and at a distance. For instance she is keenly interested in the preservation of Aboriginal languages and the past culture of the Aborigines, but she backs away from contemporary aspects of the problem, for which some solution might be possible. In this, as in other matters, Gilmore’s allegiance is firmly to the past.

For the origin of her ideology, especially those aspects of it which concern the bush, one need look no further than Gilmore’s own accounts of her childhood, where the rigidity of her home training is contrasted with the freedom and sensuous pleasure of her bush wanderings.²⁸ The paradisaical images of Australia which I discussed earlier are perhaps also the result of inherited memories, for the recollections of her parents and grandparents span more than one hundred years of Australian experience, and beyond it to what Gilmore calls the ‘dark ancestral’ heritage of Celtic culture. The source of her images and her conflict can be found, in another way, within her family situation. The family ethic, that of Calvinism, was imposed upon Gilmore at a crucial stage in her psychological

development, and involved the transition from images of freedom and sensuality (the bush) to those of self-denial and what she termed 'contract', the quality which she most admired in her grandfather. This was obviously a masculinization of her thought, for her father and her grandfather were her primary models, while her mother, who seldom appears in the memoirs, reinforced their training. In oedipal terms, the masculinization of her thought, and the repression involved, represent the loss of the primal unity between the child and the mother, and the child and the bush, and the imposition of the Father's law, that of language and logic. At the age of ninety, Gilmore's comment on her childhood — 'I am stricken as with a blow at what has been lost.'²⁹ — is revealing. But desire remains, the desire for an impossible state of being, a lost sense of wholeness, and I would suggest that this accounts for her paradisaical vision of the old Australia and its Aboriginal inhabitants, and for the at times overwhelming nostalgia in her writing.

A further conflict, this time between sensuality and commitment, emerges in Gilmore's love poems. Her attitude to love is based upon a series of binary oppositions: the instinct of the passionate heart is opposed to the notion of 'contract' and self-denial which she had absorbed from her puritanical upbringing. Superimposed upon this is the traditional opposition of the genders and their roles, whether 'natural' or imposed by religion and society. In a letter to her absent husband Will, written from the settlement at Cosme in Paraguay on 2nd November 1899, Gilmore defines the marriage 'contract' in terms of selective breeding and racial improvement:

I am not a very handsome or a very robust mother, but I think I have clean blood to match with yours. I think we ought to have real clean healthy children, for we both have clean healthy blood and no gross appetites, while you have

form and physique — enough to make
up for my lack of both.³⁰

In a further letter she addresses her husband as the one

... who holds my life, to whom I have
given up my will, with whom I stand
before God to bring forth life and
cherish it and prove what I am in its
being worthy or unworthy.³¹

These definitions allow for both feminine sexuality and a moral justification for it, along the lines of population increase (by the right people), racial purity and high-minded notions of the feminine role. These sentiments are compromised for modern readers not only by their notions of racial improvement, but even more so by the chilling self-abnegation which is required by the kind of marriage contract which Gilmore has in mind. The conflict between Gilmore's undoubtedly sensual nature and the constrictions of contemporary notions of love and marriage probably accounts for the triviality and sentimentality of many of the poems of her first volume, *Marri'd and Other Verses*,³² which was begun in Cosme, but completed at Casterton in Victoria when her husband, Will, was once again working away from home. The apparent failure of her marriage was almost certainly due to the tension between notions of duty and her wish to fulfil her destiny, to mix in the literary world of Sydney. The poem 'Somehow we Missed Each Other',³³ from *Marri'd and Other Verses*, suggests that she was repenting her marriage. Perhaps the 'two poor bankrupt souls, sowing/ A harvest that we recked not of' in this poem refers to herself and Henry Lawson, said to have had a fairly tepid love-affair before his departure for Western Australia and hers for Paraguay. There is a particularly poignant later poem (from *Battlefields*, 1939) which deals with marriage to the wrong man, the case of a talented woman tied by duty to a simpleton, sensuality having long since disappeared:

She grew, but he remained where he began,
 And so, as eager fancy hungry ran,
 She turned to dreams, imagining a mind
 That burned to vision where the less are blind...
 Yet ever on the background of her thought
 Waited the narrow forehead of the fool
 Who called her his...

‘In Life’s Sad School’ (p. 221)

In any case the poems of *The Passionate Heart*, published in 1918, deal with love which is aware of imperfection yet still insists upon its power. They demonstrate a longing for love, and a simultaneous cynicism about it, especially from the point of view of the woman. There are also moving poems of pity for women who have broken the ‘contract’ and loved too well; Gilmore forgiving in others what she apparently, after the separation from her husband, denied herself. A number of poems deal with her sense of the different roles of men and women and her bitterness about this (‘Strange that I was given/
 Thoughts that soar to heaven,/ Yet must I sit and keep/
 Children in their sleep!’ p. 28). At the same time a number of poems such as ‘Appassionata’ (p. 18) and ‘The World of Dreams’ (p. 37) suggest a repressed eroticism; a repression which is the price of a slavish commitment to the ‘contract’.

In ‘Eve-Song’ (p. 15), perhaps Gilmore’s most celebrated poem, the conflict of love and disillusion is evident. She jettisons the paradisaical connotations of Eve in favour of lines which suggest the universality of feminine experience (and disillusion) in love: ‘I span and Eve span/
 A thread to bind the heart of man’. The metaphor of woman as spinner, both enchantress and maker of the thread which binds, is an ancient one which here rebounds on the woman: ‘the more we span the more we found/
 It wasn’t his heart but ours we bound’. Meanwhile there is an echo of the old Socialist aphorism — ‘When Adam delved and Eve span/
 Who was then the gentleman?’ This raises the question of equality, not here of class, but of gender, while the wandering diction of lines three to six:

But the heart of man was a wandering thing
 That came and went with little to bring:
 Nothing he minded what we made,
 As here he loitered, and there he stayed.

mimics the infidelity and aimlessness of the man. The woman is steadfast; the man is trivial, nomadic, faithless. Her sense of loss is conveyed in the lines: 'deep in the heart of one of us lay/ A root of loss and hidden dismay'. Meanwhile the movement of the poem suggests the cycle, the dance of life, progressing towards the final recognition of the power and generosity of feminine love, despite the worthlessness of its object:

And yet, and yet, as he came back,
 Wandering in from the outward track,
 We held our arms, and gave him our breast,
 As a pillowing place for his head to rest.

I span and Eve span
 A thread to bind the heart of man!

The poem concludes with a deeply maternal image; it is that of the *pieta* in which lover and son merge, resting on the maternal breast. This is obviously a deeply moving and finely crafted poem. At the same time it reinforces an Australian stereotype of feminine heroism: that of the endlessly patient, suffering woman, waiting for and grateful for the attentions of the peripatetic male. This stereotype appears in sources as various as Lawson's 'The Drover's Wife' and George Essex Evans's poem 'The Women of the West'. One might well question its origin for, while it is undoubtedly grounded in feminine experience in this country, the glorification of the steadfast, waiting woman has obviously been of great benefit to generations of feckless and nomadic Australian males. Meanwhile the impasse of the passionate heart is neatly summed up in the aphoristic poem 'The Gift' (p. 106):

Tortured, tormented, and enslaved,
A prisoner love made of me,
Who, as a wild bird, once was free;
But from the heart's death me he saved.

To the vanishing Edens of the old Australia — its bountiful nature, its noble Aboriginal inhabitants and courageous pioneers — we might well add the vanishing dream of a perfect and reciprocal love based upon masculine strength — and I quote from Gilmore's letter written long ago in Paraguay which now appears desperately sad. She had hoped for one who, in her words, would hold 'my life, to whom I have given up my will, with whom I stand before God to bring forth life and cherish it and prove what I am'. As a counter to her disillusion Gilmore proposes the stoical endurance of 'Never Admit the Pain' (p. 103):

Cover thy wound, fold down
Its curtained place;
Silence is still a crown,
Courage a grace.

There is also the retreat from individual disappointment into a generalized sense of the power and endurance of the maternal, into which the feminine psyche is absorbed — a return to the pre-oedipal state of the imaginary:

I who am I
What shall I be when I die?
Dust in the air
In the light of the sun on a stair;
And there shall a child come running.,
Holding his hand to the sunning...

