

‘Narratives from Another Creek’: Judith Wright and the Poetics of Water in Australia

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Abstract

The recent dramatic evidence that Australia’s largest river system is severely stressed to the point of imminent collapse compels Australians to face the critical challenge of fostering and developing a new way of understanding their relationship to water in Australia, and by extension, the intricately dynamic natural world upon which, or, rather, in and by which, they subsist. The change of preposition reflects the prevailing mentality: that humans hold dominion over the land and its bounty, a persistent presumption of command and control which, in itself, points to the scale of the contest we face—the need to radically change, at the most fundamental level, long-held attitudes towards the earth and its “bounty.” Affronted and alarmed by the degradation of the natural environment in Australia, Judith Wright, renowned poet and environmental activist, challenged prevailing attitudes and practices, finding in and through poetry an effective means of envisioning new forms of awareness. A pioneering environmentalist, Wright’s concerns over the environment align directly with the now-established ecological, eco-feminist and postcolonial critiques. In reading Wright’s poem, “Unknown Water,” this paper offers a reappraisal of her ideas and work as both poet and political activist so that Wright’s “ecopoetics” can be seen as both a guide to, and affirmation of the need for, a celebratory poetics of water in Australia and beyond.

“Rivers”

[...]
Ours was no Georgian venture, for like Sturt
Charting strange rivers, you
Set down their rarer secrets—your inland sea,
The springs and mirage waters of the heart.

These for all time you netted in spare verse
Like everlasting flowers
Pressed in a book; yet there’s a glint of silver!
Thought leaps alive, and all that lives is thought:

That broader river where the mind’s at work

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Evolving in the dark
Slow metaphors and metamorphoses
And platypus glide like Noah in his ark.

(Campbell 15)¹

Transposing the familiar trope of exploration, David Campbell “discovers” the “inland” place of the poet’s “interior” imagination. In the poem’s metamorphic movement, the “land” of this newfound world is figured as water, the metaphorical and mythical source (“your inland sea/The springs and mirage waters of the heart”)—the living river whose distilled depths embody both the generative act of perception and poetic expression and, by inference, the common “place” of human relationship with the natural world (“the broader river where the mind’s at work”). In this way, “Rivers” reorients the relation between consciousness and world: where the metaphorical “river” of the mind tells of another world “out there” in the now mapped and ostensibly known geography of Australia, so the conceit of “discovery” so central to conventional foundational narratives of Australian history is reconceived as a new and transformative mode of knowing. If to see is an imaginative act, the poem, in “finding” the “broader river”, compels us to *be* differently.

The “narratives from another creek” in the title of this paper—I have taken the phrase from Judith Wright’s poem, “Unknown Water” in her collection, *The Gateway* (1953)—also symbolise different ways of being through different ways of knowing. The symbolic weight of Wright’s imagery and “argument” is also compellingly prescient as regards the emergency surrounding Australia’s river system and water supply. Just as Campbell’s poem enfolds the mind’s creative “work” of consciousness in the generative symbol of the river-as-source, so these narratives are literally bound in and framed by poetic utterance. As I want to contend, this incorporative literary form becomes a political enactment of new consciousness—an act of poetic envisioning that proposes a different mode of knowing. This is to reframe the Heideggerian distinction underpinning Jonathan Bate’s ecopoetics—that between the “experiential” or “phenomenological” power of poetry and the merely “descriptive” (and so “political”) effect of narrative (Bate qtd. in Peters and Irwin 4).² Yet, regarding Wright’s poetry, to relegate the political to a secondary concern (if only by inference) is to compromise the understanding of her work in its own literary terms and in relation to the environmental causes she promoted as both artist and activist.

