

“Where’s home, Ulysses?” Judith Wright in Europe 1937

The Journal of Commonwealth Literature

Sarah Kennedy, Downing College, University of Cambridge

March 2015

\*An abridged version of this essay was delivered at the International Conference “Encountering Australia: Transcultural Conversations” hosted by the European Association for Studies of Australia (EASA) in Prato, Italy, September 2014. I would like to thank Dr Meredith McKinney and HarperCollins for permission to quote from Judith Wright’s works.

### **Abstract**

When Judith Wright travelled to Europe in the ‘loaded spring’ of February 1937, the twenty-two-year-old poet found herself witness to ‘a break in the consciousness of Europe’. This essay argues that Wright’s experience of being an outsider in Europe at this crucial historical moment had profound implications for her poetics, in the form of a compound and productive series of displacements. Her peripatetic encounters with European cultures-in-crisis caused Wright to despair of Europe as a source of political and creative renewal, and exposed fault-lines in her own cultural orientation. Sundered from her Anglophile cultural inheritance, and able to reflect on ‘home’ with the distance and imaginative ambivalence of an outsider, Wright invoked Ulysses—that archetypal poetic wanderer—whose experience of archipelagic journeying came to express for her the contingencies and hauntedness of Australia’s palimpsestic identity. This essay positions the shifting perspectives and excursive patterns of Wright’s developing poetics in relation to concepts of outsideness and embodiment, drawing on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and phenomenological philosophies of mind.

### **Keywords**

Judith Wright, islands, war, Europe, identity, poetic imagination, peregrination, phenomenology, embodied cognition,

When the Australian poet Judith Wright embarked for her European tour in February 1937, the twenty-two year-old felt that overseas was where 'things were happening' (Rusden, 1988: 16). Politically engaged and creatively committed to an internationalist poetics, she travelled through Great Britain, Holland, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Switzerland and France, but found the routes into Southern Europe barred by the ferment of devastating conflict. As she would later write (1943: 16), 'In an uneasy year, in a loaded spring' she witnessed 'a break in the consciousness of Europe'. Her peripatetic encounters with European cultures-in-crisis caused Wright to despair of Europe as a source of political and creative renewal, and exposed fault-lines in her own individual cultural orientation. This essay argues that Wright's experience of being an outsider in Europe at this crucial historical moment had profound implications for her poetics. First, because the experience of displacement can itself work as a potent source of imaginative insight. Second, because the physical memory of voyaging and movement through space provides a somatic framework from which the poet's imagination bodies forth the experience of being within, but apart from, a haunted culture and landscape.

Sundered from her Anglophile cultural inheritance and able to reflect on 'home' with the distance and imaginative ambivalence of an outsider, Wright would invoke Ulysses, that archetypal poetic wanderer, whose experience is (in the Scottish poet Robert

Crawford's fine phrase) 'that quintessence of home seen from abroad' (1989: 22). Four years after returning from her transcultural encounter, Wright produced her first, acclaimed volume of poems *The Moving Image* (published in 1946). The Platonic title and epigraph—'Time is a moving image of eternity', from Plato's *Timaeus*—suggest the shifts in perspective and the dialogic relations that were to charge her poetry with its lucid, expository power.<sup>i</sup> This collection acutely expresses the contingencies and hauntedness of Australia's palimpsestic identity. Confronting the question "Where's home?" in "For New England" (1944), she found that 'Many roads meet here / in me, the traveller and the ways I travel' (1994: 23).

Judith Wright was an intensely self-aware and self-reflective poet, who believed that 'the true function of an art and a culture is to interpret us to ourselves, and to relate us to the country and the society in which we live' (1965: xvii). This was—and is—an especially complex undertaking in an outpost culture such as the settler-dominated society of Australia, with its exile's sense of a world, elsewhere. For Wright, as for many of her time and background, this 'elsewhere world' was the Europe of the literary imagination, the *locus classicus* of Anglophone cultural heritage. As the daughter of a distinguished pastoralist family, she had assumed herself heir to this literary culture, despite its geographical remoteness from the rural Australia of her upbringing. She had enrolled to study English at Sydney University primarily as a means to access the

library, and immerse herself in the literature of the Old World (which was, she thought, the best training for a poet). She read Baudelaire and Valéry, Pound and, as she put it, ‘brooded over Eliot and Gerard Manley Hopkins’ (1999: 124). Writing later, she observed (1965: xviii)

The European never lived by bread alone; he had something else to sustain him, the sense of belonging to a tradition, of sharing in a long inheritance of achievement ... which formed for him a kind of interpretation and framework for his own life and himself, his landscape and his cities. He shared, however vicariously and unconsciously, in an art, a literature and a culture that stretched far into the past.

When Wright embarked for the northern hemisphere, it was with the purpose of experiencing that tradition in its geographic immediacy, and laying claim to its imaginative legacy.

Arriving in Europe in the northern spring of 1937, Wright found the Italian ports unvisitable due to tensions between Italy and other members of the League of Nations, in the wake of Mussolini’s invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). Spain, too, was off-limits: Wright had hoped to follow the example of her compatriot, the poet and activist Aileen Palmer in driving an ambulance in the International Brigades, but found that she had arrived too late: the Spanish borders were closed. In London, Wright cut a skeptical if ebullient figure amongst the crowds celebrating the coronation of George VI on 12 May 1937 (Rusden, 1988: 7). Despite following the well-travelled continental itinerary of the Australian tourist abroad, Wright’s potentially pedestrian experience of Europe was

sharpened by her exposure to the simmering social tensions in the countries she visited. Her delight in the stolen freedom of hitch-hiking solo around Scotland was undercut by an acute awareness of Mosley's Blackshirts marching through the streets of London (Wright 1999: 143). Despite this, and 'disregarding threats and rumours of war' in Europe (Wright 1999: 134), Wright and her companion (her university friend Cecily Nixon) travelled first to Amsterdam and then to Germany, staying in each case with friends of friends.