I shall be savour and honey,
Root of the tree and its blossom;
I who was one, shall be many!
Then shall the wild bee come to me there,

The brown bird make her a nest,
The lady-bird hasten to find her a home,
The wayfarer linger to rest.
But I shall not know the dust and the tree,
Nor the dust and the tree know me.
‘The Living Dust’ (p. 26)

It is, then, not only Gilmore’s backward-looking idealized version of Australia’s past which is remarkable, but the inconsistencies, in both personal and communal experience, which her writings reveal. She was certainly the self-conscious, oracular voice for her society, but the mirror which she held up to it was a distorted one, presenting, often inaccurately, a version which enabled her to hide behind her own created *persona* of self-righteousness and stoicism, and to preserve her own created construct of ‘primeval’ Australia.

1. *Mary Gilmore: Selected Verse*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1948, p. 191. Subsequent page numbers for poems refer to this edition.
2. *Old Days: Old Ways: A Book of Recollections*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1934. Page numbers refer to the illustrated 1986 edition. *More Recollections*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1935.
3. ‘The Flight of the Swans’, *Selected Verse*, p. 51.
4. *More Recollections*, p. 184.
5. For a discussion of these inconsistencies see Joy Hooton, *Stories of Herself When Young*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 62-71, and Susan Sheridan, ‘Conflicting Discourses on Race and Nationalism’ in *Social Alternatives*, Vol. 8, No. 3, October 1989, pp. 23-25.

6. *The Passionate Heart*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1918.
7. Letter to Nettie Palmer quoted by Drusilla Modjeska, *Exiles at Home*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1981, p. 95.
8. *Hound of the Road*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1922, p. 78.
9. W.H. Wilde, *Courage a Grace: A Biography of Dame Mary Gilmore*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1988, p. 162.
10. The shifting value of romance/realism is an example.
11. Kay Schaffer, *Women and the Bush*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1988.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
14. *Old Days: Old Ways*, p. 27.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
16. *The Wild Swan*, Melbourne, Robertson & Mullins, 1930. Page numbers quoted are from the *Selected Poems*.
17. 'Swan-hopping and a Pot of Basil', *More Recollections*, p. 183.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
19. *Old Days: Old Ways*, p. 82.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
21. *More Recollections*, p. 243.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 246-47.

22 *Vanishing Edens*

23. *Stories of Herself When Young*, p. 70.

24. *Old Days: Old Ways*, p. 1.

25. See Susan Sheridan, 'Conflicting Discourses on Race and Nationalism in Mary Gilmore's Poetry', p. 23.

26. *Courage & Grace*, p. 316.

27. *More Recollections*, pp. 220-22.

28. See *Courage & Grace*, pp. 30-43.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

30. W.H. Wilde and T. Inglis Moore (eds), *Letters of Mary Gilmore*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, p. 6.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

32. *Marri'd and Other Verses*, Melbourne, George Robertson, 1910.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Chapter 2

JUDITH WRIGHT: DECONSTRUCTING THE POETIC TRADITION

...All that we endure,
all that we meet and live through, gathers in
our old age
and makes a shelter from the cold, she says.
'The Garden'

I intend in this chapter to concentrate on Judith Wright's last poems, from the three volumes *Alive*, *Fourth Quarter* and *Phantom Dwelling*.¹ In these poems Wright creates, with tenderness and care, images of a paradisaical childhood; images which, it seems, are common to all three of my subjects: Gilmore, Wright and Hewett. Wright places these childhood images in the perspective of a family past which is, probably for the last time, analysed and accepted. As well, many of her earlier poetic problems are addressed and solved. Her long struggle with metaphysics, her growing disenchantment with language, and her distrust of her own imaginative power are at an end; solved by a new, more simple and effective poetic technique. These last poems are, in many ways, Wright's best.

I think a comparison with Yeats is appropriate, though this might well seem strange to an Australian audience, and disproportionate to Yeats enthusiasts. Nevertheless such a comparison might help to isolate the special qualities of the late poems, those of stateliness, balance and maturity, and distinguish them from the better-known early work. There are a surprising number of direct references to and quotations from

Yeats, and these certainly indicate an attunement, at this time, to his work. There are, however, more significant similarities. Each poet, for instance, writes to a systematic philosophical theory; each has written over a long time-span and, at the same time, been active in political causes; and each has come, in old age, to a clarity of diction and image, purged of excessive philosophy and free of mannered rhetoric. Each poet is a nationalist, yet celebrates their country in a way which avoids complacency; setting nationalism in the long view of history and metaphysics while, at the same time, lovingly preserving national identity. Each poet, too, has turned towards Eastern philosophy and art in a continual process of speculation: Yeats towards Byzantine art and Indian philosophy and Wright towards the work of the mystic Sufi poets Rumi and Hafiz and, latterly, towards Japanese poetry and art.

There are similarities in the mood of each poet as they approach their last works. The mood is elegiac, celebrating friends, family and a way of life which has possibly gone forever. Yet each too, in old age, has worked through the rhetoric of tragedy: of Northrop Frye's seasonal worlds, or John Shaw Neilson's if you like, and has re-entered the primal world of spring, of a joy which is based not upon the innocence/ignorance of the primal spring, that of childish consciousness, but upon the achieved wisdom of old age. This has resulted not only in a renewal of poetic energy, but also in many positive statements of the joy which old age can bring. The strongest parallel with Yeats then is a double one — the backward-looking elegiac mood and the passionate joy which counters it.

The elegiac movement is nowhere more evident than in Wright's remarkably sensuous memories of childhood which, in their celebration of the beauty and abundance of Australian nature, remind us of Gilmore's 'scented land'. These are selective reconstructions of the past, an attempt by the adult consciousness to recapture a golden world. Their affinity with the pre-oedipal world of the child, 'those enormous years I half recall' of the poem 'The Moving Image', is obvious, yet they do not attempt, as a number of early poems do, to make a

philosophical point about the developing relationship between the mind and the world. Instead they are an attempt, motivated by memory and desire, to recapture the paradisaical morning world of the child. The dew-soaked world of the poem 'Reminiscence', for instance, is not simply a morning during the past, or even the morning of the child's life; it is an image of the pristine morning of the race, in a country which was

... a coloured country;
spider-webs in dew on feathered grass,
mountains blue as wrens,
valleys cupping sky in like a cradle,
christmas-beetles winged with buzzing opal;
finches, robins, gang-gangs, pardalotes
tossed the blossom in its red-streaked trees.

Its images — the 'feathered grass', the 'mountains blue as wrens' and the 'christmas-beetles winged with buzzing opal' — are uniquely Australian. This is a land too of paradisaical abundance, and in 'Reminiscence' Wright proceeds to name and number the 'uncountable' multitude of the parrots of her childhood, in a passage which reminds us of the prolific birdlife of Gilmore's old Australia. The act of naming has its own significance, for the parrots of the past are, in the naming act, reabsorbed into the deprived Australian consciousness. They are

Hundreds, thousands, birds uncountable
babbling, shrieking, swirling all around -
skiesful, treesful: lorikeets, rosellas,
lorilets and cockatiels and lowries,
Red-backed, Ring-necked, Orange-breasted, Turquoise,
Purple-crowned, Red-collared, Rainbow, Varied,
Scarlet-chested, Blue-browed, Scalybreasted,
Swift and Night and Paradise and Crimson...
I give up.

This is not only a land of impossible abundance, but also one of lavish sensuality. In 'Kinship', for instance, Wright recalls the 'sweet buttock-curves' of the apricots 'flushed red with summer' and loading the 'bronze-plaquet branches'; the 'Blue early mist in the valley'; 'Blue ranges underlin(ing) the sky' and 'tawny pastures breathing pennyroyal'. These passages constitute pastoral poetry in the most direct and accessible sense. The pastoral dream is one of nostalgia for an imagined nature of impossible beauty and repose, receptive to human desire and dreams. Pastoralism is often the product of the sophisticated urban psyche, and is more often set against the pollution and corruption of the city, but here it is the elegiac pastoral of old age, looking back and attempting to reconstitute the impossible beauty of the past.

These images of a privileged pastoral childhood must, however, be modified by Wright's awareness of a quite different childhood, that of the Aboriginal children whose loss she laments in the early poems 'Bora Ring' and 'Nigger's Leap, New England':

Never from earth again the coolamon
or thin black children dancing like the shadows
of saplings in the wind.

Wright returns to this theme in one of the late poems 'Two Dreamtimes', dedicated to her Aboriginal friend Kath Walker, now Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Here the loss of both white and Aboriginal childhoods — the two dreamtimes of the title — is associated with the destruction of the primal landscape, which is 'poisoned now and crumbling'. Both races are involved in this loss and sorrow:

I mourn it as you mourn
the rippled length of the island beaches,
the drained paperbark swamps.

The easy Eden-dreamtime then
in a country of birds and trees

made me your shadow-sister, child,
dark girl I couldn't play with.