I will consider both the political nature of Wright’s poetry and related aspects of the now-global “water crisis” later in this discussion. Here, I want to begin to “chart” the figurative flow of the “other creek” Wright’s narrator identifies in the poem “Unknown Water,” the other “place” of the poem’s narrative whose objective correlative is another mode or form of consciousness. Importantly, this charting also represents an exploratory approach to describing a poetics of water in Australia, which is itself framed by a transnational need for such a poetics given the emerging global water crisis. As Fred Pearce makes compellingly clear in his recent book, *When the Rivers Run Dry* (2007), the evidence suggests that there has occurred a *collective loss* of and an *imaginative estrangement* from the deep meaning and value of water. In alarmingly negative terms—degradation and dereliction of the world’s rivers and waterways—the universal importance of water is made obvious. And yet, this crisis assumes a particular gravity in Australia, one which impels the exploration of a culturally distinctive poetics of water. Where, for example, the novelist Chandani Lokuge describes Sri Lanka as the “water-island,” in whose culture Buddhism assigns water a central symbolic role and where “water floods the island’s literary imagination” (26), in the far larger island-continent of Australia this relationship with water is markedly different—the role and place of water assumes both a more precarious and yet dramatically vivid

presence. The imagination, therefore, involves itself with water in a distinctly different way, most characteristically by the absence of water, and the profound fear (and stoical endurance) of this absence. The expanse and aridity of Australia quite obviously concentrates attention and need upon rivers and fresh water sources; and for this reason, I want to focus on rivers and landed waterways. For rivers, more than the great girdling oceans, hold in their vital depths rich layers of symbolic and imaginative meaning, albeit meaning too often and easily overlooked or over-ridden by utilitarian imperatives. Judith Wright evokes the “other place” of symbolic meaning in her poem “Unknown Water”:

“Unknown Water”

No rain yet, and the creek drying, and no rain coming;
and I remember the old man, part of my childhood,
who knew all about cattle and horses. In the big drought,
he said, the mares knew when their milk gave out,
and I've seen a mare over the dead foal
with tears coming out of her eyes. She kept on standing;
she wouldn't go near water or look for grass,
and when the rain came she stayed where the foal died,
though we dragged it away and burned it.

Old man, go easy with me.
The truth I am trying to tell is a kind of waterhole
never dried in any drought. You can understand that;
you lived by water not like the cattle drank,
but the water you know of is dried up now. All dried,
and the drought goes raging on. Your own sons and
daughters
have forgotten what it is to live by a water
that never dries up. But I know of another creek.
You will not understand my words when I tell of it.

You do not understand me; yet you are part of me.
You understand the cattle and the horses
and knew the country you travelled in, and believed
what everyone believed when you were a child.
And I believed in you, and otherwise in nothing,
since the drought was coming, that dried up your
waterholes;
and I still believed in you, though you will not understand
me.

For the country I travelled through was not your kind of
country;
and when I grew I lost the sound of your stories
and heard only at night in my dreams the sound of dogs
and cattle and galloping horses. I am not you,
but you are part of me. Go easy with me, old man;
I am helping to clear a track to unknown water.
(from "The Gateway," *Collected Poems* 110)

Wright's use of narrative—conveyed as a form of implied dialogue—dramatises less a contest between competing attitudes and beliefs than a *transitional phase* in the human relationship with the land. While the opening scene (as it were) of the poem—the grimly typical scene from rural Australia of the "wasteland" of drought-blighted earth, the remorseless vanquishing of life, and the stoical endurance of the farmer—establishes a poignant mood of suffering and despair, the story moves on to suggest an understatedly optimistic "political" action—that of meeting and merging. If "unknown," the poem's "truth" becomes the tentative articulation of a new sense of place based on new understanding: "Old man, go easy with me/The truth I am trying to tell is a kind of waterhole/never dried in any drought." The phrase "a kind of waterhole" underlines this sense of the "unknown water"; it symbolises the "truth" the speaker discovers through telling and to which the narrator of the poem leads both the "old man" and, by direct association, the reader.

