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LAST AGONIES – SOME COMMENTS ON A LECTURE ON JUDITH WRIGHT

Readers of Peter Abotomey's "Class Lecture after a Recent Visit by Judith Wright", in the current issue of *LiNQ*, may find with the present writer that the views reported therein are both disturbing and moving. The sense of a vast change in the status of poetry, if not of literary art in general, coupled with the seemingly radical effect of this change on one of Australia's outstanding poets, makes poignant reading. The instance reported here is, however, not unique. A recent issue of *Overland* contains an article, not by an older practitioner, but by the 'New' poet Laurie Duggan, lamenting public indifference to his art. Both young and old are feeling the pinch. Judith Wright's views, as reported now, are merely the most recent, impassioned and explicit of a general 'unrest in the culture'. It is hoped that the following, perhaps rather dry and abstract comments on Peter Abotomey's lecture may contribute towards orientation on this problem. There is neither space here nor time to flesh-out the bones of contention.

Firstly, Judith Wright's views can be seen in relation to a recent shift in focus of thinking in the arts, namely from consideration of the art-work as a structure in itself, to the question of the effect of the work. Music, theatrical pieces, films and literary works have been constructed and presented with the intention of breaking through the passive consumer-attitude of their recipients, of jolting spontaneous phantasy into action, of bringing learning-processes into play, of expanding awareness. This development appears to be a reaction to the rapid spread of the so-called culture-industry, whose products are impersonally objective and make no place for individual 'back-coupling' of reactions and associations. Judith Wright, with her advocacy of what Peter Abotomey calls the "one true poetry: impulse or pop poetry that speaks urgently and is apprehended immediately", is on common ground with this reaction. The culture-industry, whose stereotypes penetrate to every corner of society, lets us see clearly the limited effect, the impotence of authentic literary art and thus compels us to reconsider its social effect. With Judith Wright, and surely with literary critics too, the question of this effect is vital for the continued existence and justification of 'formal' literary art. Judith Wright has apparently already decided the issue by stating that there should be no more teaching of formal, classical literature, that this literature is finished; it does not 'communicate'.

The question of the social function of poetry is not dealt with explicitly in Peter Abotomey's account; nevertheless it is a question that burns and flares through all he relates. Judith Wright rejects the traditional forms: "The skilfully wrought, intricately designed, Mozartean poetry has failed us." No one is listening. Not even the academics. They dissect, analyse,

with no proper regard to the key structural function of 'meaning'. Academics, so Judith Wright says, are formalists, not communicators.

The question of the meaning of literature has not been put for a long time. Individual forms, even genres, at least when new, have been questioned, but nobody has gone beyond literature, so as to arrive at the question of its total significance. Prior to an age of mass-communications, fine literature was thought to be important for 'nation-building', to achieve social coherence; but nowadays that is a sentimentality perhaps trotted out at certain literary dinners; but elsewhere it is hardly alive, even in the alms-department of the Literature Board. Nation-building and social coherence now have more efficacious means at hand.

In 1947, after the cataclysms of the Second World War, Jean-Paul Sartre, in his *What is Literature?*, asked 'What is writing? Why does one write? For whom?", at a time when French intellectuals were critically reviewing the culture of their land. Much later, the question has arisen in the world-wide student rebellions; the granted nature of literature has been questioned. This new generation, or at least its spokesmen, have promulgated the notion that the cultural values promoted by their teachers have lost credibility and appear to be a makeshift ideological masking of uncomfortable facts. And this all the more so, as this generation, directly affected by the Vietnam War, has clearly recognised that university literary culture was accepted unquestioningly by the same authorities who supported that war. Thus, the suspicion of ideology has fallen on the official culture. Also, the distinction in tendency between leading contemporary writers and leading academic critics has been sensed. Here, this distinction is not as wide as in certain other countries, say Germany, where leading writers emigrated in the 1930's, while leading academic critics generally remained and conformed to the new regime. The older generation of Australian poets, however, has generally conformed with the academy and hence meets with the indifference or opprobrium of the present-day 'uneducated' class. Nobody, apparently, likes the academy. Gore Vidal, in a recent A.B.C. session, stated that English Departments are not staffed by intellectuals but by bureaucrats whose chief concerns are tenure and status. A few hours later on the same station, a local poet and reviewer spoke of 'the dead hand of English Departments'. Not even academics are happy with their position. Peter Abotomey, speaking of "academics", declares himself to be "no great lover of them, *per se*". Nevertheless, he clearly sides with them and feels that the finger is on him to justify his stance.

In the face of this fate that has overtaken literary academia and its fellow-travellers, it looks as if Judith Wright's *volte face* is a belated scramble to get back on the right side of the fence, so as to cope better with the discomfort of being brought on side the 'system' as a traveller in educational wares. It is paradoxical though that one has to truck with this same system, in order to tell someone, a public of any size at all, about the difficulties of travelling in educational wares. Suffice it to say that there is a system.