The consideration of the two childhoods, parallel in their loss, yet so different, ends in a characteristic genuflection to the guilt of the white race:

... I sing to you
from my place with my righteous kin,
to where you stand with the Koori dead,
"Trust none — not even poets."

The knife's between us.

What has been lost is not simply the freedom of a dreamtime childhood, 'riding the cleared hills,/ plucking blue leaves for their eucalypt scent,/ hearing the call of the plover', but the whole unqualified acceptance of the past which the more lyrical childhood images, as well as early poems such as 'South of my Days', convey. Wright has too deep a political conscience, and is too much a realist, to dwell upon these paradisaical images, or to delude herself, as Gilmore does, about their validity.

Wright's images of childhood are invariably associated with her family; a family which has moved with her through time, subject to the inevitable erosion that time brings to ideals and relationships, and has, on many occasions, provided material for both prose and poetry. In the early poems the family figures have a representative function; all stand for qualities which the poet either admires or deplures. The wrong attitude towards nature, for instance, is illustrated not only by the brother and sisters who shut themselves away from the world of nature and affairs, impotent and afraid; but also by the poet's pioneering grandfather who, in 'Eroded Hills', cleared the land, leaving it stripped and naked to the harsh New England weather. It is this grandfather's grave in Rockhampton which she seeks in 'The Morning of the Dead', a poem which deals with the compulsion to preserve the continuity of both family and race. The cry of the dead, their 'thorned desire', is

not only physical, to 'Bear my children', but, in the words of the poem, to 'follow out my thought;/ live for me, since you wear my life'. This compulsion has driven Wright to many celebrations, and criticisms, of her family, in both poetry and prose.

In the last poems she turns, in a more personal and elegiac manner, to a fresh contemplation of her family, and there are few of the qualifications of the early poems. There are a series of elegiac celebrations: of her husband in the poems 'Lake in Spring' and 'Twenty-five Years'; of her parents in 'Wedding Photograph 1913'; and of her aunt and uncle in 'Falls Country'. The aunt and uncle have achieved the status of myth through a complete identification with nature, with 'a country/ that spoke in the language of leaves', and all their activities are imaged in terms of the leaves and trees of the Falls Country. To a poet who is also a conservationist, the aunt and uncle are wholly admirable. A quite different note is struck in 'For a Pastoral Family', from *Phantom Dwelling*, where Wright's family is directly confronted and its shortcomings conceded, yet forgiven, mainly because of the remembered joys of a shared childhood. They were, she says, 'an arrogant clan ... fairly kind to horses/ and to people not too different from ourselves'. Their attitude towards the Aborigines is encapsulated in a few caustic lines: 'the previous owners put up little fight,/ did not believe in ownership, and so were scarcely human.' Political rationalizations are also clearly exposed:

Some actions of those you vote for stick in your throats.
There are corruptions one cannot quite endorse;
but if they are in our interests, then of course...

The poem 'Change' is the most important section of 'For a Pastoral Family', for here Wright concedes the folly of applying absolute standards to human beings. The location of the poem is the highlands of New England, her childhood landscape, and the over-riding metaphor is that of the cold, pure upland stream which, in its progression through the busy world to the sea, is inevitably sullied. As an ideal measure of

purity and integrity Wright takes a figure from Yeats, a solitary fisherman who fishes the streams below Ben Bulbin. He is an 'upstanding' man to whom Yeats bequeaths, in his poem 'The Tower', the pride of 'people that were/ Bound neither to Cause nor to State,/ Neither to slaves that were spat on,/ Nor to the tyrants that spat'. She concedes that:

At best, the men of our clan
have been, or might have been,
like Yeats's fisherman.
A small stream, narrow but clean...

running apart from the world.
Those hills might keep them so,
granite, gentle and cold.

Yeats's lonely fisherman, however, is static in time and place, remote and apart from the world of change. The men of Wright's pastoral family, on the other hand, are part of the living stream itself, and subject to its inevitable progress:

But hills erode, streams go
through settlement and town
darkened by chemical silt.
Dams hold and slow them down,
trade thickens them like guilt.

The price of purity, for Yeats's 'upstanding' man, is isolation and ignorance, whereas the rationalisations of a family are seen as a 'natural' and inevitable price of involvement in life. The poem is quite clear about this:

All men grow evil with trade
as all roads lead to the city.
Willy Yeats would have said,
perhaps, the more the pity.

But how can we be sure?
 Wasn't his chosen man
 as ignorant as pure?
 Keep out? Stay clean? Who can?

It is within this context, in 'Kinship', the next section of 'For a Pastoral Family', that Wright places her most lyrical memories; memories which are as impossible to sustain as the purity of the mountain stream. The image of 'a barefoot child running careless through/ long grass where snakes lie' encapsulates both the rapture and the dangers of the Edenic world of childhood and, moreover, of the impulse to eulogise the past.

There are other reminders of Yeats in the last poems, and one is the brilliance and clarity of Wright's images; images which are almost invariably taken from Australian nature, but which are completely different from those of the earlier poetry. Australian images have always served Wright well, as an 'external correlative' for historical or philosophical meditation, and for complex and often conflicting states of mind, and she herself has commented on her need for such an image, onto which she can project her concerns: 'Your own feeling starts in you, you find something outside, maybe, that corresponds with it: it's the relationship between the two that makes a poem.'² Because the cycads, the wattle- and flame-trees, the 'eroded hills' of New England and the great sweep of the southern sky — that 'hemisphere of air' which 'goes flying/ barren and cold from desert or polar seas/ tattering fern and leaf' — because these have not yet been colonised by the poetic imagination, they are able to provide images of startling originality and vigour. In his article 'Judith Wright and the Image', David Brooks has contrasted the freshness and vitality of Wright's indigenous images with the more traditional image which, in his opinion, has become over-inscribed by generations of poets, almost invariably masculine, and is thus unsuitable for the concerns of a new country or, more particularly, for feminine concerns.³

What is certain for the moment is that, in Wright's early poetry, the indigenous image was very seldom evoked solely

for its own sake, to stand alone in its beauty and individuality. Early poems which might be read as celebrations of Australian nature such as, for instance, 'The Cicadas' and 'The Wattle-tree', are the vehicles for a certain philosophical point of view with which Wright was very much concerned at this stage. This heavy weighting of the image has led to admiring comment, by A. D. Hope for instance, on the metaphysical quality of the poetry,⁴ or, alternatively, to charges of obscurity by those unable to follow the self-conscious and often sophisticated implications of some of the more difficult poems. The persistent desire to simultaneously celebrate and intellectualize nature has been a continuing problem for Wright; one which, I would suggest, is solved in the last poems by her use of a new and radical poetic technique.

In the last poems Wright begins to experiment with the indigenous image as part of a new poetic practice; one which would answer her earlier qualifications about language and the poetic process, both of which were seen, at a certain stage in her development, as an appropriation and violation of the natural image. Wright's interest in linguistic philosophy, and specifically in the breakdown of language, is certainly modernist, and it precedes the semiotic revolution and the structuralist movement. It also precedes feminist literary theory, which draws upon much the same view of language; that is, language is seen as a repressive construct, a cultural inheritance which dictates our response rather than expressing it. Wright's attitude derives from Wittgenstein, from her study of the Whorf-Sapir thesis, and from her husband's philosophical interpretations, rather than from Saussure and the semioticians, or indeed from feminist theory, but the common ground is obvious. There is a clear nexus between Wright's philosophy, expressed so strongly and so often in both poetry and prose, and feminist theory, which sees language as a cultural construct, the medium for the perpetuation of paternalistic attitudes and social structures, and thus the medium for the repression of feminist concerns, or indeed of any discourse, such as that of the conservationist, which radically challenges the establishment.

Wright's distrust of language is also associated with her growing distrust of romantic theory as she comes to see the romantic imagination, with its over-emphasis upon the moulding, transforming, 'esemplastic' power of the mind, to be imperialistic in its dealings with the natural world. It is possible to see the romantic imagination as both narcissistic and egotistical. The poet becomes the 'conqueror, not interpreter' of nature and 'great Nature' becomes, for the poet, simply 'a provider of similes, a kind of ornamental Pathetic Fallacy'.⁵ The symbolist movement, according to Wright, continued this process. To the symbolist imagination nature becomes a '*resource*' (the italics are Wright's), a 'forest of symbols' to be utilized in the service of the poetic imagination,⁶ just as the actual forests were being felled for a utilitarian purpose. This is what the poet Christopher Brennan meant when he said that 'man's task' was 'to humanize the universe',⁷ that is to transform the natural object into a symbol for human use, rather than to celebrate it for its own beauty and power. This is obviously the point of a number of Wright's poems such as 'Nameless Flower', 'Beside the Creek' and 'The Trap'. When she says, in 'Conservation as a Concept', that 'our whole history has been one of exploitive acquisition',⁸ she is referring not only to the physical destruction of the natural world, but also to the way in which the natural image has been over-appropriated and over-inscribed. The poem 'Nameless Flower' is as much about conservation as it is about the predatory power of the poetic imagination which names the flower (naming suggests owning), absorbs it into the mind, and uses it to express human concerns rather than a concern for nature.