Importantly, the narrator knows this new place; it is the "old man", and the accustomed traditions he represents, who does "not know" any longer. The ravaging drought becomes the figurative force of positive change, rendering the old ways obsolete. And of equal importance, the speaker does not lecture, hector, dictate or deliver the knowledge of this new place; rather, the narrator requests (though does not beg or plead) tolerance, and expresses understanding and respect for what is falling away. She also invokes and gestures towards (rather than leads) the old man, and, by association, the reader, to the fresh country of this new place: if it is known, the path to this place can only be *shown* by the knowing figure who becomes guide and traveller, not authoritarian teacher or presumptuous leader. This, in turn, qualifies the earlier use of the word and concept of "truth": it is not factual and material, not certain in empirically provable terms; instead, it will unfold, and be found through searching.

To impute the gender of the voice as female, as I have here, is not to commit a biographical fallacy; rather, it is to foreground that which is implicit. For the "drama" of the poem inheres in this very narrativised encounter, or meeting, between the "old man", obviously representative of both dominant Western masculine and culturally conservative attitudes, and the speaker/interlocutor of the poem. Importantly, the "I" of the poem is seeking, or rather, feeling her way towards, and so beginning to bring into conceptual existence, the "other creek" of a different consciousness. Poetry, we see, in reshaping language and reworking form, demonstrates the importance of language in the process of fashioning a new consciousness—the conceptual frames by which we imagine, perceive and know things and experiences.

Water in the poem is both literal life source and rich and evocative metaphor of replenishment and sustenance; it is not, that is, merely a finite, manipulable and "managed" resource but a life force configured as a place we can "discover"—the imperishable source of life embodied in the waterhole that never dries up. And, in turn, the "self" personified by the speaker is obviously reconfigured here: not the ego-identifying and individualistically singular self of Western culture, but a more expansive and encapsulating "voice" —the land being voiced through the self, but neither being defined by it nor made

subordinate to it. I think we can say that Wright effects a benign “self-inscription in nature,” to adapt the critic Richard Rossiter’s phrase (80). Yet, this is not to suggest that the self becomes water, distilled as atomic essence of being or metaphorically “baptised” as new life. Rather, as *story*, the poem *enacts* a sense of evolving convergence and the promise of the *active* and *dynamic* meeting and merging of white and black, male and female consciousness.

The reader familiar with Wright’s poetry will know that her work characteristically speaks of another mode of knowledge, of an “ecological consciousness,” to use a term favoured by the late philosopher, environmentalist and friend of Wright’s, Val Plumwood. In numerous essays, Wright expressed her conviction that poetry offered a powerful, if too readily overlooked, means of “knowing”—a deeper and broader mode of awareness, and so of *being* itself. Such a new mode of being inheres in what can be called a poetics of ecology: poetry becomes a guide to being *with* and *in* the land in imaginative and empathetic terms, not simply *on* it as utilitarian producers. Such a “poetics” is Heideggerian, to be sure; yet, Wright’s understanding was always also resolutely political. Certainly, as Wright conveyed through her poetry, such a state of expanded or uplifted consciousness entails an awareness of the integral unity between human beings and the environment, from which would arise a more harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world. And yet, equally, as she argued and explained so resolutely in her non-fiction writing and public lectures, the process is always one of promoting and, in practical terms, achieving change. Given the present, largely man-made crisis in the supply and use of water, a “poetics of water,” as I am adumbrating it here, complements the political imperative of fostering a broader ecological consciousness in Australia, a consciousness that is irreducibly bound up in political action.

To suggest that poetry as form and practice constitutes its own poetics will appear tautologous or oxymoronic. Yet, it is important to appreciate that, in Wright’s view, poetry works in terms of the “feeling-experience”—“the poem is a symbol arousing feeling”; feeling not simply as subjective response but as a complex and intricately dynamic state of knowing and being (*Because I Was Invited* 31). Whereas, then, by conventional paraphrase, I can say that the “argument” or statement of the poem, “Unknown Water,” is that traditional European attitudes and responses to the land and water in Australia are obsolete and destructively inappropriate, the “knowledge” the poem conveys can only be fully learnt (or understood) through a responsive “feeling”—an experience that is necessarily complex in nuance and, in Wright’s view, intrinsically resistant to conventional intellectual or abstract expositions. If, to readers in the 21st century, this view hinges on the now-familiar distinction between the analytical and the intuitive, the fact that analytical and rationalistic mentalities prevail—expressed in human “systems” of land management governed by economic rationalist “rules”—only underlines the need to reappraise the distinction.