In Germany, Wright and Nixon stayed in Unkel-am-Rhein, a small town in the Rhine Valley. They arrived in the area less than eighteen months after Hitler's remilitarisation of the Rhineland. There, they were hosted by an impoverished baronial family who were fervent acolytes of what she termed 'the Nazi faiths' (1999: 134). The degree of Wright's political naivety up until this point—and her sudden horrified understanding—are apparent in a recalled exchange with her virulently antisemitic host (Rusden, 1988:

6)

I remember being asked by the old gentleman in question whether there were any 'ewes' in our country and I said, "Oh we have a lot of sheep there". ... When I grasped what he was at, I said "I have very many Jewish friends".

In Munich, she encountered 'horrifying anti-Jewish street posters' and Nazi rallies (Wright, 1999: 140).

These disturbing recollections are counterbalanced by her remembrance of witnessing the last days of another Europe, a *mitteleuropa* in relative peace and fragile abundance. Her description (1999: 135) of her time in Budapest, where the street-trees ‘sprouted new green plumes and feathers and there was a smell of peach brandy’ manifests a proleptic nostalgia for this imperilled world, encountered for the first time. This sense was heightened by her holiday dalliance with a Hungarian boy of Jewish extraction whose later, sudden silence during the war continued to haunt Wright throughout her life-time. Returning to Australia at the beginning of 1938, Wright (1999: 143) recalled

I was already convinced that war was soon inevitable—a fact that had not dawned on most Australians—and I could think of little else. Remembering the posters in Munich, the hushed apprehension in Vienna, the rally in Nuremberg, the Blackshirts in London, I wondered how long it would be before the Spanish war experience overtook [us].

With time and historical distance, it might be tempting for us to dismiss Wright’s time in Europe as the peripheral experience of the perennial observer. Can it really be considered a meaningful encounter? In my view it is precisely Wright’s physical experience of being situated on the social periphery of a culture in crisis—aware and yet apart—that so profoundly affected the course of her poetic imagination. As the literary scholar Caryl Emerson has observed (1996: 111)

... texts don't talk to each other, people do. ... Humans talk, flare up, fall asleep, commit follies, and forge unexpected links; literary or cultural texts might provide the ground for these activities, but only whole, living human consciousness can make it happen anew, and in new ways.

Philosophers of mind (such as Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991; and Colombetti, 2014) working at the nexus between linguistics, psychology and neuroscience propound a phenomenological, 'enactive' basis for higher cognitive and affective functions, including imagination and memory.<sup>ii</sup> The enactive approach is an 'ambitious striving for a synthesis of biological, neuroscientific, psychological, and phenomenological ideas' (Colombetti, 2014: xvii), within which the 'integrated mind' is 'cognitive, affective, embodied, and relational' (Young, 2010: 4). We formulate, enact, and articulate our responses to the past—and our imaginings of the future—through the mediating shapes of the body's sensory knowledge. In its application to metaphor and language formulation, the theory of embodied cognition argues that 'dynamic brain functions [are] shared ... during perceiving and acting and during imagining' (Lakoff and Johnson, 2008: 257): sensory experience becomes the embedded basis for the neurological structuring and framing of experience, of which metaphor is the linguistic and imagistic expression.

Drawing on the concepts of embodied and enactive cognition, I want to suggest that Wright's experience of what she described as the '*materialised horror*' of Europe



(Wright, 1999: 137, my emphasis) played a foundational role in her imaginative internalisation of—and confrontation with—the white guilt that forms such a major concern of her life and poetics. The crumbling archetype of the European City (with its literary apotheosis in Baudelaire's *Fourmillante cité* and the unreal London of Eliot's *Waste Land*) took on a visceral immediacy as Wright's remembered European cities swarmed with the proleptic spectres of war dead, swept up by 'war's eroding gale' (1994: 24). Looking back across the span of her poetic production to her earliest poems written in 1942, Wright's foreword to her *Collected Poems* (1994) acknowledges that her poetry was 'written out of the events, the thinking and feeling, the whole emotional climate and my own involvements of that time' (1994: i). The poetics of Wright's 'new choice' (1994: 24), wrung painfully from the dissolution of her inherited cultural certainties, found its governing metaphors in the spatialised contingencies of migration and encounter, and above all in a recognition of the inescapable hauntedness of her own inner and outer landscapes. Visceral memories, according to the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, (1962: 317)

... present themselves in our recollection not pre-eminently as sensory contents but as certain kinds of symbioses, certain ways the outside has of invading us and certain ways we have of meeting this invasion.

Wright's ongoing imaginative encounter with the ghosts of a displaced and displacing civilisation draws an urgency from the embodied nature of her interactions and experience.

The editors of *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* trace the sudden blossoming of Wright's talent evident in *The Moving Image* to her war-time return to the family property 'Wallamumbi' in April 1942, 'which brought the rediscovery and reassessment of her attachment to the countryside and the opportunity to think deeply about her art' (Wilde et al., 1994: 828). Wright's response to her European experience is, I contend, a significant and overlooked component of this reassessment. Wright's withdrawal and isolation in the New South Wales Tablelands was preceded by a four-year period from 1938–42, during which she lived in Sydney's Kings Cross area and worked in a series of office jobs. The poems written during this period are scarce, because, she writes (1999: 147), 'the despondency that had settled on me after I returned from an obviously war-oriented Europe ... made me feel that little I could write would survive in any case.' Two uncollected poems published in the *Australian National Review*—"Earth" (1938) and "City Rain" (1939)—were written well before Chamberlain's declaration of war against Germany, and well before the bombing of Pearl Harbour (during the morning of 7 December 1941) and the coming of war to

Australian shores. Their war consciousness is drawn directly from Wright's brooding sense of Europe's impending implosion.

In her peregrinations, Wright (1999: 137–138) had encountered 'a Europe that remained as a threat ... and a lifelong warning rather than the source of all learning and respect.' Her most immediate post-encounter poetry, written before Wright's immersion in her native landscape, charts a withdrawal from the culture of the Old World that she had come to believe was fundamentally compromised. Although traditional in form (as is much of Wright's early work), these poems are striking for their heightened awareness of inescapable temporality, and their recourse to the language of elemental processes. As she undertakes a process of detachment from and disavowal of European tradition, Wright strips away the vestiges of doomed human culture, exposing the brutal energies of the substratum.