How then is the modern poet, and in particular the Australian poet, to escape the structures which govern our language, our culture and its art, and which have given rise to such attitudes? Among the cultural constructions which determine the literary tradition we might well include the poetic theory of the Romantics and their successors, traditional poetic forms, and the highly evolved image, labelled by Ezra Pound

an 'intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time',⁹ and so, obviously, over-inscribed with human concerns, both intellectual and emotional. This perhaps explains Wright's movement towards a new poetic; one which involves a greater reverence for the individuality of the image, and a partial withdrawal of the human. In this poetic the natural image is uncontaminated by an excess of human projection or by an excessive metaphysical burden. There is also, in the last volume in particular, a choice of verse forms which avoid the humanizing tendency — these are often brief and austere — and a philosophy which involves a joyful acceptance of life, rather than an analysis of its principles.

Wright's new use of the image focuses on the signifier, the natural object, not the signified, its human appropriation, in order to demonstrate that 'reverence for life' which she considers to be the appropriate attitude towards nature.¹⁰ One manifestation of this is her use, in the last poems, of imitative form, an attempt to exactly convey the visual, aural and tactile quality of the natural object, and it is only when the autonomous image has been established that it is allowed to serve as an 'external correlative' for the human. A fine example of imitative form is the poem 'Fox', from *Phantom Dwelling*. This poem captures not only the visual appearance and sound of the fox, but also its essential nature, its speed and stealth, its elusive fire-like quality. The fox

goes running like a flame.

Against storm-black Budawang
a bushfire bristle of brush.
Under the candlebark trees
a rustle in dry litter.

Fox, fox!
Behind him follows the crackle of his name.

This poem 'Fox' is part of a sequence 'Notes at Edge', most of which follow the technique which is loosely known as imagist.

The suitability to Wright of an imagist poetic at this stage, given her objections to the humanizing of the image, is obvious. The imagist poetic is concerned, above all, with the objectivity, autonomy and clarity of the image, and the impersonality of the poet. As early as 1952 Wright spoke with approval of Pound's notions of the directness and clarity of the imagist technique.¹¹ The poem 'Brevity', which introduces 'Notes at Edge', indicates her ambition for the 'honed brevities', the 'few words with no rhetoric' which are also characteristic of imagism. Other features of the imagist technique, such as the direct treatment of the object, the avoidance of both abstraction and over-ornamentation, and the insistence upon the importance of musical cadence rather than metre,¹² also apply to the poems of 'Notes at Edge', as well as to other individual poems in the final volume of Wright's poetry.

The poem 'Mountain' is a good example of Wright's spare and imagistic technique. It is as economical and evocative as a Japanese etching, and the reference to scrolls and screens and calligraphy reinforces the oriental flavour, together with the naive suggestion of the mountain releasing 'stars, moon and sun' upward like volcanic sparks, or fireworks. Yet the exact visual impression of the mountain is conveyed, together with the sense of its dominance over both the natural landscape and the human imagination:

Eastward, Mount Budawang
deliberately releases
stars, moon and sun
upward by night or day, one following one;

or rolls out nightly
and daily back again
a scroll and screen of cloud.

By dawn or twilight
it cuts a fine dark figure on the sky —
a lengthened strip of black calligraphy.

The imagist poetic excludes both the personality of the poet and his or her ideology. In Pound's words:

... the author must use his image because he sees or feels, not because he thinks he can use it to back up some creed or some system of ethics or economics. 13

This is certainly so of the poem 'Mountain'. In the early poetry the reference to calligraphy would have carried a heavy loading as a variant of the Logos, the Word, but here it is simply a brilliant and appropriate image. Clear of philosophical signification, the images of Wright's last volume exist for themselves, in their own beauty and suggestiveness. The significance of the image emerges; it is not imposed.

As if to emphasise the autonomy of the image, a number of poems, such as 'Rainforest', remind the reader of the essential 'otherness' of nature and the impossibility of entering its 'dream'. In the world of the rainforest 'one is all and all are one', yet this is a realm which excludes the human. The hypnotic rhythms of this poem suggest the dream-like underwater atmosphere of the rainforest:

The forest drips and glows with green.
The tree-frog croaks his far-off song.
His voice is stillness, moss and rain
drunk from the forest ages long.

We cannot understand that call
unless we move into his dream,

where all is one and one is all
and frog and python are the same.
We with our quick dividing eyes
measure, distinguish and are gone.
The forest burns, the tree-frog dies,
yet one is all and all are one.

Many of the images in the last poems resemble haiku, and there is a clear nexus between imagism and the haiku. The imagists spoke with admiration of the economy and evocative quality of the haiku, and scholars of haiku have noted other similarities.¹⁴ They are those of the impersonality of utterance, the austerity yet suggestiveness of the image, and the musical cadence of both the haiku and the imagist poem. In the sixties, in creative writing classes, Judith Wright was recommending the writing of haiku as a poetic discipline,¹⁵ and in the poem 'Brevity', which I noted earlier, she voices her envy of the skill of the great haiku masters:

I used to love Keats, Blake.
Now I try haiku
for its honed brevities,
its inclusive silences.

Issa. Shiki. Buson. Basho.
Few words and with no rhetoric.
Enclosed by silence
as is the thrush's song.

Many of the images in these last poems have the quality of haiku, if not the strict syllabic count. An example is the couplet from the poem 'Memory':

Now only two dragonflies dance on the narrowed water.
The river's noise in the stones is a sunken song.

Here the dragonfly, a traditional image for autumn, and the location — above a diminished river — combine, in the best traditions of the haiku, to suggest love in declining years — a 'sunken song'.

There is not only, in these last poems, a new use of the image, but also, a closely associated matter, a distinct movement towards Eastern philosophy and verse-forms. Yeats too turned towards Eastern thought in a continual speculation about the meaning of life and the relationship between the

transitory and the eternal, and his concern with Indian philosophy and religion is as well documented as is his admiration for Byzantine art. Wright's interest in the art and philosophy of the East has had a similar evolution. Her first allegiance was to Jung, and Jung's theories of the creative unconscious and the powerful symbols which structure it provided the context of and the symbolism for some of her most memorable lyrics. Major symbols of her poetry — the tree of life and the dance of life — are identical with those of Yeats but, while Yeats claimed that his came to him from the occult, the spirit world, Wright has conceded her debt to Jungian notions of the collective unconscious. It is not surprising, then, that following a period of disillusionment with both language and the poetic imagination, Wright should turn for inspiration and renewal directly to the mystic poets, not simply Traherne and the English quietest tradition, but to the Sufi poets Rumí and Hafiz of Shiraz. The latter, according to the poem addressed to him in *The Other Half*, had renewed her faith in her poetic vision, and in Love as the compelling force of the universe. Wright's movement towards Eastern thought and verse-forms finds its clearest expression in her final volume *Phantom Dwelling*, with its admiration for and imitation of the haiku and the ghazal, its enumeration of Persian and Japanese poets as models, and its almost Buddhist reverence for even the most minute forms of life.

The most impressive expression of this movement is the sequence 'The Shadow of Fire', twelve poems identified as ghazals, with which she concludes her work. This is a significant turning away, not only from the subject matter of her early poems, but also from the constriction of western forms, towards the more fluid poetic of the east. If we consider both language and poetic conventions as culturally derived, rather than as some absolute standard, then Wright's turning away constitutes not only a rejection of western culture, with its destructive materialism, but also a rejection of the language, metre and conventions of its poetic forms. The ghazal is admirably suited to express her new poetic; one of inclusiveness which, in a spirit of love, reverences all aspects

of nature, from the tiny whitebeard heath to the vast cosmic power which controls all life.

