THE BODY AND BEYOND A STUDY OF JUDITH WRIGHT
"We don't know what women's vision is. What do women's eyes see? How do they care, invent decipher the world? I don't know. I know my own vision, the vision of one woman, but the world seen through the eyes of others? I only know what men's eyes see (1996 ; 56-57)" - maintains Viviane Forrester in her essay 'What Women's Eyes See' in an attempt to differentiate between male and female sensibilities. Forrester makes an open call to underline how is reality perceived from perception of reality issues out two interrelated positions one that acknowledges one's selfhood and the other that determines subject position. These two interrelated issues are crucial to women writers as well as to feminist discourse. What we understand by feminine sensibility today is how creativity is related to articulation of human relationships. Judith Wright as an important woman creative writer from Australia accepts the difference in sensibilities (male and female) and articulates her own experiences and feelings as a woman. Her strength as a poet, however, is a vision of integration and unity. In this chapter a detailed analysis of Judith Wright's poetry is attempted to show what does she see and how differently does she see things, the world and reality as a woman, a feminist and a human subject. The radical feminists may find Judith Wright too conventional for she does not like to use their language for she conceives woman as the mother earth and reveals a sensibility that is like Jane Austen, self-absorbing and celebrating the essential goodness of the world. She comes closer to Showalter's understanding of orthodox humanism, a
belief in literature as an expression of universal unity encompassing men and women known as ‘human nature’

As a powerful voice from Australia, Judith Wright has shown stronger feeling for the land and its traditions. She has registered a distinct voice through her poetic works that runs counter to the male tradition of robust balladry and outdoor narrative Preoccupation which are obvious, throughout Judith Wright’s whole poetic canon - continuity, love, nature, the imagination and language - are all interrelated aspects of a unity which she seeks. It must be stressed that this unity is both physical and psychic. On the one hand, the pattern of human life is seen as an integral part of the cycles of the natural world. On the other hand, through the workings of the imagination, the mind of man is united with the natural world. Love and vision are the forces working for unity - for personal integration of man with the world about him. Love is seen as a powerful, physical and metaphysical force, the life force itself. It ensures the unity of man and nature and is the agency through which continuity is achieved.

Philip Lindsay writing about Judith Wright glorifies her as:

the only woman who has kissed and told. Other women have sung of love, but apart from Sappho - and she after all, was a man in female skin - none have written honestly and without shame of their desires (1968: 35)
He pronounces Judith Wright as 'the first woman honestly to unbar her lover's heart in her verse' in contrast to Emily Dickinson, Emily Bronte, Christina Rossetti, whose love poetry, according to him, is inspired by 'sexual repression' and starved hearts rather than sexual fulfillment.

The search for unity accounts for the conflict at the heart of Judith Wright's poetry. For the compulsion to unity (for instance, surrender to love and natural process) is countered by the poet's fear of the full implications of such a surrender. Many of her most powerful lyrics contain both contrary impulses in synthesis, and the inclusion within any one poem, or even within a particular symbol, of both points of view leads to that sense of realism which is a mark of the best of Judith Wright's poetry. One expression of the above mentioned fear is the poet's obsession - particularly in the early poetry - with time, death, evil and psychic disintegration. However, her quite considerable prose writings provide a rational basis for the sense of disintegration which is so strongly felt in the poems of 'The Moving Image', which re-emerges in 'The Two Fires' but which is definitely latent throughout the poetry. Considering the poem 'The Company of Lovers' in the former collection, with all the human description also concentrates on a sense of life lost, of desolation, of deprivation:
Death marshals up his armies round us now.
Their footsteps crowd too near.
Lock your warm hand above the aching heart
and for a time I live without my fear
Grop in the night to find me and embrace,
for the dark preludes of the drums begin,
and round us, round the company of lovers,
Death draws his cords in. (1972:9-16)

The poet's search for unity is modified by a number of important phases in her life and development. "The Moving Image" was written at a time when war and death were oppressive facts of everyday life, and the emphasis is upon vulnerability and disintegration. Affirmative elements in these poems are focused upon an awareness of the continuity of the physical and the psychic life of mankind. Throughout the poetry, continuity has a wider sense than that of a simple temporal progression. Continuity is a cognitive concept too, in that man's vision of reality, his total world picture is not only an inheritance from the past, but is shaped and communicated through language - hence the importance of the word. For Judith Wright, to love is to communicate and thus to feel divine; and to communicate is to feel creative. Language is an affirmation of the power of love for Judith Wright: words are necessary for interpreting one's passions. In "Water" the simple perception of the movement of water can stimulate a perception of a profounder process:

