CHAPTER V

THE POET AS PHILOSOPHER:
METAPHYSICAL AND MYSTICAL STRAINS
IN THE POETRY OF LIVESAY AND WRIGHT

Death halves us
every loss
divides
our narrowness
and we are less.

Livesay, "After Grief" (LCP 239).

Tell her who rode me last
death's only nothing;
dead has no taste at all.

Wright, "To a Mare" (WCP 232).

A poet with the conviction that "One must have tentacles
into all parts of the world", Livesay, naturally, does not confine
her poems to a few areas of interest (Hutchinson 296). Her
poetic concerns encompass even the farthest reaches of experience.
Her poems betray strong philosophical strains which reflect her
desire to discover the purpose of existence. This search to find meaning in life is a major motive in her poetry.

In many of her poems Livesay reflects upon the process of ageing and death. To her, ageing is not an experience to be shunned, but is something to be looked at and enjoyed as the culmination of a rich, varied life. Death also is presented as an inevitable experience every individual must come to terms with. It need not be a terrifying experience, as, like every thing else in nature, it also issues forth in a rebirth. Her stance here parallels the one taken by Robert Browning in "Rabbi Ben Ezra": "Grow old along with me / The best is yet to be / The last of life for which the first was made" (363).

The philosophical content of her poems on love has already been discussed. However, a few remarks on some of her major poems on love which reveal her metaphysical concerns may not be out of place here.

In the true spirit of a frank confessional poet like Judith Wright or Kamala Das, Livesay speaks candidly of the sexual act in many of her poems. But none of these smacks, in any manner, of obscenity. In "The Touching", she speaks of a successful physical relationship as something that can transport one into the highest ecstasy. The sexual act is a force of renewal,
a rebirth of self. The woman in this poem, though “whole” already becomes more fully alive through the sexual union. Love for her “is my second heart beating” (WCP 297).

The physical act of love breaks down the barrier of the narrow walls of the poet’s own identity and she becomes a part of the larger scheme of life. Through the sexual act she experiences a sort of mystical awareness accepting the underlying unity of all existence.: “I drown in your identity / I am not I / but root / shell / fire” (LCP 298). She is now wise enough to perceive that both she and her partner are necessary as well as complementary to each other.

The mystic element of love is treated in poems like “The Dream” and “Old Song” also. Using the image of a maid meeting a unicorn in a “dark wood” the poet points to the transforming power of sexual meeting in “The Dream”: “I met a unicorn in that dark wood / and strangeness blazed my blood” (LCP 294).

In “Old Song” she alerts us to the transience of love and earthly pleasure and exhorts us to enjoy it while it lasts and let the memory of its beauty sustain one later:
the essence is
to catch the bird in season
hold, hold a snow drop
capped and cool
in the cold snow -
then let it go (LCP 295).

Where there is no involvement of the heart, the physical union of the two bodies means nothing. Physical attraction alone won't guarantee a meaningful relationship between the sexes. So she confesses in "The Hard Core of Love":

I seek more
than skin, flesh, blood
I seek the coursing
heaving heart
for my soul's food. (SCT 137)

The sexual act, however, tantamounts to a rebirth. Though fleeting in its action, it leaves an imprint on the poet who feels a renewing of self. In "The Woman" Livesay tells her lover: "When you make me come / it is the breaking of a shell / a shattering birth" (SCT 122).
The Disasters of the Sun", a poem in *The Self Completing Tree* with obvious feminist overtones is a celebration of the complementarity of the genders as is found in the ancient Chinese philosophy of Yin-Yang. According to Chinese philosophy Yin and Yang are the two cosmic energy modes constituting the Tao or the eternal dynamic way of the universe. Heaven is yang, the active, bright male principle while earth is yin, the passive, dark female principle. All the things of nature and society are composed of different combinations of the two principles. Livesay seems to have had this Chinese philosophy in mind while pointing to the complementarity of the two genders:

When the black sun's
gone down
Connect me underground
root tentacles
Subterranean water
no more lovely man can be
than he with moon-wand
who witches water. (*SCT* 102)
Livesay is quite alive to the pain and the suffering women undergo, which she believes are universal in nature and are not limited by time or space. So she can easily identify herself completely with the collective body of other women and share their common aspirations and sufferings. In "Apocalypse" therefore she responds to the cry of the pre-historic "Lucy" and records her "scream" for humanity:

Your bones hidden in the earth
three million years
could be as yesterday
a tomorrow
except that the world is now
.

Our phoenix rises
bursts into
a dazzle of satellites
'blazing. (PL N. pag.)

The image of the phoenix, a symbol of rebirth and renewal, immortalized by John Donne through his famous poem "The Canonization" suggests a future full of promise. From time immemorial woman has been at the receiving end. But the poet
is sure that her strong desire to overcome "hate", desperation and desire “will ultimately bear fruit and lead” into some marvellous connection. Her quest for a unique identity will succeed and “dazzle” by its brilliance.

“In Therapy: A Dialogue” is another poem where Livesay celebrates the woman’s power to merge her identity with nature and become “one” with it.

We are nameless
Our signatures come
from the authority of the death
as we probe the universe
to become one
with its heart. (PL N. pag.)

Obviously, the feminine “regenerative” principle is at work here. Though Livesay later rejected the idea of organised religion and moved away from the Christian faith, in her formative years she had clung to religion with the conviction that “God was immanent, not transcendent. He was ‘in nature’- human as well as vegetable and mineral” (Hutchinson 189). After she drifted away from the Christian faith, she chose to hail, very much in the spirit of a true pantheist, the natural world as a
manifestation of the Divine. She has been trying throughout
her poetic career to find answers to such metaphysical questions
as the purpose of existence. This tantamounts to projecting the
vocation of a poet as something imbued with religious attributes.
Poetry itself becomes a form of religion here as is borne out
by the poet’s own words: “I feel that the beauty of the natural
world and the artist’s or poet’s revelation of it, does lead to
inner harmony-peace-truth; the Gothic cathedrals do lift us out
of time” (Barber 22).

Poetry and creative arts are veritable saviours capable of
redeeming mankind. Woman’s close connection with the natural
cycles of growth urges a woman poet like Livesay to place
the regenerative principle at the centre of creativity for it affirms
life. She reiterates the importance of creative arts thus: “In art,
lies the greatest human achievement as contrasted with all the
other aspects of our creative existence such as religion, politics
or science” (Hutchinson 287). Women who are closer allies
of nature are better qualified to teach humanity the importance
of poetry. A poem is a message for survival. In an oft-quoted
poem, “Poetry is Like Bread”, she speaks of the need to share
poetry like ‘bread’ as it is fundamental to life. Man who is
self-destructive by nature can learn about the art of preservation
from nature. Sharing poetry is paramount because it is through communication that one can lend life meaning:

We women are everyone
beginning to share
Poetry is communication
not a game
played with words
a poem is a message. (*FTW* 59)

A poet, through poetry, can transform a disintegrating humanity and render it “whole” again. A poet has “that energy/to transfer the earth’s solidity into images / and return them here / fire’s alchemy” (*RE* 41).