The ghazal has an interesting history, one which goes a long way towards explaining its suitability for Wright's inclusive vision. Literally a 'conversation between lovers', and originally a simple song of love, it was transformed to a higher purpose by the medieval Sufi poets whom Wright so much admires. While retaining the sensual and lyrical quality, the subject matter became that of the love of God, the pathways to God, and the perfecting of the Self. Wright's ghazals are similarly reverential, not towards God, but towards nature and the awesome processes which control it. Though each ghazal can stand independently, the twelve should be read as a sequence. The first, 'Rockpool', treats with irreverence the struggle of all life, as seen in the microcosm of the rockpool — 'the devouring and mating', the 'stretching of toothed claws to food, the breeding/ on the ocean's edge' — while the last in the series, 'Patterns', is a meditation on human evil, where Wright returns to the old Herakleitean notion of cosmic balance, of the reconciliation of opposing principles. Wright is now prepared to concede the dual nature of the individual — 'We are all of us born of fire, possessed by darkness' — and to accept herself as simply a part of the energy of the universe, conceding that 'Every cell of me/ has been pierced through by plunging intergalactic messages', and in the poem 'Winter' that she is merely one of the 'paths that energy takes on its way to exhaustion' for, in the words of the poem:

... all of us end
at the same point, like the wood on the fire,

the wine in the belly. Let's drink to that point — like Hafiz.

The mark of Wright's ghazals is their vitality and freshness. Their often jocular rhythm allows for that sense of play, of humorous self-acceptance, which is so much a part of the sequence and is so surprising to those who are used to the portentous seriousness of Wright's earlier poetry. The ghazals

are also infinitely variable. They can be trite, wry, self-deprecating or lyrical. They can express disillusion, acceptance, or love. These lines from 'Pressures', for instance, deal with the persistence of love in old age:

Blood slows, thickens, silts — yet when I saw you
once again, what a joy set this pulse jumping.

Although Wright ignores the strict rhyme-scheme of the ghazal, the traditional symbolism of love and red wine has been retained:

Old age and winter are said to have much in common
Let's pile more wood on the fire and drink red wine...

Let's drink while we can. The sum of it all is Energy,
and that went into the wood, the wine, the poems.

Throughout the ghazals fire, in all its aspects, gives a unifying focus, and demonstrates the major point of the sequence, that this is a world of cosmic energy and change, of which the human is only a part.

A constant theme of the ghazals is that of the lack of connection between human intelligence, imprisoned in a 'web of language', and other natural forms. In 'Connections' Wright concedes this with a degree of humour and acceptance:

I can smell the whitebeard heath when it's under my nose,
and that should be enough for someone who isn't a moth...

In the ghazal 'Summer' this is given more extended treatment. Here the poet contemplates a former mining site, now returning to its wild state. This leads her on to a recognition of the vast gulf between human consciousness and the processes of the natural world. The ghazal begins with the couplet:

This place's quality is not its former nature
but a struggle to heal itself after many wounds.

The poet seeks the 'quality' of a place whose 'former nature' was a human one of love and hope, but also of greed and violence. Now, however, the efforts of the place to heal itself go on regardless of and oblivious to the human observer:

Upheaved ironstone, mudstone, quartz and clay
drank dark blood once, heard cries and the running of feet.

Now that the miners' huts are a tumble of chimney-stones
shafts near the river shelter a city of wombats.

Scabs of growth form slowly over the rocks.
Lichens, algae, wind-bent saplings grow.

I'll never know its inhabitants. Evening torchlight
catches the moonstone eyes of big wolf-spiders.

All day the jenny-lizard dug hard ground
watching for shadows of hawk or kookaburra.

At evening, her pearl-eggs hidden, she raked back earth
over the tunnel, wearing a wide grey smile.

The subject matter — that of the regenerative power of nature — is obviously that of Wright's early poem, 'Flame-tree in a Quarry', yet 'Summer' moves through a clear progression of startling images, such as that of the jenny-lizard with her 'wide grey smile' of triumph, rather than the complex symbolic system of the earlier poem. There is one other vital difference: 'Summer' establishes the alienation of the human mind from that of nature, while the earlier poem insisted upon their unity, and supported this with a complex use of biblical reference. The final couplet of 'Summer' concludes the movement of the poem with remarkable economy:

In a burned-out summer, I try to see without words
as they do. But I live through a web of language.

It concedes the 'burned-out' condition of the poet as well as of the season; the ultimate loneliness of the human mind imprisoned in a 'web of language'; and the busyness and 'otherness' of the natural world, intent upon rebuilding and surviving.

If these, then, are Wright's concluding poems, and I am assured that they are, they represent the abandonment of the whole Western tradition, which Wright has seen to be based upon Platonism, with its insistent division of the physical and the spiritual, and a movement towards the Eastern notion of the inclusiveness of all experience, where all forms of life from the trivial to the momentous are part of a cosmic energy, and the poetic image must reflect a proper reverence for all aspects of that energy. This is above all a poetic of joyful acceptance; an acceptance which is the product of age and wisdom. At the same time the political implications of Wright's conversion to new forms and themes should not be ignored. This is an endorsement of the values of the East against those of the West; an endorsement of what she sees in the poem 'Eve Scolds' as the nurturing, conserving values of the feminine against the materialistic acquisitive values of the patriarchy. The implications of this for both conservation and poetry are obvious. To conserve nature or to spoil it? To have reverence for the natural image or to humanize it? These are obviously parallel and related questions which, it seems to me, are addressed in these last poems.

1. *Alive: Poems 1971-72*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1973; *Fourth Quarter and Other Poems*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1976; *Phantom Dwelling*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1985.
2. 'Judith Wright', *The Weekend Australian*, February 20-21, 1988, p. 10.

3. 'Judith Wright and the Image', in D. Brooks and B. Walker, *Poetry and Gender*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1989.
4. A.D. Hope, *Judith Wright*, Australian Writers and their Work Series, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 7 ff.
5. 'Romanticism and the Last Frontier', *Because I Was Invited*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 65.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
9. 'A Few Don'ts By An Imagiste', in Peter Jones, *Imagist Poetry*, London, Penguin, 1972, p. 130.
10. 'Science, Value and Meaning', *Because I Was Invited*, p. 202.
11. 'The Writer and the Crisis', *Because I Was Invited*, p. 168.
12. See the Introduction to *Imagist Poetry*.
13. *The Fortnightly Review* (London), September 1914, pp. 463-64.
14. See Kenneth Yasuda, *The Japanese Haiku*, Charles E. Tuttle, Rutland, Vermont, 1957.
15. The source of this information is the poet Katherine Gallagher.

Chapter 3

DOROTHY HEWETT: CONSTRUCTING THE SELF IN POETRY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I am Eve, spitting the pips in the eye of the
myth-makers.

This is my legend...

'Legend of the Green Country'

As we have seen, a nostalgia for the lost Eden of childhood, for a lost Australian past, takes different forms in the writings of Mary Gilmore and Judith Wright. Gilmore displays an almost fierce conformity to the masculine values which, in the symbolic order, terminate the pre-oedipal stage for the feminine child. Her reaction to the closure emerges as a regression, a longing for the bush of her childhood, for the race of noble primitives who inhabited it, and for an heroic pioneering past. She does not herself perceive any incompatibility between her ideal Australian past and the destruction of the environment and the Aborigines by the pioneers whom she so much admires. The conflicts and lines of stress, however, are obvious to the modern reader.

A process of development in Wright's work, from the poems of *The Moving Image* to those of *Phantom Dwelling*, involves her in a coming to terms with her childhood recollections, and with a pioneering past which has been a source of both celebration and guilt. Her last and most mature work involves a turning away to poetic models which, though Eastern in origin, enable her to express her reverence for Australian nature and her joy in her own maturity. She is free, at last, both from philosophy and from a tradition which has

proved ill-suited to her concern for nature and the natural image.

Both Gilmore and Wright have written Eve-poems. Gilmore's 'Eve-Song' seems to approve the heroic martyrdom which, according to the poem, is the fate of all women in love. Wright's series of Eve poems, on the other hand, subvert the old patriarchal myths of feminine responsibility, and lay the blame for an imperfect world at the feet of the acquisitive, domineering male. In the symbolic order the binary oppositions of male/female, spoiler/carer, materialist/conservationist set up a whole series of oppositions with which Wright accounts for the modern crisis in science, politics and conservation. At the same time, both Wright and Gilmore, aware of the imperfections of personal love, still accept and celebrate it. Hewett is a more controversial Eve, contemplating the vanished Eden of her childhood recollections and 'spitting the pips in the eye of the myth-maker'. 'This is *my* truth', she says in 'Legend of the Green Country', a poem in which she resolves to 'go back and find my place' and 'Pick windfalls out of the grass like a mendicant', for

The little sour apples still grow in my heart's orchard,
Bitten with grief, coming up out of the dead country.
Here I will eat their salt and speak my truth.¹

It is this 'truth', that of the struggle to redress the wrongs of the past and to achieve an identity as an independent sexual being and a writer, which provides the material for almost all of Hewett's work.