The truth is surely that the Australian middle-class citizen no longer

needs any culture as legitimation. As decoration, yes. As status-symbol, literary culture still has some value, but that is surely to demean it. The naked striving for money which allows the typical citizen arbitrary purchase of both useful and useless wares is sufficient justification for him. He has given up his former cultural attitude and has come down to a middle-brow, if not low-brow taste which tardily decorates his barren daily round. An 'educated class' which maintains a cultural tradition hardly exists in Australia, no matter how earnestly individual attempts may be made to produce such a continuity. This 'educated class', such as it is, a self-conscious cultural elite, which does not question the legitimation of its seemingly self-evident culture, stands in contrast with an 'uneducated' class, which questions the justification of a culture it hardly understands. A properly acquired culture allows the educated person to forget the trouble he had in acquiring it, even of what Peter Abotomey calls the "exhausting drudgery at James Cook"; his education becomes a second nature to such a citizen. He is of the view that the competence that allows him to understand and enjoy art, is not so much a matter of a specific kind of education as something natural. He finds it difficult to reflect on his particular competence and its conditions; indeed the value of his competence shows itself precisely in its being automatic and self-evident.

The 'uneducated' class, that is the vast class of her fellow-citizens whom Judith Wright apparently calls "nobody" and whom Peter Abotomey calls "the general public", often confronts aesthetic literature in a similar way to a group of tourists gawking at the Balinese; it simply has no understanding of what it is looking at. If this numerous class has no possibility of acquiring the necessary pre-conditions for understanding, then it will become resigned, or else resentful and aggressive; and there are plenty of examples of this, from criticism of the Australia Council for the Arts, to resentment of literary academics and even of those individuals, 'poofters' and all, who patronise 'high-brow' cultural products.

The 'uneducated' class demands of literature, including aesthetic literature, that which they may rightly demand on the basis of their social experience, namely that it be clearly indicative, that is convey information that remains within the known horizon of social experience, that it makes itself 'useful'. Where this is not the case, then it is tolerated, provided it reproduces the accustomed aesthetic forms and their ideological content. Deviations from the expected norm are rejected as irritating, are ignored or combatted. Everyone expects the confirmation of what is already known, so that he can continue orientating himself by means of it. If this confirmation is not forthcoming, if what is known is radically replaced by something unknown, then disquiet arises, which is all the greater, the less secure the irritated recipient. But it is only when we are confronted by what is unknown and initially confounding that we learn. And it might also be remarked that the experiences from which we learn are mostly negative.

Naturally, this readiness to learn is defective not only in the 'uneducated' but in the 'educated' as well, though in a different way. The 'educa-

ted' class desires literary experiences corresponding to its cultural habituation; through this habituation, which is second nature to it, it is largely imprisoned culturally. And only where the 'new' remains within the bounds of the familiar mode of perception, will those who are 'educated' enjoy it; it must stay within the known framework. In contrast, the 'uneducated' class, or "nobody" or "the general public", is initially at a disadvantage, since it has not exercised its faculty to perceive literary art, has been unable to exercise it, because of its insufficient schooling. A work of literary art is distinguished by the fact that in it the normal structures of speech are overlaid by secondary structures. Unless the reader has acquired a knowledge of the system of these secondary structures, he will not perceive the aesthetic function of the work – a fact known to every teacher of poetry, where, though the student may well perceive normal linguistic structures, as in speech-usage, he nevertheless remains imperceptive of the 'poetical' structures. The 'uneducated' have not acquired the system, which is known, even second nature, to the 'educated'. The 'uneducated' stand outside the system, which gives them a chance to see the system more clearly than those who stand within it. Not without effort, however, since one needs to make the effort of learning in order to appropriate the system. This chance is all the more significant, the more we are forced to reckon with the fact that our society must cope with rapid and deep changes, which will hardly be mastered by an intelligentsia rigidified in traditional forms, since what is needed is the development of new forms, and these are more likely to be developed by an intelligentsia innocent of educational 'deformation', but one which must nevertheless comprehend traditional knowledge, without being caught in its valuations. If it does not have this knowledge, then it will only be pragmatically adaptable and will adjust itself to prevailing conditions like any technocratic intelligentsia that does not reflect on its position. Education, meaning here the teaching of traditional literary culture, is still so widely available that it can be taken in by the uneducated classes, by their children who come to the universities. However, since it is not self-evident for these students, it is questioned by them and, finally, reflected upon. This is perhaps a normal process, but the development of events has intensified it to the point where Judith Wright is in despair of 'educated' literature, and the disquieted Peter Abotomey has to point to his own love of formal literature as surely worth something in a sea of general comprehension. He admits that Charles Harpur won't "strike a spark from the breasts of Wollongong students" but he nevertheless appears to feel that one 'educated' initiate of formal literature must somehow count for more than a horde of indifferent 'nobodies'.

Naturally, the young react in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most frequent reaction is a simple ignoring, and the most rare, a simple gullible, unquestioning acceptance of the middle-class literary culture, of "the living tradition of dead literature". Comparatively rare too, at the present time, is the traditional left-wing reaction. Perhaps the following reaction is representative: Literary art that conveys no clear extra-literary, political,

social message is rejected, is regarded as esoteric – which it certainly is for those who do not understand it. Such critics *could* learn to understand this art, but they lack the necessary motivation to do so, since literary art has no place within the horizon of their social experience.