A poem, apart from reflecting the natural world, reflects life itself and is therefore a revelation for both the poet and the reader alike. In “The Second Language” Livesay presents words as “trees” fit to expel the darkness of ignorance and spark “our eyes with light”:

a tree’s name shadows us
I share its history
with you
who came
a first man to this forest
And you find roots
your look uncurls each leaf
till every word we speak
thrusts upwards from its mother dark
and sparks our eyes with light. (SCT 219)

True to the spirit of an avowed conservationist, Livesay has tried in poem after poem to warn her contemporaries against allowing technology to enslave them and sever them from the life-giving nature. Having been brought to the level of a machine by advanced technology, man has even lost his sense of discrimination. A demonic counterpart to the unifying regenerative principle has gained clear supremacy. Sans spiritual values, science is a Satan and the scientist, “the other side of the poet” with enough potential to erupt even a mountain. So the Scientist confesses:

I am become death
the shatterer of worlds (RE 25).

The poet however, does not lose hope completely. She finds solace in the fact that the scientist can still
That the power of art will get the better of the destructive forces at work in the world today is echoed by the Commoners also in the other sections of *The Raw Edges*. The poet does not lose her faith in the power of poetry:

We may go down bombed
Set on fire then dying
but the word the poem has been hurled
to the bombed target
our epitaph defying. (RE 27)

The Sibyl's words also merit mention here:

Sing then
for the inner ear's
hearing
so each man and woman
common and uncommon
may achieve an instant of plain prayer. (RE 31)

Prayer, the song of creativity and one’s own inner voice is presented as a potent means to achieve salvation. Prayer “is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul”, as Emerson has neatly put it (76). That the individual acts of creative imagination have the power to transform is stressed in another poem, “Lorca”, quoted elsewhere in a different context. Lorca was shot to death by General Franco’s men. But he is still alive!

O grass emerald sight
Dash of dog for ball
And skipping rope’s bright blink
lashing the light! (SCT 200)

Lorca’s poems which permeate his vitality and zest for life are more enduring than the destructive power of the bombers:

And song outsoars
the bomber’s range
serene with wind -
Manoevred cloud. (SCT 201)
His poems with their inherent capacity to "explode"—transform completely can stand even the onslaught of time.

In the "House of Winter" where Livesay enters into an imaginary dialogue with Anna Achmatova, a Russian writer, the central concern is again the value of art. During the war, Livesay saw the puniness of art in the face of the holocaust of Hiroshima

At Hiroshima

Thought stopped

Peace became war

Words were pebbles

Flung into deep water. (*CFT 230*)

But this phase of depression was not to last long. The optimism that stems from an affirmation of life makes her believe once again in herself and other artists:

Now I am stalwart

Can ready myself

to believe in you

as person, poet, woman —

I cry "Arise again"
I cry with my hands groping
hands that seek
to cover you with love. (SCT 230)

The "Enchanted Isle: A Dialogue" is another poem where the poet has a dialogue with another artist. This time it is a woman potter who is too busy selling her "fine pots", "jars", "goblets" all of "fantastic shapes". These wares which represent her own vision of life, however, do not attract the poet's attention. She on the other hand turns to the creator of these, the potter who stands for pure imagination:

What I chose
was your grey hair unswept
the wrinkled skin
the crinkled lids
eyes glowing with long years of seeing
jewels set
in an earthern island. (SCT 274)

The potter views her art as a weapon using which she can alert the world of the chaos and anarchy that exist today. But this view is not shared by Livesay. She does not want the power of imagination to be used merely to depict the hard realities.
of life as the world of the imagination cannot be ruled by the ordinary laws of the world. An artist should on the other hand use his imagination to reflect the beauty around and within man as this affirmation alone can lend meaning to life. Life offers a multiplicity of experiences and the poet’s task is to reveal the truths emanating from these and to project his/her social vision. But unfortunately, most writers are “impelled / to walk in a blindfold / take whatever turn / the hands feel out / touch tree or rockhold” (SCT 275).

Creativity is essentially a mystical experience that has its source not in reason but in intuition, a higher power defying rational explication. It is a unique power capable of transforming even those who come in contact with it. Though this transformation is made possible by the artist or the poet through his/her own particular medium, he/she cannot explain as to how this transformation takes place. “Wunderbar”, a poem dedicated to the sculptor Almuth, is a celebration of the sculptor’s creativity and his unique art which is “a kind of miracle”, “a blessing”:

Your hands manipulating
earth’s essence clay
pouring it on cleaning
till the transformation shines forth
How do you do it
you do not know
nor ploughing through these furrows
of words
do I. (SCT 214)

Death is a major theme at the hands of many a poet like Emily Dickinson and Judith Wright whose poetry is noted for its metaphysical content. Livesay has also written at least a few poems where death is treated either directly or indirectly. In “Postscript” she debates with her own self the advisability or otherwise of ending her life. Life is so uncertain - death can marshal in anytime. She is constantly aware

that the moment lies lurking
between one drink and another
one shout and another
one kiss one blow
and a heart’s beat. (WIA 40)

So she frantically digs into the “pocket of memory” and pulls out “all the irrelevances” and lays them on the table. These include “a handful of hair”, “a marble” and “the bowl of a
pipe". These urge her to stay alive. Her final decision not to end her life is strengthened by another consideration:

- and last?
- I count my verse. (WIA 42)

"Fantasia" is another poem where the theme of death comes in. Using diving as a symbol of death, she points to the inevitability of facing death at some point in life. In "Imagination’s underworld" one experiences the heights of bliss as also the depths of despair (SCT 203). But one cannot live for good in that "underworld". The poet remembers the many literary celebrities who had opted for a watery burial. She asks "Wherefore the many, many / chose the watery stair" (SCT 204).

Virginia Woolf, Shelley, Raymond Knister, Bouchette and Helen Coleman had preferred a death by water. Like them, Livesay is also seemingly fascinated by "the salty stare": "Death courteous and calm, glass - smooth / His argument so suave, so water worn / A weighted stone" (SCT 204).

But to her diving is a craft demanding training. Others may choose their own time of leaving this world, but Livesay with her firm faith in life is prepared to wait.
Like Shelley who looked upon poets as the unacknowledged legislators of the world, Livesay too considers poets as a privileged lot whose words have the power to grow inspite of darkness. All that they need is just the medium of air that surrounds our planet. The power of affirmation inherent in creative writing is the theme of her poem suggestively titled “The Dismembered Poem” which deserves to be contrasted with MacLeish’s poem “Ars Poetica”:

The words like seeds exist
declare themselves in air
behind walls, on the hidden ear
under the crack of the door

Recant! Recant! that cry
is only a public noise;
behind the door in the dark
affirms the exultant voice. (SCT 222)

The message of this poem may be debatable, but its affirming power is strong enough to create exultancy in those who read it. In another poem, “Illusions of Grandeur” also she brazenly declares “Poets are traffic lights / always flashing green” (FTW 47).
The present world is beset with alarming realities like death, confusion, disharmony and noise. But a poet can set it right, "bring back wonder to the world". In "A Hug for Beth", Livesay asks Beth, the bereaved daughter of poet Pat Lowther who was hammered to death, to

hold in reserve
the earthen key
to the locked door of creation
explode the universe
with the power of colour music words. (FTW 24)

Every act of creativity is life-affirming and it holds the key to an on-going universe. Beth, a poet with enough potential to transform humanity can save the world through the power of colour and convey the message of hope and survival to humanity.