In my view, Wright is not insisting that the intellectual response is intrinsically at fault *per se*; rather, the problem is that it is habitually favoured in the reading and teaching of poetry at the expense of other dimensions of experience. In turn, the immersive experience of plumbing the “sub-currents” of the “feeling-response,” to use a fortuitously oceanic metaphor Wright employs in her essay “What does poetry mean” (*Because I Was Invited* 31), becomes the basis of generating new ecological values and so new ways of viewing the natural world as based on the relationality of “feeling and emotion.” Achieving balance and reintegration of thought and feeling is the point, not a switching from one to the other; feeling, most importantly, understood as an *imaginative* capacity and interaction. Wright’s views directly reflect the influence of her husband and intellectual compatriot, Jack McInney, whose conviction it was that the ingrained dualism in Western culture—perhaps human culture in general—compels humans to separate themselves from the natural, or “non-human” world, to the detriment of all living things. Yet, it is Wright’s repeated insistence on a more enlightened “pedagogy of poetry”—poetry as not simply a mode of literary representation (as an “art”, though it is that, and rarely simply so), but also as the

enaction (so to speak) of a deeper mode of being, as seen in “Unknown Water”—which marks her important and distinctive contribution to this much broader and continuing debate.

Clearly, Wright’s insistence that poets contribute to the growth of a “a new kind of consciousness” confers a political character to her imaginative work, although political is meant in the broadest sense. Veronica Brady is right when observing that Wright’s view of the poet as “reworking ‘the relationship between man’s thought and the universe’ [... through undertaking the] task of speaking the world” and thus creating a new relationship with land and place, “posed ethical and imaginative problems” (83, 86). Such ideas have, since Wright’s day, become familiar; and we might pose the often-asked question, “What kind of activism does poetry engender? How, in the communicatively congested 21st century, can poetry be said to ‘act’ in the world?” Presciently, through an allusion to Dickens’s satire of the reverence of “facts” over imagination in *Hard Times*, Wright states her case: against the “economic and technological Gradgrinds of our time,” we need a “new vision and ethic” (*Because I Was Invited* 254). Too inflexibly and obstinately fixated on attitudes of control and manipulation, humans fail to grasp the fact that ecosystems operate on principles of interdependence. And, more so now than in Wright’s time of the 1950s and 1960s, the economically “rational” legitimises systematic exploitation. Importantly, given the alarmed realisation across the international community that the earth’s rivers and oceans, and thus the crucial water supply, have been degraded, abused and exploited to the point of exhaustion, the views and ideas Wright expresses through her poetry and public activism have now acquired a renewed and urgent relevance with regard to the current and future politics of water and the environment in the present day. As regards Australia—the land that so passionately concerned her—the profound misunderstanding and misconception of the environment in Australia—and therefore, of the relationship between human beings and the natural world—is in painful and alarming evidence.

It should be noted here that in the selection and reading of Wright’s poem, I have, for the purposes of argument, isolated “Unknown Water” from its original context—her third collection entitled *The Gateway* (1953). Wright quite rightly discouraged such an approach, since the poem is one chord in the greater thematic melody of a collection in which the idea of transformation is a key note. To take one brief example, the title poem “The Gateway” bespeaks the act of transformation in the voyager’s journey. Venturing inwardly beyond the known borders of land and self, the speaker arrives at the threshold of the river; and, like the river, “the sole reality” of Self “dissolves”, only to discover that where all that “ended,” “all began”:

In the depth of nothing

I met my home.

All ended there; yet all began.

All sank in dissolution

and rose renewed.