Such sentences, such cadences of speech
Concern with the relationship between language and creation is at the heart of Judith Wright's "Camping Split Rock". Each perception is an involvement within a word:

The finger of age old water splits the rock and makes us room to live; the age-old word runs on in language and from obstinate dark hollows us room for seeing. (1972; 17-20)

In prayer confronted with the thought of death herself, the poet prays that she retain love which includes 'the power to see the words', as well as the power to speak words:

And you, who speak in me when I speak well, Withdraw not your grace, leave me not dry and cold. I have praised you in the pain of love, I could praise you still in the slowing of the blood the time when I grow old. (1972; 17-20)

Judith Wright never gets breathless even when she is at her most intense as in "Woman to Man", the collection of poems she is best known by. In "To Hafiz and Shiraz", she suggests that with the repetition 'of experience, there is a corresponding simplification of words but that repetition and simplification need not mean the loss of intensity for.

Every path and life leads one way only, out of continual miracle, through creations fable over and over repeated but never yet understood.
In the poems of "Woman to Man", Judith Wright finds the answer to her earlier sense of disintegration, for the celebration of sexual love and physical creation swings the balance to the other extreme: that a joyful unity with and integration into the great round of nature. The most frequent critical comment made about Judith Wright was that in her poetry she succeeded in creating a satisfying fusion of passion and intellect. This unity is consummated and guaranteed by the creation of the child. Motherhood and child-bearing are the prerogatives of womankind that offer a sense of fulfillment and contentment to her. In the role of a mother, woman is not different from the earth. The last stanza of Judith Wright's "Woman to Child" highlights this truth:

I wither and you break from me:
Yet though you dance in living light
I am the earth, I am the root,
I am the stem that fed the fruit,
The link that joins you to the night.

(1972; 16-20)

At the same time, the mother as poet achieves a further unity, the unity of the imagination and the world of nature. The philosophical concept of unity is fully realized in works which are themselves fine examples of organic unity, with theme, structure and symbolism all contributing to a fully integrated whole. The symbolism merits the close scrutiny to which it is subjected, for the ambivalence of the
The urge to identify with physical passion and with natural process is strong and the intellectual qualifications are subsumed within the symbolism, so that the result is poetry of sensual passion and metaphysical strength, for the lyrical urge to sing of love in time. The symbolism which fuses these contrary urges is archetypal in the truest sense, for it takes us back to the primitive mythic sense of the fertility of the earth, of the turning cycle of the days, the seasons and the cosmos, and of man's participation in and integration into this round. Judith Wright's use of myth may also be considered under the concept of continuity, in that the emotional history of mankind, the most powerful concepts by which man lives and shapes his experience and accounts for his world, are mythic in quality:

Only the rider's heart
halts at a sightless shadow, an unsaid word
that fastens in the blood the ancient curse
the fear as old as Cain.

(Bora Ring': 1972: 13-16)
The use of myth, from the poet's early and self-conscious imposition of an Old Testament pattern upon colonial experience, to her later assured and skillful handling of the mythic and symbolic patterns of fecundity and renewal is discussed in this context. At its best this symbolism unites the physical and imaginative life of man with the help of the cosmos, and recognizes the ambivalence of man's position in the cosmic context.

Judith Wright's confrontation with the darker aspects of experience - the imperfection of love and the duality of nature is manifestly overt. There is a radial change in her aesthetic from the simple rapture of the monist at one with his world, to the more analytic stance of the aesthetic theorist. The poet is deeply aware of the limitations of the cognitive-aesthetic act, of the inadequacy of language and the failure of the imagination. Judith Wright's realistic confrontation of imperfection in three related areas - love, nature and poetry - destroys the basis of the unified vision and leads to poetry of detachment and acceptance. 'Unity becomes duality' and the polarities of her poetic vision - joy and pain, life and death, reality and art unity and disintegration - are accepted as necessary and even appealing aspects of being:

A far-off boat moves on the morning sea,
That broad and equal monotone of light
is drawn to focus, purpose enters in
Its unity becomes duality,
and action scars perfection like a pin.
(‘Return’: 1972: 1-5)

Detachment and acceptance are the keynotes of the poems and this is reflected in the technical aspects of the poetry. Although there are many admirable poems which express this changing vision, many others are marred by a lack of poetic control (either inflation or banality), prosaic diction, or by a loss vigour and poetic tension.