To Livesay, poetry is nothing short of a kind of religion, a religion different from an organized and ritualistic one. In "Dream sequence: I and II" she describes her encounter, a mystical one, with a "sceptered bird" which, with its mark of royalty or sovereignty, symbolises divinity. It bursts into the poet's room "and dazzled me / I swam in light" (SCT 194).
This meeting frees her from the clutches of the external senses and urges her to look "inwards" into her own self which lays bare the eternal truths of life.

The sanctity of the poet's experience is explicit in the title of the second sequence- "The Visitation". She wonders whether her visitor is a bird or an animal, both symbols of nature. But soon she realises that her visitor is a she-bird who asks whether she is married. When she answers

\textit{To a man, yes}

\textit{I mean: to a god...}(SCT 195)

the bird's next query is

\textit{Have you ever been married}

\textit{to a god?}

\textit{No.}

\textit{Well then. I can work with you. (SCT 195)}

Marriage imposes restrictions on a woman, a marriage to a god is all the more restrictive because it enjoins the woman to utterly efface herself in order to merge with the divine consciousness. This could also imply a complete negation of the self that inhibits the creative imagination. Livesay's decision to accept
the divine gift of poetry parallels the way Emily Dickinson looked at the poetic profession. As for Emily Dickinson, for Livesay too, religion is not necessarily a dogmatic code of behaviour, but a divine manifestation of nature. At the encounter with the bird, creativity wells up in the poet's mind:

Message delivered
She flew off
in a whirl of wings
Since when
my humming heart
sings. (SCT 195)

Like Wordsworth and others before her, Livesay also finds unstinted pleasure in the objects of nature. But what impels her to live on, more than anything else, is the power she finds in her vocation, namely writing poetry. She cannot view poetry as a mere art, for her it is life itself. It lends meaning to other lives as much as it sustains her otherwise troubled life:

The validity of my life
is whether you read this poem
or not
and whether it speeds
your arrow. (IA 66)
Earlier in the same poem “Catechism” she affirms, in unequivocal terms, her staunch faith in the power of poetry:

The validity of my life
is a few poems caught and netted
a few strong feelings
above love and dying
and loss.... (IA 66)

In her preface to “At the Finish”, reproduced in *The Self-Completing Tree* Livesay admits

Greater minds than mine have coped with the philosophical problems of living and dying. My comments on these subjects are at best, tentative, and at worst gloomy - not to be taken seriously but to be appreciated as one pulls up the blind, longing for clear skies and delighted when they happen. (SCT 233).

Though she rates her comments on the issues of living and dying as “tentative” and “not to be taken seriously” what follows in the same preface betrays her active and serious interest in the subjects:
One rides on through the tunnel, seeing light. What light? Does it matter? The great goal should be to celebrate along the way song and dance, youth and age. For in growing older, there lies the possibility of affirmation, seeing younger. (SCT 233)

That she is always conscious of the passing of time and whatever problems there are associated with the processes of ageing and death is undeniable. The obvious philosophical strain of her mental and intellectual make up equips her for a reconciliation with ageing and death.

Ice Age, the “gnarled artie bush of a book” contains poems which portray the frustrations as well as the serenity that is concomitant with old age (Woodcock 60). According to Alan Twigg, this volume also points to the “possible changes in our world climate” and to “what is happening to humanity psychologically and spiritually” (132).

A healthy human community is one founded on the bedrock of love and charity. “Spiritually whole” people alone can sustain our “ancient and balanced universe”. It is more so in a world like ours rendered poorer by the passing away of charity idols like Mother Teresa and Lady Diana, the Princess of Wales. The
title poem in the above volume shows the poet’s chagrin at
man’s innate capacity for destruction, a destruction which means
personal death as well as a death of the whole biosphere at
the hands of technology. It is necessary to act righteously in
one’s individual capacity in a world besieged by umpteen
problems. So she asks

    Now who among us
    Will lift a finger
    to declare *I am of God, good?*
    Who among us
    dares to be righteous? *(IA 70)*

In her youth, Livesay had expressed certain misgivings
about what philosophies meant to her:

    It’s true, philosophies
    Have never darkened me
    I live in what I feel and hear
    And see. *(LCP 68)*

But her later poems, as suggested already, show her pre-
occupation with the philosophical nuances of living and dying.
“Thumbing-Ride” speaks of her attempt to hitch-hike a ride
on a deserted highway. At a symbolic level, the poem describes
the human predicament dominated by despair, redeemable only by bonds of love established with those around us:

I am the one
alone on the highway
language exists
in my thumb. (IA 17)

Love is the omnipotent truth that compels us to accept our sense of oneness with the rest of the humanity. It has the inherent capacity to effect small but transforming miracles. No wonder, the Sybil, a symbol of age and wisdom wants to learn

in the clutch of loving
how small miracles
shatter the facts
explode! (SCT 276)

For many, ageing is merely something resulting from the passage of time. The wisdom associated with old age is often ignored. Old age need not necessarily imply a loss or cessation of interest in life's activities. The old can still remain committed to the young and act in unison "for our own and the island's / safe keeping" (SCT 275).
Much like Donne in the seventeenth century who dared to ask Death not to be "proud", Livesay too views death as a passport to a better and a more assuring world. Herself a sybil in her own right, a change brought about by the onset of old age, she is ready to acknowledge the unity underlying all experience and view birth, death and rebirth as a continuous process:

It is time to go
and time to come
children springing into men
and old men dwindling
into green. (*IA 19*)

Green, a proverbial symbol of lushness and growth, is here a symbol of rebirth also.

Old age does not wither her interest in the wellbeing of the world she lives in. In fact, it has made her all the more aware of the danger latent in an unthinking technology. Unless adequate measures are taken at the earliest, a hundred years will be enough to "finish this genocide", she cautions us:

When I see my grand child running
in a game of football
his helmet is empty
in his right arm
he carries his head. (SCT 55)

In “Breathing” also she reiterates her conviction that ageing is not always a reducing factor. It reinforces her yearning to live life to the full. Even in old age a woman “is a leaf perhaps/or a breath of wind / in a man’s nostrils” (SCT 251).

She is not ready to lose herself in senility or let others ruin her life. To her old age is as meaningful a manifestation of life as youth and is therefore ready to accept it without reservations. In “Salute to Monty Python” she brazenly declares

Let old age take over
with violence
ruthless possession
physical knockouts
if only to demonstrate
the other side of the mirror;
how you look to us
kiddos! (IA 15)

George Woodcock has been very eloquent about Livesay treatment of the process of growing old.
I can think of no poet among my contemporaries who has written more tellingly and authentically on the experience of growing old, and few who have shown so well how a celebrative acceptance of life can lead us to accept death, and not in a mood, necessarily of fatalistic resignation. (50)

“It is the token of Livesay’s ultimate honesty that she should have been able to write of the process of growing old so variously and so realistically, with such a combination of tenderness and passion that she speaks for all who face the inner dichotomy of emotional youth and physical ageing”, he adds (60).