In "Earth" (1938), Wright's first poem published after her return from Europe, human history is viewed as a process of subsidence, subject to the chthonic forces of decomposition. The soil feeds upon 'all knowledge', and 'dreams decayed', and 'Earth in the end will take you back entire' (1938: 53). In lines (1938: 53) such as

No, there is no hope  
To renounce earth; men find no grip on air,  
Water and fire repel them.

the poem eerily prefigures the funereal language of ashes and dust in Part II of T. S. Eliot's *Little Gidding* (1942), published four years later, and a great influence on Wright, in time. Compare Eliot's (1969: 192)

Dust inbreathed was a house —  
The wall, the wainscot and the mouse.  
The death of hope and despair,  
This is the death of air.

Both of these extracts mediate their horror at the processes of disintegration to which they bear imagined witness via a displacement of human experience into the dispersed materialities of a ruined landscape (this, I suggest, is one of the hallmarks of traumatised consciousness). Wright's poem ends with the flickering image of a fountain, its shifting jets playing chiaroscuro with the light, that (1938: 54)

Changes, and loses power, and sinks again,  
And then becomes the earth.

This image of leaping fluidity subsumed by telluric inevitability poignantly recalls the 'abounding, glittering jets' of Yeats' fountain in *Meditations in Time of Civil War* (1923), a poem similarly concerned with order and disorder, the rupturing of culture through war, and the resulting loss of human creativity (2000: 135).

The more gentle pluvial action of "City Rain" (1939) descends quickly from drought-  
quenched fecundity to a subterranean chaos of interment:

Rain has a quiet voice.  
Hear it sighing down,

Trilling over the roofs  
 Into the streets of the town.

...

Under my steps the seed  
 Roused where it was blown.  
 The earth blossomed strangely  
 In leaves and flesh and bone.

...

You, within your roof,  
 Think you to withdraw?  
 Beware; in the shells you build  
 We are the fatal flaw.

The entombed imagery of birth-in-death—‘The earth blossomed strangely / In leaves and flesh and bone’ (1939: 52)—is the first appearance in Wright’s work of what was to become, in her later poem “Eurydice in Hades” (1970) ‘clay corridors / below the reach of song’ (1994: 264–265). This later poem draws on the tropes of classical civilisation (‘laurel wreaths’ and triumphant kings) albeit acknowledging their limitations (they are, simultaneously, ‘blind passages’). In contrast, “City Rain” eschews such tropes entirely. Here, the imaginative field of reference is more starkly allied to images of Blackshirts flooding the streets of London than to the sophisticated detachment of the ‘cunning passages’ and ‘contrived corridors’ of history in Eliot’s ‘Gerontion’ (1920), (1969: 38).

The poem’s specifically (and, for Wright, atypically) urban topography—‘the roofs and the walls ... [and] the streets’ (1939: 52)—diverts the rain away from its life-giving

function (to rouse ‘the drought-dry grasses’) and into the barren spaces of the city streets. This loss of proper function, with perhaps an echo of the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:3–9), rouses a seed that ‘blossomed strangely’ (1939: 52). The impetus of the poem flows downwards with the rainwater. The persistent aural rhyming of ‘town’ and ‘down’—together with the visual rhyme of ‘blown’ makes the disintegrative process inevitable. The rain infiltrates the city’s substratum and exposes its ‘fatal flaw’ (1939: 52). The human buildings of the urban landscape are ‘the shells you build’ (1939: 52)—the semantic ambiguity of the line conflates shelter and munition in mutual indictment.

With its deracinated, archetypal city built upon the tumult of a living, dying bedrock, “City Rain” (1939) also prefigures Wright’s later interest in Jung, speaking as it does to Jung’s famous dream of a house in Basel built upon layers of catacombs, the boneyard of civilisation and source of Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious. (Although Wright and her husband Jack McKinney were to become immersed in Jungian psychology in the 1950s, according to her own account (Clarke and McKinney, 2006: 276) she had not yet read much Jung when she composed this poem.) Brooding on her experience of a Europe trapped by the inevitability of war, Wright described the winter of 1939 as a time when ‘Europe came back to haunt my dreams’ (1999: 150). The process of unearthing that is apparent in “Earth” and “City Rain”—the sudden irruption

of and confrontation with suppressed violence—provided a psychological template for the recognition and acknowledgment of guilt that would characterise her later responses to Australia’s colonial legacy. The poems written immediately before and during the war rehearse this othering of the familiar through their haunted awareness of complicity.

The poem “The Hanging Avalanche of Days” (1940), written in late 1939, most clearly and directly handles the bitter fruits of European knowledge, and the historical vertigo induced by civilisation’s collapse. Its first stanza reads (1940: 24)

The hanging avalanche of days  
fulfils its still and dreadful threat,  
overwhelms the valley’s sap  
and blocks with ice the summer ways.

The fatal disruption of the natural order is attributed to an assembled field of European cultural personifications, whose dark resurrection portends disaster (1940: 24)

The figures in the old cartoons—  
the armoured wench, the farmer fool—  
from darkness tower up again;  
fear-distended, mad balloons.

The stanza conjures the iron-clad Britannia, the bucolic John Bull, and the little dictator with his balloon-globe from the cartoon pages of *Punch*. These defunctive figures are the ‘useless dead’ of a putrified order, who rise up to hurl the poem’s lovers into ‘a storm of blood’ (1940: 24). Situated within, yet not of, this ruined landscape, the poetic

consciousness suffers the self-recrimination of a Cassandra who has disregarded her own premonition (1940: 24)

Why, in the hours when you and I  
drowned in love our old unease,  
did no shudder run through me  
showing me how you must die?

Why did I not foreknow your hurt,  
see your eyes turn blind and red,  
and knowing love would be but short  
go out to save the useless dead?