Compared with Gilmore and Wright, themselves strong and radical women, Dorothy Hewett is the 'wild card' (her words) in the pack, and the mark of her work is an outrageous and rebellious vitality which challenges all the values of family and society. Almost all of her writings are to some extent autobiographical and, in one guise or another, Hewett as child, adolescent or adult is the hero of her work, hence my title: 'Constructing the Self'. It is not, as some critics have maintained, that she uses a series of masks to disguise the self,

but that the masks are all too transparent. Central to all of her writing is the notion of Eden lost, and this is a specifically Australian, specifically West Australian dream. The inhabitants of the Eden of childhood recollection, especially the mother, recur again and again in Hewett's writings, achieving the stature, force and ambivalence of mythic figures. Much of the drama in poetry, plays and autobiography results from an apocalyptic struggle between punitive older women and the developing feminine self, the prize being that of artistic and sexual integrity. All her feminine heroes, whether Sally Banner in *The Chapel Perilous*, Rapunzel in the poem 'Grave Fairytale', Alice in *Alice in Wormland*, or herself in *Wild Card*, are larger-than-life embodiments of the rebellious feminine spirit, opposed by a series of authority figures. Among these the mother as witch, denier and sexual nay-sayer, is pre-eminent, but is succeeded by Nim, the 'spoiler', the embodiment of masculine sexuality, with whom Alice contends in *Alice in Wormland*. Much of Hewett's personal drama, in particular her resentment of her mother and her admiration of her father, the Black Prince, is open to psychoanalytic interpretation; indeed her personal myths become, at times, almost a parody of psychoanalytic theories of the progression to maturity of the feminine person.

The West Australian location, which Hewett refers to as 'my luminous spirit place',² is most beautifully realised in the first section of her autobiography, *Wild Card*. The most lyrical images are those of the farm in the great sweep of golden wheatfields and the farmhouse which 'sits in the hollow of the heart' and 'will never go away' because it is 'the house of childhood become myth'. Descriptions of her childhood locations are always poeticised or mythologised, and the passages which follow remind the reader of Dylan Thomas's 'Fern Hill', as the owl-haunted farm, the animals and the sleeping children, move from light into darkness, 'sail out on tides of sleep', with their own dream-like momentum:

Enchanted birds and animals out of a
private ark sail out on tides of sleep...

In summer we sleep in the big sleepout completely enclosed in flywire so that at night we feel as if we are floating in air above the garden and the quiet orchard, borne away by the call of the mopokes. In the morning we wake to a wash of light, a magpie perched on the clothes prop, a rooster crowing from the chook yard at the bottom of the garden. In the dim light we watch the cured hams swaying from the iron hooks above our heads.³

The use of the perennial present tense assumes, if not the survival of the landscape, then the enduring quality of its images in the imagination of the adult. They are, as with Gilmore and Wright, sensual images of a fertile land:

The orchard is heavy with peach and apricot, nectarine and mandarin, quince and pear... The grapevines are pendulous with pale green ladies' fingers... The moon rests on the stable roof like a great ruby bubble. My mountain pony Silver steps out daintily, pulling up clumps of cape-weed, her hoofs curling like Arabian slippers... Every spring the magpies nest in the almond tree, raising naked-necked fledglings, their beaks gaping for worms... The plover nests in the furrows made by the plough. The quail settles down in the long grass over her eggs. The peewits are crying over the wheat. Rain's coming — the black cockatoos sweep down from the rock hill and collect like black rags on the gums... I am running to the end of the

farm, I am running to the end of the
rainbow where there is, apparently, a
pot of gold.⁴

The violence that is a part of this idyllic place is accepted almost unnoticed by the watching children, but provides apocalyptic images for the writer: the blowflies 'buzz angrily outside the flywire door'; 'the sheep carcasses hang in blood-spotted calico on the old weatherboard verandah which runs right through the centre of the house'; and near the stable gate are 'the murderous gallows, dripping blood and fat' where 'the sheep hang with their throats cut'. Moreover this is a doomed Eden from which Hewett is eventually expelled, driven 'howling from the garden' as one poem puts it.⁵ Her psychological expulsion is due to her emerging sexuality and her bitter struggle with the mother. The expulsion is physical too: from the golden wheatfields of Wickpin and Yealering (magic names to Hewett's readers) to the suburban conformity of Perth. Nevertheless Hewett returns in sorrow again and again seeking, as the other writers do, the source and meaning of her childhood, but the farm she returns to is ruined by the overstocking of a greedy tenant, and by the rising salt which is a feature of the wheatfields. Hewett also returns continually in her imagination to a location which is mythologised as

... Eden perfect circular
the candid temples of her innocence
the homestead in the clearing
ringed with hills
the paddocks pollened deep in dandelions
the magic forest dark & beckoning⁶

Eden is also inhabited by Hewett's family: grandparents who had established the family fortunes by exploitation of the battlers in the back-blocks, a passionate and irrational mother armed with an iron ruler who 'Kept sex at bay like the black snake coiled in the garden', and a father caught up in a loveless

marriage to a wealthy woman, 'Bought and gelded in an old grey house by a creek-bed'⁷:

the blood of them all swam in her
she was caught in the web of their history
like the tarantula
hanging from the chaffhouse rafter
waiting to reel her in.⁸

'Legend of the Green Country', an impressive poem which won the ABC Award in 1965, confronts the loss of Eden — 'the land falling into the cash register,/ Raped and eroded, thin and black as a myall girl on a railway siding' — and accounts for it not only in terms of exploitation, but also of sexual denial. The grandmother 'kept the till,/ Counted the profits, and stacked the bills of sale' while the mother was beautiful — 'men shot themselves in the scrub on her wedding-day' — but frigid:

The women were strong and they destroyed the men,
Lying locked and cold in their sexless beds,
Putting greed in their men's fingers instead of love.
They drove them from the earth, left them derelict,
Dead mutton hanging on hooks on the verandahs...

Where would they go, rich, gelded and blind,
Tugging their old mad women with them to their graves?

The truth which Hewett commits herself to at the conclusion of 'Legend of the Green Country' — 'Here I will eat their salt and speak my truth' — is that of her family history, of the vicious women and the gelded males who rise up in her imagination, again and again, to thwart and repress the development of her own rebellious self.

The most forceful evocation of Hewett's childhood world, with its joys, hatreds and resentments, is to be found in *Wild Card*. Here the mother is a raging daemonic figure, the

father a passive victim, deprived of both affection and sexuality. The resentment which, as Irigaray and others assure us, is part of the mother/daughter relationship, and essential for the psychological and sexual maturation of the daughter, is strong. Incidents such as that in which the mother calls her 'a great gawk' and, 'frothing at the mouth, her face red and swollen, beats [her] with an iron-edged ruler', then breaks down, sobbing and crying,⁹ reverberate from text to text, their obsessive repetition revealing the depth of Hewett's continuing attraction to and resentment of her mother.

One way of dealing with the quest for autonomy and with Hewett's resentment of those who bar the way is through the distancing techniques of fairytale and myth, techniques which are appropriate to Hewett's taste for the exotic and the fantastic. The childhood life as described in *Wild Card* is so suffused with mystery and fairytale that these become inseparable from reality. Nursery-rhymes such as 'Who goes round my house by night?/ Only poor old Jim...' achieve a terrifying life of their own and the farm becomes a gothic place: the pianola plays 'Velia, ah! Velia,/ the witch of the wood'; special locations such as the owls' haunt and the wishing well are identified; and the landscape is peopled with characters from Hans Andersen and Grimm's *Fairy Tales* — 'They are everywhere in the dim green light of early winter, a peculiar sensation because I both love and fear them'.¹⁰ These figures take possession of the imagination, and 'picture books' become 'prophecy':

There was some point
 where picture books dissolved
 & prophecy was rampant
 the shearing shed giddy as blown glass
 teetered on the edge of the known world
 blue-heelered swaggies shellshocked
 mocked and blind
 fell down the tunnel of this nothingness...¹¹

It is not surprising, then, that Hewett turns to fairytale figures to dramatise the struggle for feminine autonomy. The poem 'Grave Fairytale' from *Rapunzel in Suburbia*¹² attempts a Freudian interpretation of this struggle. The imprisonment of the maiden in the tower suggests the frustration of the young woman's sexuality, and the witch who imprisons her, 'light as an eel' but 'savage as a cuckoo', stands for either the repressive self, or the sexually denying older woman who preserves the interests of the patriarchy. This would explain the obscene collusion, in the poem, between the witch and the knight:

I watched all night the beasts unsatisfied
roll in their sweat, their guttural cries
made the night thick with sound.
Their shadows gambolled, hunch-backed, hairy-arsed,
and as she ran four-pawed across the light,
the female dropped coined blood spots on the floor.

