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CLASS LECTURE AFTER A RECENT VISIT BY JUDITH WRIGHT
(October 1976)

Thursday was a hectic day for me. I started with two hours of tutorials followed by a lecture with Judith Wright, afternoon tea with Judith Wright, a one hour lecture to First Year, a tutorial straight after and a two hour address by Judith Wright a quarter of an hour after that. As well as this there was considerable organizing to be done in association with the visit, particularly as most of the original arrangements came unstuck. Judith Wright herself must have been exhausted. She had travelled down by train from Newcastle that morning, missed her breakfast, missed the Wollongong train, rushed down by car an hour and a half late, been whisked off to lunch, back to lecture and interviews with the press, afternoon tea, T.V. interview, etc. etc., the University day concluding for her with her two hour Convocation address. I was spent at the end of the day, anyway, even if she wasn't.

I was also considerably bewildered and dismayed. Judith Wright put forward certain tenets and raised issues that smacked very much of a sell-out, if such a thing can be where no money changes hands. It seemed to me that not only as a teacher of literature but also as a lover of formal and classical poetry I had been put in a position where I had to justify myself. There must be no more teaching of literature, no more formal poetry she said. All that sort of thing is finished. There's only one true poetry: impulse or pop poetry that speaks urgently and is apprehended immediately. The skilfully wrought, intricately designed, Mozartian poetry has failed us. Nobody understands it, nobody reads it ("nobody" meaning the general public). The academies have put all their emphasis on how poems are written and constructed and none on their contents and what they say. They pull poems apart like watchmakers dismantling clocks but they're not interested in the time. This was the line she followed in both lectures.

Before her first lecture to my Australian Literature class, just prior to my escorting her through the doors into the lecture theatre to begin her talk, we had an unbelievable and desperate discussion on the topic of her discourse. There we were, mere minutes away from audience contact and haggling, like a couple of Armenian merchants, over a topic.

I had believed all along that she would talk on her own poetry and had said as much to the Convocation organiser but at this juncture she jibbed. "I refuse to talk about my own poetry. I never do. I don't believe in teaching poetry at schools and universities so how can I then teach my own writing? I leave that to other people".

"Could you deal with some general principles about poetry", I suggested, somewhat feverishly. "I mean would you outline and explain your beliefs and interests, tell us something about Baudelaire and the forest of

symbols", I added ingeniously, because I knew this was an important development in her poetry and I was anxious to steer her off Charles Harpur, a favourite subject of hers but one hardly calculated to strike a spark from the breasts of Wollongong students. "I don't believe in symbols anymore", she said. "I don't believe in the old notions of form and there are no forests anymore."

Well, here's a nice howdy-do, I thought, a lecturer, an audience and no words to link them.

"What about talking on your current beliefs of poetry, then?" I improvised furiously. "Students rarely get the opportunity to know the genesis of a poem or the process of the creative mind. One can teach the created thing; the actual creative experience is beyond the knowledge of anyone other than the creator".

"You wouldn't like what I have to say. All my old beliefs in the intellect and the academies have been flung out. What I believe would be unacceptable here".

I began to feel, not without reason, that I was getting the run-around. "You can only say what you believe", I told her, with some warmth. "It's a great honour for us to have you here and we want to hear what you have to say because it is *you* saying it. Tell us how your thinking has changed, then."

This, in fact is what she finally did. She wanted to talk about James K. Baxter, the New Zealander drop-out from society and poet drop-out from poetry. Nobody in the audience had ever heard of him and my own knowledge of him was recent and fortuitous. Although Judith Wright did not believe in symbols anymore, she saw Baxter and his disillusion as symbolic of a much wider disillusion with society and poetry. Baxter, she preached, was the poets' way, light and truth.

She read poems by him: first his 'academic' poetry, as she called it, then his later 'free' poetry, the flat declarations without developed insight, the word made word, not flesh. There didn't seem to be much to it but she was against analysis of poems anyway, because she was against analysable poems; she was against teaching poetry because she was against poetry that needed to be taught; she was against formal, classical poetry because it was too complex to be apprehended on first hearing.

This all came as something of a shock from an ex-academician and the most famous of Australia's formal poets, particularly as there are so many false assumptions underlying her current avowals.

One thing, for instance, was in the way she lumped all the academies together as if the teaching of English was constant from one to the other. Being taught English at Griffith University though, might be a rather more exciting discovery than what used to be, in my day, the exhausting drudgery of studying English Literature at James Cook University. Certainly my own under-graduate years reading English at the University of Western Australia were some of the happiest of my life and brought about a tremendous liberation of mind.

As far as analysis goes, my own teaching intention in such a process and the intention of the best critics I know, is only to bring about greater understanding of the literature, just as a lecturer in Physics might hope to make Einstein's Theory of Relativity more meaningful to his students. Satisfaction and appreciation increase with deeper comprehension. Awareness of how a poem is put together can only add to one's realisation of what it is saying.

As for the academies, I am no great lover of them, *per se*. One must deplore the trend towards quantity rather than quality in staff, students, research, teaching, capital assets. Yet it seems to me that in the fields of literature, they have managed to do what the conservationists are failing to do with the land and natural resources. Where would the poems of Milton and Spenser be, for instance, if their existence depended upon the box and the John Singletons? One thinks of all the old literatures that have been preserved from oblivion and destruction by the academies on the grounds of beauty and aesthetic values. The same thing can be said of most of Australian poetry and indeed, of a major portion of Judith Wright's.