The lost and silent presence to whom these questions are directed is a recurrent feature of the poems of this period. Another uncollected poem, 'Battle Station, New Guinea' (1942) speaks with the yearning immediacy of enforced distance ('I am here, in a country of hills and of deep grass') of a distinctly Australian environment that becomes progressively haunted by absence (1942: 7). The memory of a 'small chill wind' engenders the insufflation of a haunted sadness into an already spectral landscape ('snow-gums stripped and pale', a 'blue moonlight haze' and the mopoke owl that 'wakes all night and grieves'), culminating in a plaintive whisper "'Where are you now, my dear, where are you now?'" (1942: 7).

In "To A.H. New Year, 1943" (1943)—a poem, as John McLaren (1996: 25) perceptively comments, 'shaped ... by the full pressure of its time'—Wright encounters





and each man fortifies his single soul  
 in the name of liberty, not understanding  
 that liberty is love, and has no frontiers.'

In this attempt, as the poem says, to find 'a meaning in annihilation' (1943: 16) the radical displacement into death and dissolution is rendered as a bitter form of liberation into a new landscape beyond hate and love. But memory of the insistent dead endures beyond the poem's attempts to grant them meaning. As the poem's reference to the destructive frontiers built by 'each country' suggests, there are complex genealogies of guilt at stake here that cannot be reduced to a consolatory narrative of noble sacrifice.

In "Dust" (1945), the apocalyptic vision of 'war's eroding gale' (1994: 24) is imbued with an emerging sense of culpability. The poem picks up the contrastive imagery, so plentiful in "City Rain" (1939), of natural processes—the beneficent wind ('carrying cloud / like a waterbag') and sun ('hardening the good wheat brown as a strong man') — and their corruption: the 'evil' of the 'remnant earth', tainted by a 'sick dust'(1994: 24)

... the earth rises,  
 running like an evil river; but the sun grows small,  
 ...  
 and war's eroding gale scatters our sons  
 with a million other grains of dust.

O sighing at the blistered door, darkening the evening star,  
 the dust accuses. Our dream was the wrong dream,  
 our strength was the wrong strength.

Weary as we are, we must make a new choice ...

In addition to sharing a semiotic kinship with Eliot's 'Triumphal March' (1931), with its surfeit of 'Dust / Dust / Dust of dust' (1969: 130), the poem's final stanza echoes Eliot's inchoate supplication ('O hidden under the dove's wing (Eliot, 1969: 127)) as it approaches its revelation: 'the dust accuses'. The wrenched intransitivity of this phrase sharpens the accusation, allowing the poem's insistent wind to penetrate through this lexical gap to contaminate speaker and reader alike with its load of 'sick dust' (1994: 24, 23).

These poems bear witness to the completeness with which Wright's travels had destroyed her sense of Europe as the cultural framework for her own life and art. Her encounters had burdened Wright with the paralysing foresight of war. But in sweeping her up in its 'eroding gale', the storm of Europe had also—crucially—re-ordered her internal imaginative topography, granting her a new and profound perspective: that of home seen from outside. The Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin has described 'outsideness' as a determining factor in creative understanding, writing (1986: 6–7)

Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. After all, a person cannot actually see or make sense of even his own exterior appearance as whole, ... only others can see and understand his authentic exterior, thanks to their spatial outsideness and thanks to the fact that they are others. In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most

powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly.

When she returned to Wallamumbi in 1942, it was with the fierce love and heightened sensitivity of the exile. Wright relates that as the train sped through the granite spurs and forest valleys of the Falls Country 'I found myself suddenly and sharply aware of it as "my country". These hills and valleys were—not mine, but me' (1999: 158). Yet even as she experienced this epiphany of cosmological oneness and belonging, Wright was aware of her manifold separation from this landscape. The magical certitude of the child who had claimed New England as her own psychogeographical domain had been replaced by an ambivalence and aching sense of exclusion precipitated by her coming into the knowledge.

This is the condition of being-in-language writ large, a form of Bakhtinian 'dialogic imagination' wherein the poet's language 'lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context' (Bakhtin, 1992: 284). But it is also, doubly, the ontological dilemma of the interloper's child, born into a landscape but excluded from its older, deeper valencies. Describing this state of schism, Wright later observed (1969: 301) of Australian writers that

Australia is still for us not a country but a state of mind. We do not speak from within but from outside. From a state of mind that describes rather than expresses its surroundings or from a state of mind that imposes itself upon rather than lives through landscape and event.

This statement expresses an acute consciousness of the fragility of literary representation in its relation to being—summed up in Alfred Korzybski’s aphorism ‘a map is *not* the territory’ (1933: 750). But it is also a statement of personal ontological necessity: it defines Wright’s quest for psychological and poetic integration with the supra-human environment—the desire to live through landscape and event—even as it recognises the irreconcilability of this landscape with Western consciousness. Her 1981 essay ‘The Broken Links’, collected in *Born of the Conquerors* (1991) makes the reason for this psychic exile poignantly explicit (1991: 30)

Those two strands—the love of the land we have invaded and the guilt of the invasion—have become part of me. It is a haunted country. We owe it repentance and such amends as we can make ...

In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that Wright should express sympathy with that consummate wanderer D. H. Lawrence, whose outsider’s vision in *Kangaroo* (1922) she praised (1965: xvii)

Lawrence saw what lies deeper in us than we know—the scar left by the struggle to conquer and waken, for our own purposes, a landscape that had survived on its own terms until the world’s late days.

Reading Wright’s description of the Europe she encountered in 1937, it is tempting to find a ghostly imprint of Lawrence’s fictional account of the birth of fascism in Australia. Wright’s memories of a Europe that ‘seethed like a disturbed ants’ nest on a

hot day ... [and] knots of men in fascist uniforms who passed us in the streets of London, or Munich, or Nuremberg' (1999: 143) seem to me to be mediated by Lawrence's earlier, inverse imagining of a fascist uprising in Australia, where the fascists rise up to combat their unthinking, swarming adversaries with the cry 'A bas les fourmis!' ('Down, ants!'), (Lawrence, 2002: 122). If this doubling is more than scholarly fancy, then there is a wonderful, enfolding otherness to Wright's experience of Europe gaining its remembered form from Lawrence's imagined encounter with the phantom of Australian fascism.