James Shirley’s famous dirge presents death as a leveller:

The glories of our blood and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armour against Fate;
Death lays his icy hand on kings:
Sceptre and crown
Must tumble down,
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crooked scythe and spade. (63)
But to Livesay, even old age is a great leveller. "The Prisoner of Time", a moving tribute to Alan Crawley, reveals her sympathy for him who is now "just bits and pieces / of the old flare". The sorry plight she finds him in even makes her doubt whether it is not "Better to die young? / flung / from garden into ocean"? (SCT 262)

The well-known adage, "Cowards die many a time before they die" finds its echo in "Aunt Helen", a poem describing an old woman who lived on refusing to die. Finally when she dies, the poet is left with a few baffling questions: "Or are we woven in her shroud, / her dying bolder than ours, / a stride more loud? (FTW 11)

The idea that death has its compensations repeatedly figures in poem after poem. In "To Be or Not to Be", with its obvious Shakespearean echo, Livesay recalls her meeting with a nonagenarian uncle. To her query as to what he thought of life at this stage, his reply was

I think of all the old days,
the old roads, the old ways
I think of mother, and of how
I will be meeting her soon. (FTW 14)
Not surprisingly the poet herself, who is on the wrong side of seventy, recalls her parents and imagines that they are watching her every step and giving timely warning. She died at the advanced age of eighty seven in 1996. The theme of rebirth is central to poems like “Celebrant” and “Geranus... Crane”. In the former she writes: “To die is to create renewal / this crocus bulb pulsing / in my cradling hand” (SCT 17).

In “Geranus... Crane”, the geranus is described as a unique bird like the Egyptian mythical bird, the phoenix. Even after it is dead, it can be “pulled up” and “hung” “dry on the rafters”. The suggestion of rebirth is too obvious to be missed here.

The serenity that accompanies ageing helps one to reflect on life and nature with great composure and detachment. Nature herself abounds in objects that are perpetually reborn. The titles of her major volumes like The Two Seasons, Day and Night and Right Hand Left Hand point to her awareness of the complexity of life, a fact corroborated by George Woodcock. According to him these titles are keys to the “central vital core of Livesay’s poetic achievement, that almost Manichean sense of the dual nature of existence” (12).

“Remembrance of Things Past”, shows Livesay in a clear mood of nostalgia where she reminisces about all that she has
been doing to alleviate at least some of the miseries suffered by women in general. In her old age she can at least weep for

the psyche that struggled
never wept for, then
I cry now
unacknowledged
Not for this self
but for those selves
sisters. (SCT 271)

Though she harbours no ill-will or displeasure against those who have been perpetrating crimes on women, her admiration for those struggling against tyranny is unlimited.

There are at least a few poems like "The Dark House" which smack of a certain pessimism. This poem describes the callous indifference with which man himself is destroying nature. So she makes the acerbic remark "It is as if / we were not meant / to be here" (SCT 240).

In "Walking in the Park", the poet's grandson gives vent to his doubt as to why some are born blind, crippled and spastic. In her attempt to offer at least a near-rational explanation she says that wars are fought "Because men will not be / happy
in their own place" (IA 29). But to his query "Why are we here, Granny Dee?" she does not seem to give a straightforward answer (IA 29). She deftly changes the subject as she wants to "forget the dark". But the note of affirmation, characteristic of her poetry reasserts itself in "The High" where she says mincing no words, "I believe, I believe", it is possible for a man to take off like a plane! (SCT 45).

Like Donne before her, Livesay also believes that death is powerless to impose an absolute inertia on anybody. So she hails rebirth as the natural progression of life after death in many of her poems. "The Other Side of the Wall" is one good example:

Beyond, sky is serene
Song bells the air
all things once living have changed
but live on there. (SCT 241)

The realisation that "all things... live on", though in a different form, makes her accept death without fear

The wall is death
My death. Not to be climbed
Yet.
I have no fear. (SCT 241)
Her stance here is much akin to that of Emily Dickinson who was brazen enough to view death as a gentleman caller. No wonder, Livesay has written an “Epitaph”, virtually her own obituary, where she looks forward to her own death. Having lived her life to the hilt, she knows that happiness and sorrow are but the two sides of the same coin. They are as much a part of existence as the natural cycles of birth and death. Like a true stoic, she accepts the duality of life thereby making herself “whole / blessedly / complete” (SCT 258).

Judith Wright’s poetry too stems from an insistently reflective mind and a keen, alert and rich lyrical sensibility. Though H.M. Green has grouped Wright with the “lyrical and lyrically descriptive poets” and not with “the intellectual” poets like Kenneth Slessor, R. FitzGerald and A.D. Hope, he hastens to add that “everything she writes is charged with thought” (2:936). That her poetry displays a vision which is both universal and deep is irrefutable. Even her treatment of nature is “Meditative.. with strong metaphysical searching” (Mc Auley 160). Her treatment of love, time, death, childhood, motherhood and regeneration are essentially metaphysical. At the hands of a lyrical and confessional poet like Judith wright, love is a major theme with its varying manifestations through motherhood, gestation, birth and childhood. Elaborate discussions have
already been done in an earlier chapter on the theme of love and its metaphysical dimensions. So the present chapter seeks mainly to highlight the metaphysical and sometimes mystical vein in her treatment of time, death, regeneration and certain lesser but allied themes.

The philosophical strains in Judith Wright’s poetry are too obvious to be missed even by a casual reader. Even as a young poet in her formative years Wright had evinced a genuine interest in themes like time and death. Thinkers from Plato to Bergson and poets like Baudelaire, Eliot and Yeats have influenced her in formulating a concept of time. The very title of her first volume, *The Moving Image* betrays her indebtedness to the great Greek thinker. The motto ascribed to it: “Time is the Moving Image of eternity” is Plato’s famous observation about time (*WCP* 2). In formulating her concept of the circular movement of time, she has also been influenced by the Nietzschean theory of the cyclical movement of history, the Yeatsian concept of ‘gyres’ and the ‘whirling’ tradition of certain Muslim mystics. She has also shown considerable interest in the concept of the universe as a *mandala* or circle held by the ancient Indian mystics. During the fifties, her husband was working on a study of the structure of modern thought and this provided her with a golden chance to read a good deal
in Indian philosophy. Amateur and eclectic in her attitude to religion, she shows equal interest in Oriental mysticism as in Sufism.

The title poem of the volume, The Moving Image which deals with the theme of time in great detail is a pointer to all her later views on time. Occasioned by the thought of an old clock that has been in her service for many years, this poem reveals the poet's nostalgia for the past when time flitted away endearingly. But now she is "Caught up in the endless circle of time and star / that never chime with the blood" (WCP 3).

But she is not easily let down and future for her is not a dreaded prospect. She is prepared to meet any challenge even if it necessitates encountering some travails and torments "though the earth break under my feet and storm / Snatch at my breath and night ride over me" (WCP 4).