‘The Moving Image’ one of the most important of Judith Wright’s early poems initiates in one form or another all of her major themes:

I am the maker. I have made both time and fear,
Knowing that to yield to either is to be dead.
All that is real is to live, to desire, to be,
till I say to the child I was, “It is this; it is here”.
In the doomed cell I have found love’s whole eternity
(1972: 32-36)

The poem deals with not only man’s increasing subordination to time as he matures from childhood to adult life but also it affirms the power of the human spirit to triumph over its temporal bondage. The child’s carefree conception of time is examined in minute detail. To him the years seem “enormous” eternity is eminent in every green field and he is unafraid. This is the best of Judith Wright’s projections of the integrated vision of the child who is in tune with natural time. His ‘green’ world is measured by the recurrence of the natural cycle: the
time 'between one blue summer and another', the 'tree dressed in gold' for autumn. His temporal awareness is measured by moments of heightened consciousness and is characterised by a fluidity of spatial and temporal concepts.

Love for Judith Wright is a physical compulsion which ensures the continuity of the generations, a vitalistic force which moves through and orders the entire phenomenal world, and finally a powerful, spiritual force - the counter to fear, evil and hatred. As such love is primarily a unifying power, reconciling individuals with one another, integrating the individual into the cycles of the natural world, and guaranteeing the unity and continuity of all aspects of being, for all are manifestations of the primal creative force of life itself. This accounts for Judith Wright's emphasis upon sexual love, for sexual love is the force which integrates the pattern of human life - of love and procreation, of birth and death - into the cyclical pattern of renewal in the natural world. The poet is able to achieve this by means of dramatic lyrics which present a particular physical situation and at the same time define its metaphysical significance. "Woman to Man" exploits the full ambiance of mystery and paradox to communicate the spiritual as well as the physical miracle of the creation of new life. The purely physical level is direct and explicit. The blind head butting at the
dark' is both the phallus (the immediate) and the child's head at the moment of birth - the future implicit in the present. The poem has a double time perspective in which intercourse and birth, the act and the future contained in it are synchronized. The physical act is also suggested by the rhythm which gathers impetus in the final stanza and reaches an orgiastic climax in the final line where the sexual act, and its significance fuse in the mind of the woman:

This is the maker and the made;
this is the question and reply;
the blind head butting at the dark'
the blaze of light along the blade.
Oh hold me, for I am afraid.

(1972: 16-20)

The sexual embrace is inseparable from the mystery of conception and gestation. The woman is the creator, and to her the sexual act is not only an act of love, but an act of creation involving 'the third who lay in the embrace'. This integration is largely achieved by the symbolic identification of birth and the life pattern with the seasons, the diurnal cycle and the fecundity of the vegetation cycle. Yet nowhere is sexual love seen as purely physical. Through the sexual act and through conception love repeats the primal creative act and man is inducted into the cycles of life which constitute eternity in Judith Wright's terms. The most frequent critical comment made about Judith Wright was that in her poetry she succeeded in creating a satisfying
fusion of passion and intellect. But this determination to think about
the quality of her feelings brought tremendous stresses and strains which
eventually told on both her language and technique. Stephen Heath
analyses the particular situation in the proper perspective:

The woman is more naturally a writer, since close
to the mother tongue, close to creation: it is the woman
who is more the writer, by the very fact that she
creates an idiom; and the poet well knows that it is the
mother tongue he speaks and no other\', woman's pleasure
being in excess and at expense of the phallic, the
phallic order of the signifier, it is like process of
writing: 'female pleasure can be seen as writing this
pleasure and the literary text (which is also written like
an orgasm produced from within discourse) are the effect
of the same murder of the signifier. (1996: 313)

Judith Wright's manifesto - 'I am the maker' - does not
simply apply to the poet as 'maker'; it is also a recognition of the
power of sexual love to transmit life through time. Such a shift of
perspective transforms time the destroyer into time the agent of
continuity and generation, for it is within time that love fulfills its
creative function, and time brings to fruition the continuing cycles of life
which love creates In all this there is no guarantee of personal
immortality; the reassurance is one of involvement in continuity. The
individual becomes part of something which is eternal - the family of
man and the vitalistic cycles of nature. The joyful acceptance of this
involvement elevates physical experience to a transcendent dimension.
sanctifying the child as evidence of both physical and spiritual continuity

You who were darkness warmed my flesh
where out of darkness rose the seed.
Then all a world I made in me;
all the world you hear and see
hung upon my dreaming blood.