Wright's re-encountering of her native landscape in the new knowledge of her inherited guilt can be productively read as an instance of the Freudian Uncanny—the familiar become estranged—or as a recrudescence of the Jungian Shadow. Toby Davidson has argued persuasively that Wright's poems of direct confrontation with her inherited familial and civilisation guilt—in particular 'Nigger's Leap' (1945), 'At Cooloolah' (1954), and 'The Dark Ones' (1976)—enact a 'poetics of haunting and embodied (or avoided) resolution' (Davidson, 2008: 1). He sees in the late poem 'The Dark Ones' (1976) a Jungian projection of white fears of the Other, depicted as 'ghosts of a land / only by day possessed' (1994: 355). The 'shamed relief' of the invaders masks a self-directed, debilitating fear, figured in the shadow cast on the mind and the

infection in the blood from the metaphysical wound of colonial complicity. The precise contours of this estrangement are a complex of Wright's childhood sensitivity, war-consciousness, and postcolonial reckoning.

Wright was highly sensitive to the dense absences, or echoes, in her surroundings. Even as a child, she felt haunted by the spectre of an Aboriginal elder whose shadowy form she encountered flickering in the corners of rooms (1999: 87). Her writing about her family is replete with instances of 'sharp ... disquiet' (1999: 164), and a sense of 'something sad' (Brady: 138) beneath the superficially heroic settlers' narrative. The earth-hoarded memories of repressed human presence that feature in Wright's descriptions of her pastoralist childhood become compounded, in adulthood, by the doubled knowledge of foreign war and home-grown atrocity.

In her family history *The Generations of Men* (1959), written in 1949, Wright describes her grandfather's response to an Aboriginal ghost, (1995: 183)

... when he had seen—or imagined—that tall warrior standing on a plain where no warrior could have been, beckoning him across to nothing but a low tussock and the teasing heat-waves of shimmering air.

In a landscape ghosted by indigeneity, Albert Wright (in Judith's account) came to understand his 'whole civilisation [as] haunted, like a house haunted by the ghost of a murdered man buried under it' (1995: 183). 'He was', she writes, 'overtaken by a deep shudder at that enigmatic memory' (1995: 183). Davidson points to another, similar

instance of the shudder in 'The Dark Ones' (1976), when a 'shudder like a breath caught runs through the town' (1994: 355) as evidence for the 'haunted corporeality' of Wright's engagement with her 'hereditary ghosts' (Davidson 2008: 10, 1). In fact, both instances are preceded by "The Hanging Avalanche of Days" (1940), which asks 'Why...did no shudder run though me?' (1940: 24) in relation to the calm before the convulsion of Europe. The shudder—a word Frank Kermode writes has 'remained capable of describing the horror, or even the beauty, of a body's response to violent stimulus' (2010: 13)—is a corporeal embodiment of the psychological link between war and colonialism. Its recurrences in Wright's poetry and prose trace an arc from the retrospective construction of an absent shudder in "The Hanging Avalanche of Days" (1940), to its physical realisation in the confrontation with colonialism's violent suppression of indigenous people.

The psychic action of 'The Dark Ones' (1976) takes place within the confines of road and township, its spatial dynamics collapsed into eyes, faces, and the inner ecosystems of the bloodstream. In contrast, Wright's war-time reckoning with the compound legacies of violence she found abroad and at home produced poems (in the 1940s) that are outwardly oriented. They seek to play out their troubled psychodynamics beyond the bounds of the self. There is a persistent, although unarticulated, linkage of settler culture



and war guilt in poems such as “Camphor Laurel” (1949), where Wright’s figuration of an empty house built upon the bones of the dead (1994: 35) similarly draws on Freudian ideas (Freud, 2003: 154–155) of the return of the repressed to enfold the ghosts of pre-white Australia and modern Europe in a single party. This is not to say that Wright equated the Shoah with the colonial decimation of indigenous people, but rather, that the dream of *lebensraum* (living space) that gave rise to German territorial expansionism has as its guilty cognate the pastoralist’s desire to divest the Australian interior of its people, and make way for grazing herds. In each case, the landscape inescapably becomes a synecdoche for the bodies of the victims of history, whose physical corpses it has subsumed.

Such homological doubling is a defining characteristic of “For New England” (1944), a poem deeply concerned with the implications of belonging and homecoming. From its three-line opening, the poem both establishes and undercuts the contrastive grammars of foreign and endemic, self and other: The trees, ‘the homesick and the swarthy native / blow all one way to me,’ and the ‘southern weather ... smells of early snow’ (1994: 22). The ever-present wind is made to carry out a subtle series of translations and involutions. Travelling from the poem’s elsewhere, it is the ‘foreign wind’ against which the settlers must struggle, not least because in carrying its message over ‘the dubious

rims of sea ... *you are not forgotten*' (1994: 22), the wind recalls the interlopers' foreignness to themselves.

The action of the ancestral matriarch who 'planted the island there and drew it round her' (1994: 22) is replicated by the poem's early attempt to construct a native genealogy for itself. The insistent narratological momentum of the anaphora 'And I remember ... Therefore I ... And therefore I' is, like the settlers themselves, blown off course by an epiphany of duality: 'Therefore I find in me the double tree.' (1994: 22). The 'house closed in with sycamore and chestnut' gives no shelter from the disruptive agency of the wind that whips the air until it is 'fuming with wild wings' (1994: 22). The settlement narrative ends abruptly, cut off by a new-found austerity and acceptance: 'The hard inquiring wind strikes to the bone / and whines division' (1994: 23). The following stanzas demonstrate the necessary interdependency of division and concurrence (1994: 23):

Many roads meet here  
 in me, the traveller and the ways I travel.  
 All the hills' gathered waters feed my seas  
 who am the swimmer and the mountain river;  
 and the long slopes' concurrence is my flesh  
 who am the gazer and the land I stare on;  
 and dogwood blooms within my winter blood,  
 and orchards fruit in me and need no season.  
 But sullenly the jealous bones recall

what other earth is shaped and hoarded in them.