The tower in its phallic shape and its capacity to imprison the feminine, is obviously patriarchal. It gains an added resonance from Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott', and a quotation from this poem precedes the collection *Rapunzel in Suburbia*. While the lady of Shalott is permitted only a second-hand version of reality in the mirror — the mirror of language, or of patriarchal prohibition — Rapunzel, in Hewett's poem, lacks a mirror, and the significance of this lack will emerge later in my discussion. Throughout Hewett's writing hair becomes a symbol of feminine virility — most of her feminine heroes have, like herself, abundant flaxen hair. Rapunzel's rope of hair is thick, sinuous and virile; it ranges the countryside, reeling in life:

Framed in the window, whirling the countryside
with my great net of hair I'd catch a hawk,
a bird, and once a bear.

The great switch of hair seems to have a life of its own, and challenges patriarchal power. When it wraps itself three times around the phallic tower, the tower quakes. The possession of the rope of hair empowers Rapunzel. She takes charge of her own sexuality, first by bringing the knight up into the tower, and secondly by sending him plunging to his death when he betrays her with the witch. The poem lingers on his rotting ruin:

Three seasons he stank at the tower's base.
A hawk plucked out his eyes, the ants busied his brain,
the mud-weed filled his mouth, his great sword rotted,
his tattered flesh-flags hung on bushes for the birds.

Rapunzel defeats both the insolent witch, now merely a 'heap of rags', and the presumptuous male — 'the framed-faced bully boy/ sick with his triumph' — but at a great price: the sacrifice of her hair, and the beauty, virility and freedom it represented: 'Bald as a collaborator I sit walled/ in the thumb-nosed tower,/ wound round three times with ropes of autumn leaves'. These lines suggest that both society (which shaves the heads of collaborators, those who have outraged its sexual norms) and nature (the 'ropes of autumn leaves') endorse her present state — that of imprisonment, isolation, and impotence. There is, however, always the possibility of future power, for her hair will eventually regenerate. Meanwhile all witches lead back to Hewett's unfortunate mother — the great denier who, in 'Legend of the Green Country', 'Kept sex at bay like the black snake coiled in the garden'.

Alice in Wonderland, the first of the childhood books which Hewett lists in *Wild Card*, provides an analogue to her own situation, and Hewett refers to it extensively in a number of her works. It is merely a coincidence that Hewett's paternal grandmother is Alice Hewett, a religious devotee, for the child, it seems, dislikes her, as she does many of her feminine progenitors. The complex story of *Alice*, however, provides a fertile source of reference, concerned as it is with childhood control and power. This is achieved in *Wonderland* through

Alice's deadly use of common-sense, in contrast to the madness and irrationality of the adults. Alice's control is also based on her ability to escape constricting situations through shape-changing. This is in contrast to the lack of power which Hewett so keenly resents in *her* childhood. *Alice* is also concerned with feminine maturation, with the way in which the child learns that the adult authority figures are simply a pack of cards or chess pieces taking part in an elaborate game with its own rules: those of the chaotic society into which Alice has wandered or, in Hewett's case, the authoritarian society into which she has been born. Judith Bloomingdale comments that 'the world of Wonderland is a great courtroom where the guilty individual, the child, is arraigned before a mad audience on whose ears the word of reason falls without effect',¹³ and this is an accurate reflection of Hewett's childhood and adolescence. Unlike Hewett, Alice can demolish the authority figures whenever she can muster enough resolve; just as Rapunzel does when she cuts her own hair, although, in the case of Alice, there is no loss of power. Alice is, as William Empson notes,¹⁴ the '*child-become-judge*', and this certainly applies to Hewett in 'Legend of the Green Country', in *Alice in Wormland*, and in *Wild Card*. In all these works Hewett is quite scathing of anyone, particularly her female relatives, who has opposed her in the past. Empson further notes that 'Alice is given a magical control over her growth by the traditionally symbolic caterpillar, a creature which has to go through a sort of death to become grown-up',¹⁵ and many of the experiences which Hewett reveals in her autobiography, or suggests in poems such as 'Grave Fairytale', involve the deadly cruelties which attend feminine maturation. Another lesson which Alice learns in Wonderland is that words have a life and will of their own,¹⁶ and this is clearly relevant to Hewett's struggle, in many of her texts, for artistic as well as sexual autonomy.

Empson, and other critics such as John Skinner and Paul Schilder,¹⁷ suggest a psychoanalytic interpretation of *Alice in Wonderland*; an interpretation so obvious as to be inescapable, and one which has also caught Hewett's

imagination. What is certain is that Dodgson's Alice is enduring the process of growing up and, in psychoanalytic terms, exploring the passages and constricting rooms which suggest aspects of feminine sexuality to Empson and others. She finally vanquishes the authority figures — particularly the domineering and irrational Queen of Hearts, the embodiment, according to Dodgson, of 'a blind and aimless Fury', and a reminder to Hewett's readers of the irrational violence of her mother. These figures, for all their apparent power, tumble down like a pack of cards at the end of *Alice in Wonderland*. The end of *Alice through the Looking-Glass* comes when, in the symbolic game of chess, Alice vanquishes the Red Queen, the epitome of female authority figures, and 'mates' the King. The crucial elements of both the *Wonderland* and the *Looking-Glass* texts, for Hewett's readers, are those of feminine rebellion, development and control.

Hewett's autobiography *Wild Card* demonstrates her interest in the card symbolism of *Alice in Wonderland*. Its title, its section-headings and page decorations all have an esoteric reference to the pack of cards, or at least the royal suite. However, the inter-textual affinities are more fully explored in the poetic autobiography *Alice in Wormland*. Here the search for the lost paradisaical garden which Alice glimpses, but is prevented from entering because of her wrong size or shape, or her failure to grasp the key (this has a sexual significance) is given extended treatment. The setting of this work, Wormland rather than Wonderland, suggests both mortality and phallicism, and the subject of the sequence is Alice's all-too-familiar quest for sexual and artistic autonomy. The cover-picture of Hewett in an exotic cloak suggests the Queen of Hearts, or at the very least a priestess seer with attendant owl and falcon, reclining on a bank in what seems to be the Sydney Botanical Gardens. The illustration predicts not only the overwhelming self-dramatization of the sequence but also the fact that this Alice will be decidedly mature and sexually aware. This fact is reinforced by the Preface:

... Nim comes a shadow on the shivery grass
hanging between the sun & the round hill
a falcon on his wrist a white owl on his shoulder
she sees his doomed face waver at the bottom
of the well...

hand in hand they fly
Alice & Nim, the falcon & the white owl
from the blackened garden.

Perhaps his attendant falcon and owl symbolise, respectively, Nim's masculinity, and the poetic power which Alice seeks. The falcon is a traditional symbol of masculine chivalry just as the owl, Athena's attendant, is the symbol of wisdom. The eagle and the owl, between them, symbolise day and night, the conscious and the unconscious, the active masculine principle and feminine wisdom. On the first death of Nim, Alice appropriates both:

Alice crouched on the grave of the 28 parrot
the tabby cat & the bantam hen...
this must be what it's like to be alone
she thought it isn't so bad
then the falcon flew up to her wrist
& the white owl to her shoulder
Thief! cried Nim on the winter wind.

Just as the famous dead of Hewett's childhood — the chinchilla rabbit overfed with lucerne, the white pullet which died of tick poison, the 28 parrot who took fits and the china doll, all of them buried at the bottom of the orchard — are resurrected at the end of the 'Nim Poems', so Nim, like the vegetation god, will rise again and again, to torment Alice with unresolved desire:

Nim lay in his shallow grave
waiting for the resurrection

the first dandelions
sprung out of his thighs

This is a preparation too for the conclusion of *Alice in Wormland* where Alice, after death, becomes not only the keeper of the Chapel Perilous, *la belle inconnue*, but the holy grail itself, while Nim, so inadequate and cruel in life, becomes the suppliant, the seeker, the falcon to her owl and the sharer in her mystic apotheosis:

*it is the beast fable
it is the myth of ourselves
& only just beginning*

Come shrieks Nim
together they leave the chapel
testing the air they mount
& are borne away.