(“The Gateway,” *Collected Poems* 117)

I have taken Wright's poem out of context in another important sense, for I make no extended reference to Aboriginal culture and history in regard to both Wright's poetry and her political convictions. Indeed, to downplay or elide the significance of Aboriginal experience in relation to Wright's artistic work and political thought would be to misrepresent her work. Her acute sense of the suffering of, and deep concern over the injustice meted out to, Aboriginal people through colonisation is integral to any serious understanding of her work, both literary and political. Aboriginal spiritual and cultural understandings of place and land are of great importance in terms of the "poetics of water" that I am outlining in this paper, a point confirmed in the words of Sonia Tidemann and Tim Whiteside, who state that "the depiction of Aboriginal relationships involving water reveals a body of knowledge that is different from western concepts but that should be regarded as equally valid and respected, bringing with it a new richness to western thought" (1). As Tidemann and Whiteside show, Aboriginal stories and myths emphasise the *interdependence* of land, water and the human and animal life sustained thereon.

It is precisely this understanding and experience of interdependence that can be seen as corresponding with Wright's insistence that poetry is instrumental in shaping a new consciousness. To use a term she favoured, poetry as the literary embodiment of the "poetic imagination" can communicate "our other capacities for experience"—the "feeling-world picture" she saw as representative of the "unsuspected experiential possibilities stretching far beyond the intellect and the senses" (Wright qtd. in Clarke & McKinney 240). A vital sense of the relationality between human beings and the environment can then come into existence, and by extension, this sense of the relational—not simply as concept but lived realisation—is pivotal in bringing a poetics of water into clearer view.

Moreover, interdependence is obviously fundamental to any notion of a poetics of water since such a poetics is inextricably a poetics of earth and land. Certainly, water can be viewed as an entity in and of itself, and, as demonstrated across a vast array of literary and artistic representations, as a powerful image and symbol generative of manifold meanings and connotations. When, in his compelling study, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, Gaston Bachelard refers to water as the "dream of origins" (2), he captures the imaginative resonance water holds for human beings as much as its elemental necessity. Yet, rivers and waterways quite literally define landforms and are defined in relation to land. While this is a mundane ecological fact, Wright has also promoted the notion, this time in a novel for children entitled *The River and the Road*, that it is the river that would teach the children "most about the country itself" (1966: 13-14). As the use of the word "country" suggests, the imagined and imaginative engagement with land is in turn also always a poetics of place, and so of belonging and identity, home and nation—a now very common theme and preoccupation for an increasing number of artists and writers in Australia.

In beginning to define and explore a culturally distinctive imaginative relationship with water in Australia, a poetics of water could be said to attend the historical development of all, or certainly a vast majority of, human societies. After all, the earth is "under the sign of water," as one ecologist aptly puts it (Fischesser 169); all life on earth is constitutively bound in and bound by this "primordial element" in the most fundamental sense—from recorded beginnings in prehistory to the present, and from the molecular and cellular level of existence to the religious, spiritual and imaginative dimension of human activity. In human civilisations, its need and importance are quite literally universal—truly transcultural in this sense. The contemporary Australian English I am using here, for example, is rich with water imagery, an imagery covering the spectrum of meanings and connotations, from the bucolic and baptismal to the cyclical and erratically destructive. It is this fund of imagery, carried in and through language, that acts as a living memory (or vestigial echo) of the vast number of myths, rituals, legends and symbols that reflect the importance of water in human culture and society, imaginatively and historically. The

extensive and ever-burgeoning scientific and ecological literature and knowledge of water only add to this cultural store; and of course, in Wright's literary *oeuvre*, water and river imagery features prominently.