Like Wordsworth who sang: "Heaven lies about us in our infancy", Wright too looks fondly at the lost paradise of golden innocence (46). But she finds solace in a future that would unfold "the livelier distance ahead" and declares boldly "I would go further with you, clock and star" (WCP 4).
At this stage at least, time poses no threat to her. It assumes awesome and infinite dimensions only later when, dragon-like, it tightens its coils round her. But even then the innate virtue of love emerges as a saviour to rescue her from the clutches of time, “In the doomed cell I have found love’s / whole eternity” (WCP 4).

In the second part of the poem the theme of time is linked with the bleak scenario caused by the war. The tyranny of time matches the tyranny of war. Man is helpless in coping with time and war and their concomitant evil. It is often sanity that raises prison walls of time around man and produces such evils as ambition, fear and even war. So she hails insanity as a saviour capable of freeing us from the bondage of time. Deliverance from the prison of time, lies in attaining “a singing madness like poor Tom of Bedlam” (WCP 5). All mystical experience entails a suspension or the distraction of the intellect leading to the liberation of the spirit and its eventual merging with the cosmos and eternity. One may recall here Shakespeare’s Tom in King Lear and Yeats’s Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman in the poem of the same title where the madman is elevated to the status of a seer.
Tom is capable of re-living in "the tiny world of his life" the entire gamut of evolutionary theory back to a single cell. Tom's journey back to the cell stage corresponds to the mystical backward journey in time, down to the cell-stage. What Tom experiences echoes what Eliot had said nearly a quarter of a century before

Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered. (31)

Using the metaphor of mirrors, Wright has expressed the same idea in a later poem too:

Mirrors reverse us
they stare at each other and demonstrate
Infinite Regress
Reductio ad Absurdum
Eternity : Zero. (WCP 302)

The "Infinite Regress" takes Tom to his starting point, the "cell". Insanity makes him a magic mirror which can reflect all time and all place. He is now like Jamshid, the legendary king of Persia who had with him an all - reflecting wine cup. The seven
rings engraved round its interior corresponded to the seven divisions of the universe. In a state of divine delirium, the Sufi poets’ hearts were like that wonderful cup which symbolised emancipation from spatial and temporal bonds. Eliot treats a similar experience in “Gerontion”:

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors and issues, deceives with whispering ambitions, Guides us by vanities. (83)

Like Blake before her, Judith Wright also tries to envisage eternity reflected even in the most ordinary things and the most mundane situations. No wonder, she has selected the following lines from Blake’s “Milton” to serve as motto to her volume, The Gateway:

Thou perceivest the flowers put forth their precious odours And none can tell how from so small a centre comes such sweet Forgetting that within that centre Eternity expands Its ever during doors. (WCP 70)
In several of her poems, she has telescoped time in the smallest possible symbol. Old Dan, the protagonist in “South of My Days” is described thus by her: “Seventy summers are lived in him like old honey” (WCP 20).

In “Bora Ring”, the white settlers who suffer a severe guilt-complex in having ridden the Aboriginies of their due rights, find embedded in this blood “The ancient curse / the fear as old as Cain” (WCP 8). In “Bullocky”, all the striding years “run widdershins” in the brain of the protagonist who experiences a mental derangement of sorts as Tom does.

Wright has exploited even geological jargon to communicate her diverse responses to eternity and time. Her “Rosina Alcona to Julius Brenzaida” is such a poem. The opening lines of the poem “Living long is containing / archaean levels / buried yet living” prepares us to see all past inseparably present in our present (WCP 282). While driving homewards one day, she pauses by an “old wooden pub where” in an absolute present she had spent a day drinking and laughing with her lover. The lover is no longer living but the pleasant memories of the day bring
Undryable tears
From artesian pressures,
from the strata that cover you,
the silt-sift of time (WCP 283)

Earlier she says in unequivocal terms “Present crossed past / Synchronised, at the junction” (WCP 283).

She has also written more academically geological poems such as “Geology Lecture” and “For the Quarternary Age” which betray the same spirit implicit in the poem just mentioned. In “Geology Lecture” she says “The furnace of an old volcanic breath / Survives and culminates in me and you” (WCP 323). The concluding part of the poem makes more interesting study. Though we are not fully aware of it, we sit with gently folded hands

Containing all prehistory in our bones
and all geology behind the brain
which in the Modern age could melt these stones
So fiercely, time might never start again. (WCP 323)

It may be that only a person who is well-versed in geological ages can fully appreciate the poem, “For the Quarternary Age”. But not even a lay reader can miss the way the poem points
to the fact that all the past events and phenomena of this universe are embedded in his life. But the poet seeks specific correspondences only between the Quarternary Age and her amatory responses

Quarternary Age that made me in your dream fertile and violent, swung from ice to heat to flood to famine - what you’ve grafted in! Could I be calm when you are so extreme? You tried to drown me in your melt of flood and freeze me staring in your glacial step. Burned by your intermittent fires I’ve known splinters of crystal forming in my blood (WCP 363).

In formulating her concept of "the past", particularly in her early poems, she seems to have been influenced by the doctrines of Darwin and the other evolutionists. The term "Cell" which occurs in "The Moving Image" have been used in the same sense in which it has been used by the evolutionists according to whom life had started as a single cell. This stance helps Judith Wright in finding a plausible destination for the backward journey of man in time. No wonder, her mad Tom reenacts the evolutionary process in all its recognizable details:
The first birth and the first cry and the first death
the world of the first cell and the first man,
every sound and motion forgotten, remembered,
left their trace in his body, their voice in his speech.

(WCP 5)

Who else can speak of making love in geological terms as Judith Wright does in her poem, "Habitat"?

Patterns of ancient
movement
Stir in the limbs
Sheltered
by covering leaves. (WCP 303)

The title poem in Alive is a pointer to man’s kinship with even the microscopic organisms present in a drop of water. "A tiny kick of life" seen through the microscope makes her feel "The life in me replies / Signalling back / "you there: I here" (WCP 321).

But the poet has her own misgivings about the process of evolution too which in collusion with time, offers no choice on life. Instead, it makes life, rather ruthlessly indeed, suffer all the agonies of growing towards a certain perfection:
How long it was that we wrestled
I hardly know - time waited
while through defeat on defeat
I reached my triumph. (WCP 114)

Nautilus offers itself as the finest example for the result of
the ruthless conspiracy between evolution and time: "The thing
was slave to its own meaning" (WCP 187). Subscribing to the
popular view that life started in water and that its human
offshoot was brought to the land by an unsympathetic time,
she directs her resentment against it in "Interface I". The failure
on the part of the sea to protect her from time and land leaves
her thoroughly bitter and annoyed: "Beached by the old
betraying sea / I drag my body further, / Crawl to my unfinned
feet and dress and go" (WCP 344).

But her anger gives place to reasoning, introspection and
self-censure in "Interface II". She recalls the wisdom and
foresightenedness of the whales who "tried the land early" but
chose to slip back "into the mothering upholding element". She
now puts the blame squarely on humans who in their myopic
and masochistic arrogance ... "abandoned the faithful mother
/ to face a challenge they finally / could n't meet" (WCP 345).
The alleged conspiracy between time and tide does not make her bitter any longer. So the “betraying sea” of “Interface I” becomes in “Interface II” “the mothering upholding element” and “the faithful mother” (WCP 345).