Alice in Wormland demonstrates both the best and the worst characteristics of Hewett's writing. At its best her persistent desire to mythologise elevates the experience she is dealing with and brings to it the resonance of myth. At a certain level, however, myth becomes inflation, and this is so of some of the sequences in *Alice in Wormland*. The metamorphoses of character and theme in *Alice in Wormland* can also lead to over-signification and confusion. Nim, for instance, begins as a fantasy figure in the adolescent imagination of Alice. He is both the embodiment of male sexuality (he is self-seeking, treacherous and cruel) and the poetic muse (which comes and goes, transforms and punishes). He is a part of her lost garden of childhood and, like the garden, rises up continually to haunt Alice, until he is embodied in one or a number of weak, inadequate and treacherous human lovers. On a mythic level Nim is the vegetation god who is resurrected in the spring, and this is appropriate to the way in which he haunts Alice, as unresolved desire. He is also the fisher-king of myth, ruling over the barren lands, and finally, as seeker, though an

undeserving one, he attains the holy grail, which is Alice herself. Nim is also a shape-changer and a card-sharp: he has a 'devil's knack/ with the cards':

from the pack of cards
 he used at the Chinese gamblers
 he deals her the ace of hearts
 he holds the joker

Nim & Alice
 driving through Sydney
 under the golden light
 & the cubist skyscrapers

As shape-changer and controller of the cards, he usurps the power which, according to the analogue, should belong to Alice. Because of her unresolved passion for Nim, and for the lost garden of her childhood, Alice has little power. Apart from a brief lesbian attraction ('The Lilith Poems'), she seeks only Nim, and the long central sections of the sequence deal with Alice's quest for sexual and artistic satisfaction, and with the joy and pain which all-too-brief interludes with Nim bring.

These sections also provide a political and social context for Hewett's construction of the self. This is crystallized in the section 'Alice Travelling I', where the decay of post-war Europe and the atrophy of political ideals is imaged in terms of the mad irrational world of Alice's Wonderland:

the Duchess is here
 the Doormouse diving his head
 in the priceless Sevres teapot
 the punchbowl from Macey's
 shatters in rainbows on the grass...
 the Red Queen douses her screams
 in the pan of the new American toilet
Alice Alice will you come back
next year for the International Meeting
of the Veterans of the Spanish Civil War?

Alice loses 'the capacity for belief' in ideological systems and reinstates 'Art as her religion'. This is accompanied by a resolution of her impossible desires both for the lost garden and for Nim. The poems of 'The Infernal Grove', one of the most powerful sections of *Alice in Wormland*, provide a structural counterpoise for 'The Alice Poems' and 'The Nim Poems', the garden sections with which the sequence begins. In 'The Infernal Grove' Alice reconstructs the paradisaical and timeless garden of childhood:

To start again she said
to recover the child in the garden
reach out push open the gate
by the geraldton wax
where the petals drifting past
from the almond trees
clog up the wire fences
time is only told by Four O'clocks.

She realizes its loveliness and appeal, but also its potential for corruption, for

the garden's soft with fruit fly
the black snake coils
across the path to spring
the sundial ticks
the blood drips down my thighs
everything takes on mortality...

& she knew now
that there was no garden...

love lust sin wisdom
co-existed
& every moment
was the last moment
but the garden was a continual yearning

for what must always be lost
& found & lost again.

This provides a 'metaphor' for her longing for Nim, for Alice and Nim had

... stolen
the owl & the falcon
each time with a rush of wings
they had given them back again
yet there was no owl no falcon

they had invented a garden.

Here Alice asserts control over her circumstances, in particular her all-absorbing commitment to the lost garden of infantile memory and the male fantasy figure which has dominated her quest. The authority figures, such as the peremptory mother, have now disappeared, for this is Alice's personal struggle to translate regressive desire into a vision of the future, and so achieve the feminine power which is rightly hers as Alice. This is not to be an easy victory and, like Jung's individuation, it prefigures death. But death in *Alice in Wormland* is a shape-change, and shape-changing, in the Alice story, is an important index of power. Alice's death, in the section 'The Shape-changers', is a triumphant transformation, the end of the quest for feminine and artistic autonomy. The visionary poem No. 70 is a recognition that Alice, like Hewett herself, is one of those who will not submit, the 'silent steppers' who, after death, will

keep to the spread of shade
carrying their hurricane lanterns
along the fence line
with the flame blown sideways
ugly & handsome they come
the unsatisfied the high-stepping
proud & unreconciled...

The metamorphosis with which the sequence concludes — with Alice transformed into the holy grail, the sought and no longer the seeker, and Nim, contrite and suffering, pursuing her beyond death — is anti-climactic, for the true heart of the sequence is Alice's recognition of the nature of desire and of her own power to transcend the authority figures of her childhood, and the weak and inadequate embodiments of the masculine principle with whom she contends.

Here the second Alice text, *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, is also relevant to Hewett's quest, particularly from the point of view of feminine individuality. John Matthews considers that *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* offers

... a sharp vertical division between two complete and fully formed realities — image and mirror-image... One does not exist without the other and, to a very real extent, *is* the other, depending on which side of the mirror one is standing... Yet the two sides must be kept separate for either/both to exist; one cannot be on both sides of the mirror at once, no matter how adept one becomes at passing through it and back again.²⁰

According to this the mirror images might well be those of conformity to or rejection of patriarchal prescriptions, states which are the reverse of, yet dependent upon, one another. The mirror through which the Lady of Shalott is permitted to view 'shadows of the world' is obviously that of patriarchal conformity; when she takes control of her own destiny and leaves her tower the mirror cracks 'from side to side'. Rapunzel in 'Grave Fairytale' has no mirror — the poem insists on the lack — so, when she loses her hair, she is not only deprived of the power which the hair embodies, she also lacks the distorting mirror and must view reality at first hand, through her own perceptions.

When we bring to the image of the looking-glass the Lacanian notion of shaping, of self-definition, of conformity, but always to the patriarchal, the Word-of-the-Father, the distinction becomes clearer. The mirror stage, according to Lacan, is the stage of self-realization of the child. Through an encounter with its reflection in the mirror, the child shapes its identity and, in the case of the feminine person, this is an identity which has been prescribed, and one to which she must fit herself, no matter how constricting, or even crippling, the fit might be. Conforming to patriarchal values quite often, as in Gilmore's case, involves psychological conditioning. Hewett however, like Gilmore, identifies with her male progenitors: the Black Prince her father, romantic musician, playing his cornet to the ladies on Yarra River cruises, war-hero, winner of the D.M.C. and Belgian *croix de guerre*, but at last emasculated by the power of the mother; and her grandfather who once, when drunk, rode his horse into the bar of the Wickepin pub, but who was tamed, 'gelded' by her money-hungry grandmother. Despite this identification with romantic and quixotic masculine values — and Hewett's attraction to such values is a continuing problem — both Alice in *Wormland* and Hewett herself in her autobiography spurn all authority, whether masculine or feminine, in both sexual and aesthetic matters.

The refusal to accept the mirror image implies the possibility of passing through the looking-glass into a space of feminine freedom, a space of reversal where all is possible. Alice in Dodgson's text can, for instance, progress from being a pawn (an appropriate symbol of repression) in the game of chess, take her rightful place as queen, supplant the hated authority figure, the Red Queen, who represents unbridled passion (a reminder of Hewett's representation of her mother), and achieve sexual freedom — that is 'mate' with the king. For Hewett's *Alice in Wormland*, passing through the looking glass could perhaps provide a metaphor for the radical transformation with which the sequence ends. The addiction to the past, to the impossible and regressive dream of a return to the garden, becomes a vision of the future, with the feminine self as the supreme object of desire. Many, however, would

see it as yet another instance of Hewett's subscription to romantic values, and yet another construction of the self as hero. In short, in this work at least, there has been no passing through the looking-glass, it still reflects the constructed self; the various myths of, masks of, and fantasies of the self which have so dominated Hewett's work.

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3. *Wild Card: An Autobiography 1923-1958*, Ringwood, McPhee Gribble, 1990, pp. 3,5.
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5. 'The Alice Poems', *Alice in Wormland*, Paddington, Paper Bark Press, 1987, p. 10.
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7. 'Legend of the Green Country'.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
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12. *Selected Poems*, p. 50.
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14. William Empson, 'Alice in Wonderland: The child as Swain' in his *Some Versions of Pastoral*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1935, pp. 253-294.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 269.
16. John Matthews, "'Redeem the Time": Imaginative synthesis in the poetry of Duncan Campbell Scott and Christopher Brennan', in Russell McDougall and Gillian Whitlock (eds), *Australian/Canadian Literatures in English*, Sydney, Methuen, 1987, p. 191.
17. John Skinner, From 'Lewis Carroll's Adventures in Wonderland' and Paul Schilder, 'Psychoanalytic Remarks on Alice in Wonderland and Lewis Carroll', in Robert Phillips (ed.), *Aspects of Alice*, pp. 293-307 and 283-92 respectively.
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