Where's home, Ulysses? Cuckolded by lewd time  
 he never found again the girls he sailed from,  
 but at his fireside met the islands waiting  
 and died there, twice a stranger.

Bound to the liminalities of belonging and exclusion, recognition and estrangement, "For New England" (1944) enacts the manifold geodesic motions of the perpetual wayfarer, never quite in command of the axial point from which the course for 'home' might be plotted. Its insights arise from and are enriched by a direct, perceptual experience of the forward-and-return mappings of the poet's odyssey. As Wright (1999: 3) put both the question and answer in her autobiography: 'To begin with, in Australia, who am I? ... The history of our arrival holds a history beyond itself. It begins in another hemisphere.'

In Europe, Wright had witnessed political geography manifestly in motion. The urban and rural environments through which she travelled were beset by the twin anxieties of invasion and dislocation. Around and across the contested borders between states—and in the subtler fissures within the individual cities she visited—Wright repeatedly encountered the disorientation of communities struggling with the threatened disruption of their established historical narrative. Wright had embarked on a sea-journey around the horizon's rim only to arrive in Europe at the moment of its

disintegration. Sensitive to the discontinuity around her, and troubled by the fragility and revealed barbarity of the old order, she returned to a home newly seen as both more, and less, her own. These compound dislocations were spatialised in the imagination as the un-mapping of Europe. The crumbling cities of the Old World gave way to the elemental scale and oceanic spaces of Wright's return journey. The voyage back to Australia provided a further imaginative frame for Wright's newly rich poetic crystallisation of the experience of being Australian.

In a series of lectures on the making of modern Australian consciousness, the novelist, poet and essayist David Malouf speaks about the European vision of Australia as an islanding of the imagination, whose contours are born out of the memory of oceanic expedition. His comments bear lengthy quotation (Malouf, 1998)

When Europeans first came to these shores one of the things they brought with them, as a kind of gift to the land itself, was something that could never have existed before; a vision of the continent in its true form as an island that was not just a way of seeing it, and seeing it whole, but of seeing how it fitted into the rest of the world. And this seems to have happened even before circumnavigation established that it actually was an island. ... If Aborigines are a land-dreaming people, what we latecomers share is a sea-dreaming, to which the image of Australia as an island has from the beginning been central. ... sea-routes whose ports of call in the days before air travel constituted a litany of connection that every child of my generation knew by heart.

This division does an injustice to indigenous history, obscuring the rich and continuing relationship between Aboriginal people and the sea in all its many forms.<sup>iii</sup> But it is certainly the case that the belated European imagining of Australia is framed by

a maritime consciousness borne of (and tainted by) the history of imperial expansionism. Malouf's charting of 'a litany of connection' along the sea-routes to the antipodes dramatises the essentially unknowable nature of the Australian landmass when viewed from the coast through the eye of the outsider. The unpublished manuscript of Wright's autobiography (quoted in Brady, 1998:138) imagines an alternate, indigenous vision of the land connected by 'those granite rocks [and] holy areas of stone which link up with stones across the country all the way to Western Australia.' Conscious of these tensions and lacunae, Wright's imaginative framing of island Australia is sufficiently detached and knowing to encompass a problematising of the maritime tropes of empire, whilst its sensual immediacy retains and embodies the wonder of the new arrival.

Wright's prose memory, recalled at the end of her life, of the steamer stopping at Gibraltar, 'an English bastion with war on its very horizon' (1999: 132) suggests the way her imagination bodied forth the experience of travel as a human geometry of motion and displacement, marked by contingency, transformation, and a porousness of the self. Her poetry after her return from Europe abounds with the human patterning of elements in space: "Nigger's Leap" (1945) measures 'our days by nights, our tropics by their poles' (1994: 15); in "Conch-Shell" (1949), life is 'the force that leapt between your poles' (1994: 29); whilst in "The Moving Image" (1946) a human timescale is imaged as

‘the widening spiral turning and returning’ (1994: 3). In “Woman to Man” (1949), the crisis of birth (a simultaneous separation and becoming) is troped as ‘the blaze of light along the blade’ (1994: 27), a searing conflation of biological and geodesic immediacy. This image has always struck me as depicting the moment when dawn-light first burns across the curvature of the sea’s horizon. There is something innately nautical in its astronomical momentum and geometrical framing. The rhythms and patterning of these sensory convolutions derive much of their vividness and poignance from Wright’s confrontation with the geographical reality of Australia in the fullness of its isolation between pole and tropic, and her imaginative concurrence with the sea-routes whose trajectories enact in turn the maritime reticulation of human experience.

I am not alone in noticing the oceanic dimension of Wright’s poetic imagination: A recent paper by Leigh Dale points to the repeated use of nautical metaphors in “Nigger’s Leap” (1945)—a poem with no overt connection to the sea—in lines like ‘Night buoys no warning / over the rocks that wait our keels; no bells sound for the mariners’; and ‘See in the gulfs, how small the light of home’ (1994: 15). Dale argues persuasively that despite her stated antipathy to Slessor’s ‘glittering’ but (she felt) unyielding prose, Wright’s “Nigger’s Leap” responds directly to Slessor’s “Five Bells” (1939). (“To A. H., New Year 1943” (1943), which begins ‘Tonight, bringing in the new year not with bells

/ but walking alone, cloud hiding the small stars, / I think of you' (1943: 16) seems to me to be under a similar compulsion of response). Dale implicitly accepts embodied experience as a credential for enrichment of literary response when she asserts that Wright's engagement with Slessor's "Five Bells" (1939) is all the more powerful for 'her own experiences of ferry travel on Sydney Harbour', a view reflected in Dale's lovely coinage 'kinaesthetic empathy' to describe Slessor's response to Joe Lynch's death (2013: 51–2).