Judith Wright has projected two things in particular namely love and art as two potent entities to counter the ravages of time. How love can be instrumental in transcending time has already been dealt with in the chapter on love. Art is accorded a much more lower profile than love. In “The Moving Image” “music” is mentioned along with “sleep” and “a lover’s face” as something that can slacken time’s incessant pace. In “Request to a Year” the poet peaks of the artist’s, her own great grandmother’s, “isolating eye” and “firmness” of hand with which she salvaged an event from the flux of time. She calls her great grandmother a “legendary devotee of the arts” (WCP 152).

In “Wedding Photograph, 1913”, a photograph has successfully rescued a happy marriage occasion from oblivion. Like the Grecian Urn which Keats immortalized through his poem, this photograph makes the poet “ponder” and she treads back to its long past world:
Let me join
that happy crowd of cousins, sisters, parents,
brothers and friends. I lift a glass as well
the greyhaired daughter whom you did not know.
The best of luck, young darlings
Go on your honeymoon. Be happy always. (WCP 326)

A direct statement has been made in "Picture" about the role
art can play in countering the onslaught of time: "Time locks
us up in the mind, / but leaves this window, art" (WCP 331).

According to Judith Wright, art is the only "window" which
makes an escape from time possible. So in "Morning of the
Dead" she warns us against falling into the trap laid by the
treacherous and callous time. She advises us rather to seek solace
and recompense in art:

Time is not for weeping
Time and the world press on. So take life further,
Let the thin bubble of blown glass, the passion
of vision that is art, refine, reflect and gather
the moving pattern of all things in consumption
and their rejoicing. (WCP 209)
But Judith Wright does not always reckon time as an evil force to be shunned. At times, it becomes a by-word for evolution and perfection as exemplified by the Nautilus and at other times it becomes synonymous even with love as in “Lake in Spring”: “A ripple goes across the glass / The faces break and blur and pass / as love and time are blurred together” (WCP 333).

She knows therefore that it is blasphemous to rebel against time. It is rather better to remain the “fools of Time”. A Shakespeare, for obvious reasons, might have boldly said, “Love’s not Time’s fool” (1328). But Wright seems to be aware of the consequences of falling out with time. Judas fell out with time and hence had to suffer its consequences. “Judas in Modern Dress” is in a way a warning against rebelling against time. He “stepped out alone” unlike the more famous seeker who rejected the world and sense for God’s love, and saw “the abattoir ahead” and the soil under him soaked with blood. What he did for “man’s intelligence” doomed him to suffer perpetual loneliness. His plight is fit to exact the sympathy of even the most inhuman of the humans:

Times after times I see my death go by and cannot reach it even with a prayer
Indeed, since I am neither Here nor there
I cannot live, and therefore cannot die. \textit{(WCP 198)}

The knowledge that he is a perpetrator of the sin of self-betrayal makes his suffering all the more unbearable. So he yearns for the word which may bring him "back again into the Way". Ali Athar finds in Judas's plight an obvious religious overtone too. His defence of time has reduced him to a mocking man, a sad man-animal. According to Ali Athar it was in fact "the defiance of God's will enjoining on us all to accept time and death" (138).

In poems like "The Harp and the King" and "Bachelor Uncle" also there is an emphatic affirmation of time. But unlike Judas, "The old frightened king" is scared of eternity and therefore does not want to be taken "outside time". He would rather wish: "Make me believe in my mortality, / Since that is all I have ..." \textit{(WCP 156)}.

The Bachelor Uncle, "an empty cross old man", an "alien" denied by all save "the old clocks on the wall" willingly accepts "time's cruelty" and lets it control his life. So he repairs the old clock: "Time's true and must be told / to the meticulous second" \textit{(WCP 193)}. 
The sun, the real maker of time, is the subject in quite a few poems of Judith Wright. “Sports Field” is one such poem. Here the sun is hailed as “the great gold ball of day” which springs up from the dark hill, to measure and mark every human activity. While at play, children trifle with the ball, but no one can ignore this ball called the sun. It is well beyond the catching power of any person and the whole game of life can go on only “till the day’s great golden ball / that no one ever catches, / drops ....” (WCP 204).

In “Turning Fifty” also, she presents the sun as devoid of all painful associations. The sun is no longer treacherous and she avidly awaits the sun to rise. In the garden outside, even the birds wait for the sun “to show their colours”. She is pained at the thought that she too is a party to the way even the air we breathe has been polluted. Still,

as the sun comes up
bearing my birthday,
having met time and love
I raise my cup - (WCP 252)

Modern grammar speaks only of two tenses, namely, the past and the present. Wright also considers it a meaningless exercise
to demarcate time into past, present and future. Man cannot comprehend infiniteness and he is attuned only to imagine in spatial times. To Wright, what is real is only the “whole flow”, “the whole change pouring through the lens of eyes”. But human language is inadequate in squaring upto the whole flow. So it joins hands with the human mind in breaking up time into the three known senses. “Boundaries” makes a clear statement of the poet’s view: “It’s just that we think in limit, form and time / Only language invents, / Future and past (now’s gone before ‘it’s said) (WCP 387).

In a much earlier poem, “Waiting” she calls time, “the spider” which binds one “helpless till his sting go in” (WCP 9). But she would prefer time to be “only the monster of a dream” or “the sick distortion of minds anesthetized”. A “calm surgeon” pronouncing our cancer as “not mortal”, “time lifts no knives to heal or to destroy, / and did not cause, and cannot cure, our pain” (WCP 10).

Time is exonerated of all sinister intentions in “For the Loved and Unloved” also. Man himself is to blame for his present plight and tragedy: “It is not time’s undone us, / but we ourselves, who ravel / the thread by which we travel” (WCP 126).
Thus it should be said that Judith Wright's attitude to time is not consistent. While in some poems she hails it as a force generating fear in us, in others it is presented as something harmless, the fear of which is unreal and stems from a diseased imagination.

Death, which is inextricably linked with time, is another major theme at the hands of Wright. A limited spell of time has been apportioned to every being on earth and living can be defined in general terms as the continuous march towards the limit of that span. How far a man is destined to live always remains an enigma and therefore death comes as a shock to many when they are least prepared to face it. Time "binds us helpless" and all that it gives us is "the crystal hour of waiting". So in her characteristic candour she makes an appeal in "Waiting" : "Let our weeping be / amendment for these lives, and make us whole / in man and time, who build eternity" (WCP 10).

Man's fear of time has its origin in the fear of death. But he has found out a way of suspending the fear of death at least temporarily: by losing himself in the ecstasy of love. In moments of perfect ecstasy one becomes oblivious of the
fear of death. Interestingly enough, “death” was the word with which most Elizabethans described the orgasmic pleasure resulting from a sexual union. We may recall here Donne’s effective punning on the word “die” in his poem “Canonization” while describing the phoenix riddle.