In the evening lecture, she came out even more explicitly against academics and 'academic verse', read a considerable amount of patently ephemeral, pop-type verse and increased our experience of the later work of James K. Baxter. It became clear at question time that not all of the audience had been persuaded.

"Does all poetry have to be of the immediately apprehended, forgotten-next-week variety?" asked one gentleman. "Why not pop poetry *and* classical poetry?"

"Why endorse poetry just because it is directly understood? The poetry that lasts is more finely wrought, often more difficult and speaks not just to our generation but to all generations."

The answers to these questions were not clear. Judith Wright even seemed puzzled that they had been asked. The time for impulse poetry was now, she said because everything was threatened now. It was a matter of salvage. Baxter's intention was to make poetry more human (as if good poetry had ever been anything else). The intellect has failed us, she iterated from *Riders in the Chariot.* Youth has the answer: drop out of society and live up the pop culture. Bring poetry out of the academies and back into the market-place. Drop the discipline of metaphor, strict metre, rhyme, symbol; instead let the utterance be direct from the heart.

Under pressure she read some of her early poems: "The Bull", "The Cycads" which shone out like gemstone among the coloured beads of the verse she had read at the start of her talk. Then she shut her book and said, "I don't believe in it any more. In ten years' time there will be no trees left and the tree as a symbol in verse will not be understood. The wood-chip industry will eat up all your symbols and they will have no meaning. Once they existed but they never had any real meaning for us. Australians hate their country. That's why they destroy it. They want only to kill the land and the trees and the mountains. New Zealanders hated their country but

at least they turned it into a second England. Australians only want to destroy for money."

And there it was – at least part of the answer to the depressing *volte-face*. Useless to argue that literature has its own validity apart from the real world, that one can still be hoist with one's own petard long after petards have disappeared, that a thing properly named, as Gwen Harwood says, will live for ever.

In an interview she gave in 1968 Judith Wright had this to say:

> "When I want an image I go to the country – what Baudelaire called *nature* as a *forest of symbols*. Baudelaire's theory of nature as a symbol for one's experience has always seemed to me to have a great deal in it. I don't draw on figures, on people. Not usually. But I do draw a great deal on landscape." (Quoted in *Australian Art and Artists: In The Making*, p.58.)

If one thinks of Judith Wright in her two roles of poet and conservationist we find that in a peculiar sort of paradox, the latter is destructive of the former. The love for her country that she affirms so often in her poems means that the association with the landscape under threat and in destruction finally brings her to a standstill as a poet. Every potential symbol is a dagger of fragile glass in her heart. All she can feel is the pain of the land's inevitable demise. "The sword of Damocles", she said in her afternoon lecture, "hangs over it all." The pain of all this, I suspect, she finds nigh unbearable. She and her poetry, she believes, have failed to keep her beloved landscape safe. A poem like "A Document" even shows her own guilt.

" 'Sign there!' I signed, but still uneasily.
I sold the coach wood forest in my name. . . .
But it was World War Two.
Their wood went into bomber-planes, They grew
Hundreds of years to meet those hurried axes . . .
. . . Uneasily
(the bark smells sweetly when you wound the tree)
I set upon this land my signature."

The academies, she feels, are even more guilty for they have not taught her message of love and the living land, only the punctuation and the metre and one can hardly expect that the pedantic reviews of her poems by people like Professor James McAuley would convince her otherwise. Now she thinks that direct utterance might have brought more readers to her poems, might have inspired more protesters to go out and save the land. Writing fine poetry saved nothing. The academicians taught her poetry but they let the source of her symbols be blown up.

The other problem she faces is that nightmare of the artist, that despair which drove Hemingway to suicide and Lawson to the bottle and which springs from the drying-out of the artistic wells. She has lost her spontaneous impulse.

"The original impulse was lyrical, but now it is more intellectual," she said in the interview she gave in *Australian Art and Artists: In The Making*, (p.53). "It used to be much more spontaneous than it is now. I have when I was younger, written a whole poem almost straight down, got it all at once. The older you get the more you lose the strength of the impulse and have to rely on your mind. You have to work at it, create that junction between wherever it is coming from and the head."

At the time her husband had been dead two years and she went on, "I keep saying 'we' still . . . Jack and I were terribly close; whenever I wrote it was as much for him as for me. Now I haven't got someone to write for. *That's why I'm stuck,* I think." (my emphasis).

More and more her poetry has become mind poetry and less and less heart poetry; more and more she has tried to make her poems 'critic-proof' (her phrase) where once she was only concerned to actualise her poetic inspiration with no thought for critics or larger audiences only for fidelity to her poetic gift and feeling. Now the poetic tide has receded, her husband is dead, the old homes are gone. She has little money. "If I can't get a grant," she said at tea, "I will have to go on the pension. My book sales will never keep me." Her beloved land is being mutilated to death and her poetry has saved nothing, therefore she does not "believe in it anymore".

This, it appears is where she stands now and desolate country it is.

"Time strips the soul and leaves it comfortless
and sends it thirsty through a bone-white drought.
Time's subtler treacheries teach us to betray,
What else could drive us on our way?
Wounded we cross the desert's emptiness,
and must be false to what would make us whole.
For only change and distance shape for us
some new tremendous symbol for the soul."

("The Harp and the King")

Such bleak sentiments lead us to the verge of despair where one is stayed and borne up only by the faith and affirmation contained in the last two lines. But what if one does not believe in symbols anymore?