"Nigger's Leap" (1945) brings the 'kinaesthetic empathy' of the seafarer to bear on the once-familiar contours of home: now made suddenly and starkly alien by the knowledge of a long-obscured horror. In its interrogation of colonial violence, the poem elides the temporal and the spatial in the form of night and sea, as forces that subsume and obliterate. The 'obscure tide' of the night 'lips the harsh / scarp of the tableland' (1994: 15–16); threatens the sailor/settlers 'and beats with boats of cloud up from the head.' (1994: 15) This meteorological incursion gestures beyond the specific atrocity of the poem's title to echo the broader pattern of beatings and broken heads inflicted by those who came on boats. Here, however, the homological resonances between night/sea/mouth and boat/cloud make violence and its legacy endemic to the colonisers' experience of the landscape. Those who have been the beneficiaries must suffer the

inevitable inundation: 'Night floods us suddenly as history / that has sunk many islands in its good time.' (1994: 16).

The contemporaneous poem "The Surfer" (1946) is similarly deft in its negotiation between the need to address (post)colonial ignorance, and a willingness to revel in the sensual immediacy of the natural environment. The poem acts out a metaphysical *volta* around a tidal axis of sun and home. As in "Nigger's Leap" (1945), light and darkness suffuse the sea with metaphysical character. The opening, daylight stanza composites the surfer and the surf—'Muscle of arm thrust down long muscle of water;' (1994: 21)—granting the youth the marine grace to move through the water like light: his strength drives 'through the hollow and coil / of green-through weirs of water; (1994: 21). At one with the surrounding sea, his spiralling delight in the foaming surf is mirrored by the wheeling gulls above ('in air, as he in water' (1994: 21). The poem's whole cosmology turns at the central stanza, with the sun, as the 'last leaf of gold vanishes from the sea-curve' (1994: 22). The poem's repeat injunction 'turn home' is undercut by the sudden realisation, at the coming of the dusk, that this is no place of habitation. In the 'cold twilight' the sea 'shows / the bones' beneath the waves (1994: 22). The native buoyancy that sustained the weight of the surfer builds to a restless



vertigo as the capricious sea 'drops there and snatches again, drops and again snatches / its broken toys' (1994: 22).

Immersed in the complex grammars of dislocation and emplacement, Wright's imaginative gift was a penetrating, visionary awareness of her own intersubjectivity, well before the historical moment when phenomenology and cognitive science converged to give currency to such insight. Haunted by her family's dispossession of their aboriginal antecedents, and invaded—in Merleau-Ponty's terms—by her experience of traversing a Europe in crisis, Wright's poetics strive towards an imaginative homecoming whilst resisting the pitfalls of neo-colonialism. The tension and self-doubt evident in Wright's late poem "Two Dreamtimes (for Kath Walker, now Oodgeroo Noonuccal)" (1973) with its injunction "Trust none—not even poets" (1994: 318) demonstrate both the difficulty and urgency of such a project.

As Wright's challenge to her squatter family's account of the past makes clear—'I'm a stranger, come of a conquering people' ("At Cooloolah" (1954))—haunting implies displacement. Whether as possession or projection, the presence of a ghost 'suggests a violent disjunction between the body and the soul' (Brunet, 1997: 68), the lingering on of disembodied spirit in an environment, or the penetration of the body by a foreign entity. Leaving aside the field of pathological experience, the closest analogous

experience a living person might have to that of displaced ghostliness is the experience of the traveller moving through strange lands, and uncovering, on return, the strangeness of home.

The emotional fluidities of journeying, dispossession and encounter are thus key to Wright's working through and acceptance of the ghosts of her colonial familial past, and her sense of return to a place seen for the first time. Drawing on her own experience to generate what Owen Barfield termed the 'participant knowledge' of poetry (Barfield, 1973: 32), Wright repeatedly turns to the liminal figure of the traveller to mediate between arrival and incursion, displacement and emplacement, in order that those implicated in the crimes of colonial history might begin, as she put it, 'to lay that ghost in themselves' (1995: 183).

This mediatory process is apparent in "For New England" (1944) with its elision between 'the traveller and the ways I travel', and the split insider/outsider consciousness of the poem's 'I', 'who am the gazer and the land I stare on' (1994: 23). The poem conjures Ulysses, a figure whose archetypal experience of compound estrangement becomes an hermeneutic steer for Wright's decolonising poetics. Ulysses 'met the islands waiting / and died there, twice a stranger' (1994: 23). The dynamic of exploration and arrival in an archipelago with its own character, intention ('waiting')

and history is complicated by the fact that for Ulysses this is in fact a return 'home' to Ithaca.

Although "For New England" (1944) is the most nuanced rendering of the dynamic in Wright's oeuvre, Ulysses and his unnamed cognate 'the traveller' recur across Wright's work, most clearly in Wright's third collection *The Gateway* (1953). *The Gateway* is a collection—written under the sign of Jung—concerned with discerning the messages death sends 'from the night's mud / the unmade, the inchoate' ("Dark Gift" (1951), (1994: 71)) and with interrogating the 'Self' in 'the land of oblivion / among black-mouthed ghosts' ("The Gateway" (1953), (1994: 115)). The title poem is spoken in the voice of 'the traveller', an uncanny, composite figure ('Self ... slipped from my side' (1994: 115)) who journeys to the timeless country of the dead in search of a primal return to source. Despite its ostensible turn inward, away from the concerns of the world, the poem's Jungian structures of individual psychological attribution are arranged according to the postcolonial logic of earlier poems dealing with foreign war and white colonial guilt. The evacuated centre of the poem's psychic experience ('In the depth of nothing / I met my home') rehearses again the necessarily unfulfilled desire for emplacement, inhibited by a metaphysical struggle between 'the last surrender' and 'the last peace' (1994: 116).