In this way, literary art becomes subordinate; first place being given to a political or other extra-literary intention; that is subordinate in so far as the difficult question of the aesthetic quality of the work is by-the-way; thus this quality itself becomes secondary. Therefore, aesthetically inferior literature becomes interesting because it has social significance; it is read by many people and has an ideological character. In this way, the literary work of art is misunderstood; though this is a disadvantage which no literary work can entirely escape. The advantage, however, is that the literary work of art is regarded from the viewpoint of its social significance, thus given back into the social context in which it arose. That is, when the idea of 'use' is not defined in a narrowly political or party-political way, then this approach becomes an important step forward, for it once again connects the work with the general social process, from which middle-class writers of the 19th century attempted to split it away into an autonomous reserve. The present writer has attempted to indicate elsewhere something of this latter development in both Australian literary criticism[1] and poetry[2]. The historical emergence of the purely aesthetic function and the awareness of its autonomy are irreversible factors in the development of literary art. This process cannot be ignored or rejected by simply putting the label of 'decadence' over modern Australian poetry. But there is no denying the huge narrowing-down of literary art that has ensued from the exclusive concentration on the aesthetic function, or what Peter Abotomey means when he refers to himself as "a lover of formal and classical poetry", a form of literature which "has its own validity apart from the real world". Both Judith Wright and the real world are leaving him to it; perhaps the democratic process, the multi-voiced 'nobody', will also ultimately leave him to it, outside of working hours. Already, the English departments are being increasingly ringed around by other institutions and disciplines, gnawing away at the socially relevant bits and leaving the 'pure' literature for the vague sentimentalities of the growing number of housewives yearning for something 'higher'. The Leavisites, like the very autonomy of literature itself, may have had a certain inevitability and historical justification, but society is changing; both criticism and 'formal' literature are in a cul-de-sac. Judith Wright knows it. The characteristic dilemma of present-day poetry is the dualism of 'pure' and expedient poetry. Peter Abotomey illustrates this nicely when he points to the conflict in Judith Wright, between her roles as 'formal' poet and conservationist. (On this latter role, see Judith Wright's *The Coral Battleground*, and an extensive review by Geoffrey Lehmann in *Quadrant*, December 1977.) Poems, at least old style, are impotent to protect trees. Such poems have been integrated into the system, and now, to Judith Wright and the world at large, might just as well be phased out. The immortal works have had it. They are not worth

teaching. Their creator, the heroine of the school-books, honoured by the universities, cannot live from her work, needs a pension. One answer to this antinomy between 'formal' impotence and social function is the abolition of literary art in traditional form and its absorption in the service of a new society. This is apparently Judith Wright's present view.

The 'old' literature, the 'formal' or 'aesthetic' literature, that Judith Wright now rejects, is dependent on the society in which it was written; it is dependent on its social norms and psychic failures, and it is also dependent on scientific and ideological systematisations. To this extent, it is not of the avantgarde, as sometimes thought by its authors and critics, but of the arrieregarde, lagging events. Judith Wright wants communication on current events, now. The change of direction which she has chosen for her own work, that is a communicative process that takes account of the recipient, is surely one that must eventually be followed also by literary criticism if this latter is to be finally assessed, likewise, by the extent to which it promotes, from an anthropological, sociological view, the self-realisation of man in society. Literary criticism might well advance itself by comprehending the object of its studies, no longer in isolation, but in the totality of human life in society. This has the appreciable consequence that literary studies operate on the social process with criticism, so as to have an enlightening effect on it and thus to become aware again of their social responsibility, also in relation to, and precisely to the 'uneducated'; this responsibility has been sacrificed for a long time. Judith Wright's example, and her reproach that academics are formalists, not communicators, suggests that in literary studies it may be time to bring the latest findings of linguistics, semiology and other disciplines to bear on literature as a communications-process. It is clear that the question of the meaning of literature cannot be confined to the framework of traditional poetics and aesthetics. Just as the question of the validity, the 'usefulness' of literature goes beyond literature, so must the answer go beyond the assessment of literature on internal criteria alone; rather literature must be seen as a particular form of communication related to other communicational forms, and its own nature and task recognised within this field of reference; that is, in place of literary studies largely pursued as subjective, self-indulgent exercises in cultural habituation, the mostly meaningless proliferation of theses mocked by at A.D. Hope and others, there should emerge a more objective and active concern with the literary function in the context of the social sciences. Judith Wright may be deplored as simply a case of someone whose nerves are cracking, but other nerves are also showing signs of strain. The problem will not go away of itself.

NOTES

[1] Noel Macainsh: Australian Literature and the Autonomous Critic, *Westerly*, No. 3, 1977.

[2] Noel Macainsh: Christopher Brennan's Autonomous Wanderer, *Quadrant*, December, 1977.