Any preliminary mapping of a poetics of water in Australia must, therefore, work within certain limits. The arrival of Europeans in Australia marks an important, if historically obvious, point of focus of commencement. In the case of Australia, the Europeans who arrived in the 18th century—an arrival which Eric Rolls quite properly calls a “major disruption” (1998: 121)—carried with them a language, and thus a particular set of cultural associations by which a sense of place and so a sense of self would be established. The arrival of Europeans was not simply a matter of transportation, but, as the writer and poet, David Malouf, rightly points out (26), an act of translation, and therefore a process of “re-interpretation and change.” But it is also, as Rolls's use of the term disruption implies, an historical moment (or instance) of cultural disjunction: the complex framework of “old world” inherited ideas, values and practices would and will not, despite concerted effort, translate neatly to the “new world,” and so to the pre-existing Aboriginal culture and local environment. It is of course true that poetry (and literature) illuminate the fact that language and reality are never one and the same. And it is also true that the manifold aspects and repercussions of the disjunction between human beings and the natural world that Wright addresses have been analysed and discussed by a wide array of critics and historians of varying theoretical and political convictions, seemingly to little avail. And yet, the necessary change of collective consciousness as the only means of mending or correcting this problem is being forced upon us. For our assumed dominion over the natural world belies our own self-created deprivation—humans deprive themselves of a richer and far more nourishing relationship with ecology through heeding too ardently the “scientific-technological” view of nature and the voice of “materialist-utilitarian” values.

The very idea of “voicing” the land—of hearing the earth and place, and so being receptive and open—is central to the message Wright communicates. And, crucially, this voice is not singular but characterised by diversity and variety. I want to conclude with the words of Eric Rolls, poet and historian of the natural world in Australia, words that speak in chorus with Wright. The title of his essay, “Voicing the Land,” provides the operative verb here—it is redolent of “singing,” suggesting the working towards the sounding and uttering of a sense of place and so, synaesthetically, a new “seeing” of and being in place.³ . Rolls draws the reader in close to witness an unexpected marvel—the first drops of rain falling on dry soil:

It is a wonder to watch rain falling on dry ground. In the central red country it is an experience of all the senses, especially that of smell. As the first few drops dent the soil with audible smacks, the sharp smell of growth-promoting acids lifts into the air. When rain falls on dry black soil, each damp particle swells and puffs up. As it rises, dry soil trickles from it, then it too rises as a raindrop hits it. The whole surface of the paddock stirs about in welcome. (“Voicing the Land” 123)

In limpid, taut prose, he captures the natural drama of a catalytic interaction—of the life force being released, the charged clamour of elemental interactivity occurring, quite literally, at ground level. The poetic strength of this writing inheres, in part, in the sensitive description and the perfectly honed understatement by which he conveys the physicality of rain seeding earth, holding the moment still for the reader so we do not simply see but become involved in the phenomenon. His attuned perceptions are less the guide than the reciprocal condition or state of being through which Rolls opens out a microcosmic moment to the full scope of the reader's consciousness. The heightened interaction of all his senses bespeaks the active awakening of his whole being to the modest spectacle before him, so that the beautiful culminating line “the whole surface of the paddock stirs about in welcome” enacts a kind of enhanced fusion between perceiver and perceived. In the apparently mundane instance of rain mingling with soil,

we apprehend the near-mystical quivering of fecundity, the transformative action of living energy. And through one writer's attuned perceptions and language, the reader can experience a sense of connection with the natural world, the sensual charge off-setting the ephemerality of the experience.

The act of enlivening our awareness of the fundamental interrelationship between human beings and the complex ecosystems upon which we subsist is a crucial, if less politically explicit, aspect of changing attitudes and consciousness. For Judith Wright, the degradation of the environment by human beings is a distressing symptom of the human disconnection and separation from the natural world. Through her poetry and her political activism, she envisioned a healing of this disjunction, a return to the unity of human and world to be achieved through the fostering of a transformative new knowledge—a new way of being gained through the transformation of the separate individual self so integral to our Western notion of being.

Endnotes

- ¹ I have reproduced the last three of the six stanzas in David Campbell's poem "Rivers"; the poem itself is arranged as the last of four poems ("IV Rivers") under the title "Letters to a Friend," and is dedicated to Douglas Stewart.
- ² "A green poem is a revelation of dwelling rather than a narrative of dwelling; it is 'phenomenological' before it is 'political'" (Bate qtd. in Peters and Irwin 4).
- ³ See Wright's idea of "becoming another kind of 'man'" in relation to the transformative acts of "learning to look" and "seeing the country" (Wright qtd in Holmes (4/6))

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