For Wright, the interrelation between self and place was fraught by an imaginative compulsion to exceed her own epistemological and semiotic limits without trespassing on the spaces and stories of others. Her experience—on the cusp of adulthood—of being an outsider in Europe in 1937 initiated a process of self-recognition that Wright came to see as fundamental to the purpose of poetry (Davidson, 1983: 391). It inculcated a new distance and ambivalence, rendering the child born of the conquerors ‘twice a stranger’ (1994: 23). The exile’s complex of fierce love and estrangement that distinguishes *The Moving Image* (1946) is a sustained feature of Wright’s poetics, right into her very last collection, *Phantom Dwelling* (1985). “Falls Country (For Peter Skryznecki)” (1971) addresses itself to a fellow traveller, ‘latecomer to this country, / sharer in what I know’ (1985: 59). In “Summer” (1985), Wright confronts the inarticulate clarity of the animal world: ‘In a burned out summer, I try to see without words / as they do. But I live through a web of language’ (1994: 421). Wright’s phrasing here obliquely answers to and then exceeds Bakhtin’s ‘I live in a world of others’ words’ (1984: 143) in the complexity of its awareness and desires. The poem speaks with a lifetime’s rending insight of the reciprocal, haunted struggle of human consciousness and non-human environment to make terms: ‘This place’s quality is not its former nature / but a struggle to heal itself after many wounds’ (1994: 421).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of the neoplatonist implications of Wright's early symbolism, see Hawke (2001).

<sup>ii</sup> **Varela, F. J., et al. (1991) is a foundational text in this field. See also Damasio, A. (1995); (Lakoff, G., and Johnson, M. (1999); Thompson, E. (2001); Stewart, J., et al. (2010); and more recently Colombetti, G. (2014). Lawrence Shapiro (2011) provides a very helpful introduction.**

<sup>iii</sup> Legal recognition of indigenous marine governance has belatedly produced successful native title claims over sea country, including most recently the 2013 Torres Strait Sea Claim.

## REFERENCES

- Bakhtin M. (1992) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Translated from Russian by C. Emerson and M. Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin M. (1984) *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated from Russian by C. Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bakhtin M. (1986) Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff. In: Emerson C and Holquist M (eds) *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Translated from Russian by VW. McGee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1–7.
- Barfield O. (1973) *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning*, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.
- Brady V. (1998) *South of My Days: A Biography of Judith Wright*, Sydney: HarperCollins.
- Brunet, S. (1998) Rewriting the Landscape: Judith Wright's Fragile Land and Haunted Self. *Land and Identity: ASAL Proceedings 1997*: 64–69.
- Clarke, P. and McKinney, M. (2006) *With Love & Fury: Selected Letters of Judith Wright*, Canberra: National Library of Australia.
- Colombetti G. (2014) *The Feeling Body: Affective Science meets the Enactive Mind*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Crawford R. (20 April 1989) Callaloo. *London Review of Books* 11(8): 22–23.
- Dale L. (2013) No more boomerang? "Nigger's Leap" and "Five Bells". *Journal of Australian Studies* 37(1): 48–61.
- Damasio, A. (1995). *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. London, Picador.
- Davidson J. (1983) *Sideways from the Page: The Meanjin interviews*, Sydney: Fontana / Collins.
- Davidson T. (2008) 'An Entangled Kind of Haunting': Judith Wright and Uncanny Australia. *Philament* 13: 1–19.
- Eliot TS. (1969) *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*. London: Faber.
- Emerson C. (1996) Keeping the Self Intact During the Culture Wars: A Centennial Essay for Mikhail Bakhtin. *New Literary History* 27: 107–126.
- Freud S. (2003) *The Uncanny*. Translated from German by D. McLintock. London: Penguin.
- Hawke J. (2001) The Moving Image: Judith Wright's Symbolist Language. *Southerly* 61: 160–178.
- Kermode F. (2010) Eliot and the Shudder. *London Review of Books* 32: 13–16.
- Korzybski A. (1933) *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, New York: Institute of General Semantics.

- Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson (1999). *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York, Basic Books.
- Lakoff G and Johnson M. (2008) *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lawrence DH and Steele B. (2002) *Kangaroo*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Malouf D. (1998) Lecture 1: The Island. *The Making of Australian Consciousness*. The Boyer Lectures: ABC Radio. Available at:  
<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/boyerlectures/lecture-1-the-island/3460264#transcript>
- McLaren J. (1996) *Writing in Hope and Fear: Literature as Politics in Postwar Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty M. (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated from French by C. Smith. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Rusden H and Wright J. (1988) Transcript of an interview with Judith Wright-McKinney conducted between 18 September 1987 and 12 May 1988. Canberra: National Library of Australia. TRC 2202.
- Shapiro LA. (2011) *Embodied Cognition*, New York: Routledge.
- Stewart J, Gapenne O and Di Paolo EA. (2010) *Enaction: Toward a New Paradigm for Cognitive Science*, Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press.
- Thompson E. (2001) Empathy and Consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8: 1–32.
- Varela FJ, Rosch E and Thompson E. (1991) *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press.
- Wilde W, Hooton J and Andrews B. (1994) *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wright J. (21 November 1942) Battle Station, New Guinea. *The Sydney Morning Herald*: 7.
- Wright J. (28 April 1939) City Rain. *Australian National Review* 5: 51–52.
- Wright J. (1 October 1938) Earth. *Australian National Review* 4: 53–54.
- Wright J. (1940) The Hanging Avalanche of Days. *Southerly* 1: 24.
- Wright J. (Autumn 1943) To A.H., New Year 1943. *Meanjin* 2: 16.
- Wright J. (1965) *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Wright J. (1969) The Upside-Down Hut. In: Barnes J (ed) *The Writer in Australia: A Collection of Literary Documents, 1856–1964*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 331–336.
- Wright J. (1991) *Born of the Conquerors*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Wright J. (1994) *Collected Poems 1942–1985*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson/HarperCollins.
- Wright J. (1995) *The Generations of Men*, Sydney: ETT Imprint.

- Wright J. (1999) *Half a Lifetime*, Melbourne: Text Publishing.
- Wright J. (1985) *Phantom Dwelling*, London: Virago.
- Yeats WB. (2000) *Selected Poems*, London: Penguin.
- Young K. (2010) *Imagining Minds: The Neuro-Aesthetics of Austen, Eliot, and Hardy*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press.