But in moments of crisis, even love fails to absolve us of our fear of death. “The Company of Lovers” written during the Second World War presents a woman who fails in her attempt to alleviate the fear of death in a tighter hug of her lover. She asks him to lock his “warm hand” above “the chilling heart” so that she may live without fear at least “for a time”. But she soon realises that even around them “Death draws his cordons in” (VCP 7).

At times, Judith Wright lends a religious tinge to her treatment of death. An inseparable adjunct to evil and sin as it is, it is God’s will as well demanding every one to accept it. Judas who tried to evade it brought eternal damnation upon him. His inability to court death is virtually a curse upon him. “Judas in Modern Dress” describes the plight of Judas who is “neither Here nor There” and therefore cannot live nor die: “Times after times I see my death go by / and cannot reach it even with a prayer” (WCP 198). In “The Harp and the king” also she speaks of the rejection of immortality seeking comfort
in death. The old king in this poem who is afraid of immortality urges the court musician to "Make me believe in my mortality" (WCP 156).

The Christian background in which she grew up makes her accept sin as integral to her very existence. We are destined to live in the shadow of death for our own fault with the guilt complex haunting us throughout. This is the central idea of her poem "Lament for Passenger Pigeons":

Pigeons and angels sang us to the sky
and turned to metal and a dirty need
The height of sky, the depth of sea we are sick with a yellow stain, a fouling dye (WCP 319).

The "yellow stain" and the "fouling dye", one may easily infer, are the seed of death which starts sprouting in us only to overpower us eventually. She speaks of the inescapable guilt complex which torments man in "Habitat" also:

Guilt's our inhabitant
Pacing all night inside
this well-lit frame
Chaos incentres order. (WCP 307)
In poems like "Return", "West Wind" and "White Night" also she speaks of the inherent evil in us. Evil and good are at once present in man and this dual presence is "time's purpose" (WCP 122). In "Westwind" she reiterates her view that only death can deliver man from the eternal agony he is doomed to suffer: "You will find no rest in time or being; forget to be / blow as we do down the black wind into an easy grave" (WCP 123).

In "White Night" the poet appears as a prey whose "mind runs restless". Using the wolf-imagery much akin to the tiger imagery used by Blake centuries ago, she points to the murderous nature of the evil: "We are tracked by our own evil" (WCP 324).

If the fatal but inherent evil in us were taken for granted, every death becomes a kind of suicide. Ironically enough, the fear of death and a strong desire to die co-exist in our psyche. In our failure to distinguish between good and evil we may be deceived into loving even the very thing that destroys us. No wonder, the mother in "Two Songs for the World's End" advises the innocent rather unwary daughter

The world, the lover you must take,
is the murderer you will meet
But if you die before you wake
never think death sweet. (WCP 108)
"The Slope" which celebrates man's mysterious death - wish has received much critical acclaim including that of A.D. Hope. With their minds benumbed by "black vortices" and "despair" men are running down "the last black slope" to their own destruction (WCP 336). A.D. Hope finds in this poem "a vision of the whole human race bent on self-destruction like the Gadarene swine and for much the same reason" (23). The politicians and the other "muddy men too numb to know they kill" are in fact helping us carry out our will to destroy ourselves. They are the "instruments of this plannet's death" (WCP 336).

In "Creation-Annihilation", she draws a fine contrast between God's role of creation and that of man, namely annihilation:

"His job was all creation
What is there left to do
but turn our talent to
what's always been its bent?
That must be what he meant
Our job's Annihilation". (WCP 372)

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In “Interface III” also the poet speaks of the suicidal tendency present in man. The fate of man is the same as that of the dying whales who “in a sort of madness” stray out of water just to die. No attempt will succeed in turning such whales aside “back to deep waters” as they have rejected “the whole-road, the free seas” and they will “obstinately, blindly, certainly” find another beach. They simply can’t keep off death because

Death is inside the whale,
Some diseased directive,
Some inner treachery,
Some worm lodged in the brain. (WCP 345)

Deep in the head, the whales carry “the secret of destruction”- “the tiny burrowing worm”. Mankind which prefers to reject both reason and logic the same way as the whales do, shows an identical propensity for self-destruction: “not only whales have made it / Whole peoples, countries, nations / have died in the same way” (WCP 346). The suicidal tendency inherent in every creation is the theme of an earlier poem, “Turning Fifty” also. Obviously pointing an accusing finger at those who feel no qualms about polluting the very air they breathe and spoiling the green earth she says: “though, granted life or death / death’s what we’re choosing” (WCP 252).
Wright seems to combine the doctrine of Determinism with the law of Karma made immortal through the Gita. The onus of making man what he is lies with his first parents, Adam and Eve who disobeyed God’s command. One may wonder why an all-knowing and omnipotent God did not bother to avert this so that mankind could be saved from eternal damnation. But God wanted things to happen the way he wanted and everything was pre-determined. It is this realisation what makes Eve say in "Eve Sings":

The knowledge was of evil and good
we learn it deeper, growing old,
but cannot change our human mould
or nay the word the serpent said. (WCP 358)

As it has been mentioned already Eliot had exerted a tremendous influence on Judith Wright both as a poet and as a philosopher. The extent to which Eliot had been influenced by eastern thought is too well known to be discussed here. He makes bold use of the law of Karma enunciated by krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield of Mahabharatha to show how all past exists in our present. One may also recall here the famous concept of "the imaginative continuum" (Brown et al. 1:11) attributed to Northrop Frye and the famous exhortation Emerson makes in his.
monumental essay, "Self-Reliance": "Bring the past for judgement into the thousand eyed present" (67). Judith Wright is but echoing Indian thought when she suggests that death is determined, though rather mysteriously by one's own action not only of this life, but of the countless past lives one has lived through. In "Fire Sermon", a poem inspired by the Vietnam war and quoted already in a different context, she presents the famous dialogue that transpired between Krishna and Arjuna:

"It is not right that we slay our kinsmen"
Arjuna cried. And the answer?
"What is action, what is inaction
By me alone are they doomed and slain. (WCP 276)

Man, with his unalterable past and his fear of death is almost an obnoxious enigma. Wright makes it clear in "The Harp and the King" that man's death is caused solely by his own tendency for self-betrayal: "Time's subtler treacheries teach us to betray" and she brazenly avers in "Waiting" that "we are our own Iscariots" (WCP 10). This self-betrayal amounts to a serious sin like the original sin and thus it takes on a religious colour.
Judith Wright does not seem to view death as something to be dreaded always. It is in death alone that life invariably attains its consummation and it is death alone that keeps the law of change at work. So she does not shy off lending a respectability of sort to death "... our death is part of time/ and we are incomplete until it come" (WCP 218). She therefore cannot approve of those "destructible people" who live in steel and plastic "corseting their lives / with things not decently mortal" (WCP 299).

The phrase "decently mortal" richly suggests that defying death tantamounts to defying the very scheme of things in nature. Denying the right to die is not different from denying the right to live. This idea has received a better treatment in the short but moving lyric "The Unborn" where the aborted baby plaintively lisps to the guilt ridden mother

Not even tears were mine,
not even death
not even the dazzling pain
of one first breath. (WCP 48)
Death is not always necessarily a total cessation of one's role in the affairs of the mundane world. A dead person, despite his physical disappearance, continues to influence our thought, feeling and action. The line of communication between the dead and the living is not easily snapped. Like W.H. Auden who affirms in "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" how the voices of the dead are modified in the guts of the living, Wright too is convinced that

Now all of us who live
are in our lives an elegy;
are in our lives an eternal speech
with the dead. (WCP 56)

"Communication" is a more interesting poem written for her "three-day friend" on the edge of dying. At first she fails in her attempt to communicate: "Only the buzz of silence meets me now, / I dial, but there's no one answering" (WCP 290).

But she is quick to learn that "they are connected with each other" and that a connection can bring a line alive. And this connection is possible through the "heart" which will now serve as an unfailing "exchange".
The line goes dead, but still the line is there for our reality is in relation. The current bears the message, then stops following. But it has proved there is communication. (WCP 290)

Judith Wright’s grandfather had been dead long before she was born. “The Morning of the Dead” speaks of the attempt to locate the grave where he lay buried. The old man “silenced by death” continues “speaking still in my life”. Though his grave could not be traced she affirms:

he and I met, bowed in our sleep like clouds; touched untouchedly; clouds that melt into each other; Shapes that need not strive, because their event is their truth found each other in love. (WCP 208)

Exploring the dead-living relationship in greater depth she asserts: “What drives us is the dead, their thorned desire” and urges us to hear the words of the dead who cry: “Bear my children; follow out my thought; / live for me, since you wear my life” (WCP 209).
A more direct statement of the theme probably occurs in the poem "Black/White": "in theory / even the dead still influence what we do, / direct our strategy" (WCP 335).

The mystical faith that the dead never tires of influencing the living has been expressed with greater verve in her more personal poems where she remembers her husband dead long ago. In "The Vision (for J.P. McKinney)" she says: "your eyes, your look, remain, all said and done, / the guarantee of blessing, now you're gone" (WCP 263).

Reiterating her faith in the dead, she says in "Dialogue":

your not-being's true
just as your being was
It circles me, a lightless moon
seen by my light
the years of unrelation
complete you for me. (WCP 314)

In her pre-occupation with the theme of death with all its ramifications Judith Wright seems to take after Emily Dickinson who has written quite a number of poems which deal exclusively with the theme of death.
Alongside her faith in death as a major force, is found her abiding faith in the permanence and invincibility of the life-force as well. Shirley Walker’s comment in this regard is not out of place here: “Throughout Judith Wright’s poetry the life-force is consistently identified with love and the key to this identification is contained in the epigram from Bacon which the poet has placed before the poems of Woman to Man” (30).

Death is powerless to impose an absolute inertia on anybody. It can at best take its victim to a greenroom of sorts where it redresses itself to assume a new role. “Fourth Quarter” probably contains the clearest expression of this concept:

Tomorrow you’ll be gone
into the black;
but you’re just moving on
to make your comeback. (WCP 341)

She has made effective use of certain symbols like water, fire, dust etc to drive home the idea of regeneration. In “Interface III” she hails the sea as “the mothering upholding element” and “the faithful mother” thereby stressing the symbolic
significance of water in relation to the rejuvenating force of nature (WCP 345). She finds ample faith in the creative and rejuvenative power of fire also. Significantly enough, she has used the words of Herakleitos as the motto to *The Two Fires*, “This world, which is the same for all, no one of gods or men has made; but it was ever, is now, and ever shall be an ever-living fire, with measures of it kindling, and measures going out” (WCP 18).

The old king in “The Harp and the King” seeks solace in music, as he thinks it can act as a “fountain through the drought”. The drought he suffers from stems from his spiritual as well as physical sterility: “Night and the terror of the soul come on, / and out of me both water and seed have gone” (WCP 157). Though “the harp” sings “the praise of time and of the rain” purportedly to comfort him, it fails in its attempt as “I failed my God and I betrayed my love / Make me believe in treason; that is all I have (WCP 157).

Metamorphosis has been suggested as a sort of regeneration in a few of her poems. In “The Bones Speak”, the invisible life-force is referred to as “the river underground” which infuses a new life into the “bones” urging them to rise anew. It can even transform the dead humans into non-human entities:
It is a dark root groping in our death
to change dry silence into wine and bread;
to alter the long winter of the dead
into the swinging wine, the flowering wreath. (WCP 54)

One immediately recalls here Shakespeare's famous line in *The Tempest*: "Those are pearls that were his eyes" (7). The idea of metamorphosis she has directly stated in "Two Fires". While addressing "my father rock" she says: "The aeons grind you into bread - / into the soil that feeds the living and transforms the dead" (WCP 120).

The child in "Child and Wattle Tree" also affirms its faith in the phenomenon of metamorphosis:

Take me into your life and smother me with bloom
till my feet are cool in the earth
and my hair is long in the wind;
till I am a golden tree spinning the sunlight. (WCP 31)

The cycles of nature, manifested in the four major seasons, each with distinct attributes also suggest regeneration. Spring, proverbially associated with fertility becomes a bringer of pain and discomfiture in "The Cedars".
Spring, returner, knocker at the iron gates,
why should you return? None wish to live again
For it is anguish to be reborn and reborn
at every return of the over mastering season
to shed our lives in pain, to waken into the cold.

(WCP 74)

There is a clear echo of Eliot's line, "April is the
cruellest month" here (91). Judith Wright has made clever
use of the snake imagery to describe the law of annual
renewal and rejuvenation in nature. In the concluding lines
of her poem just quoted, the snake is completely identified
with the spirit of spring: "The snake, the fang of summer,
beauty's double meaning, / shifts his slow coils and feels
his springtime hunger" (WCP 75).

The snake is here a symbol of the revivifying force of
nature. No wonder, the poet looks wistfully at the sloughed
snake, in "Snake Skin on a Gate", stretching warm in the sun
"shining; his patterned length clean as a cut jewel" and her
prayer is: "Like this from our change, my soul, let us drink
renewal" (WCP 244).
To conclude, it may be rightly argued that Wright is a mystic on the basis of her consistent treatment of such themes as time, love, evil and death. A.J.M. Smith’s famous concept of “eclectic detachment” applies best to her (6). While allowing a variety of eastern as well as western influences to enrich her vision, she has at the same time maintained a great measure of originality also. She is no blind imitator of anything, however popular and world-wide it is. Hinduism, Buddhism and even Sufism have had their telling influence in shaping her as a poet. Her knowledge of eastern mythologies seems to derive mostly from translations or from the references to them in modern western literature.

During the fifties, her husband McKinney was working on a study of the structure of modern thought. This gave her a chance to read a good deal in Indian philosophy. By her own admission she is somewhat a follower of Jung’s work which led to an interest in oriental mysticism. The translations of Rumi and Hafiz introduced her to Sufi poets. A.J. Anberry’s work on Sufism also helped her a lot. Through her daughter who was sojourning in Japan she came in contact with Zen translations. Like Livesay, Wright too is not a casual poet. Both have written very serious poetry with a strong philosophical content.
Works Cited


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