(Woman to Child: 1972: 1-5)

This experience for Judith Wright gives the individual access to creativity—both physical and aesthetic. It is also a recognition of the basic physical unity of man and the world of nature, in that the same life processes govern both.

In "Woman to Man" both imagery and paradox transmit the metaphysical significance of the sex act. The symbolism is that of darkness and light chaos and creation, and the regenerative cycles of nature. An example of multiple layers of significance is the image of the resurrection day, the day of birth. This not only suggests the birth of the child from the darkness of the womb, but also the resurrection of Christ, with the triumphant mastery over death which this event implied. The identification of birth with the rising of the sun, both here and in "Woman's Song" transcends the Christian reference and takes us back to the mythic identification of birth, sunrise and the origin of
the world. Each human birth repeats the primal triumph of creativity over chaos ("the selhess, shapeless seed of line 2." in each birth, death and darkness are conquered once again. The continuity of life which is achieved through sexual love is further defined in the complex symbol of the tree of life:

This is the blood’s wild tree that grows the intricate and folded rose.

(Woman to Man: 1972: 14 - 15)

The ‘blood’s wild tree’ is both a physical symbol - perhaps the tree like arteries and veins rooted in the beating heart - and a symbol of continuity in the generations. The longed for child, the flowering of this tree of passion, is the rose, the traditional symbol of beauty and transience. Moreover, the embryo rose is ‘intricate and folded’ bud like, suggesting both potentiality and the actual embryonic appearance. At the same time, the image of the ‘blood’s wild tree’ insists upon the organic unity of man and nature, a unity which is reiterated elsewhere in Judith Wright’s poetry. This symbol, the mother as tree and the child as flower or fruit of the tree, and the organic identity which it proposes, are grounded in myth. The tree is a symbol not only of the unity of all being, but of the inexhaustible creativity of all living things which the feminine principle represents. Thus the persona of the poet which emerges is representative of and reflects the numinous quality
of the eternal feminine, and the tree in her blood is a manifestation in
time of the many-branching tree of all life which knows no time.

Procreation constitutes the core of love and sex between
males and females and it is also the basis of a happy family life and
society. In “Ishtar” Judith Wright presents woman as one who fully
knows the truth of the body but her thoughts are not overtly expressed.
She is actually an inseparable part of the entire procreative system-
of child birth and of continuity of life. The poet expresses the hopes
and fears of a mother in the following extract:

When in fear I became a Woman
I first felt your hand.
When the shadow of the future first fell across me
it was your shadow, my grave and hooded attendant.
(Ishtar: 1972: 5-8)

The elation that belongs to physical union is strongly conveyed, yet
sexuality never becomes the most important aspect of the love
relationship, nor is the lover fully individualized. Instead, he is
relegated to the position of a servant to the vast impersonal power
which possesses both. The focus is upon the child, both for itself and
as evidence of the creative power of sexual love. The child too tends
to have symbolic status rather than individuality, and the undifferentiated
nature of the child as symbol allows the full significance of birth and
the renewal which it signifies, the vulnerability of the individual is continually countered. This is why in “Woman to Child” the mother contains not only the spatial world in microcosm—“all a world I made in me”—but the temporal dimension too, in that the child is the symbol of the conquest of time:

All time lay rolled in me, and sense
and love that knew not its beloved
(Woman to Child; 1972: 9-10)

Judith Wright’s attitude to time is quite different considering her perception of her sexual role, for time is no longer a frightening force hurrying man on to destruction and death. Instead time is the beneficent agent of eternal recurrence and, accordingly, the poet sees her reproductive role in terms of the recurrent cycles of the natural world.

Judith Wright is not only clear about the positive and life-affirming power of sexual love, she is equally clear about the misuse of sex, the denial of its creative power. This finds reference in “The Unborn” where the poet asserts:

Slight is the foothold from the well of night,
the stair is broken and the keys are lost,
and you whom I have wrecked and wrecked indeed;
and yet you stand upon the edge of sight,
and I have known no path you have not crossed.
(1972: 6-10)
The profound sense of loss and deprivation in the poem applies not only to the mother, but to the child whose conception she has apparently prevented, and who is 'wrecked indeed'. But 'Typists in the Phoenix Building' is probably the poet's most powerful condemnation of anti-sexual and life denying values. In this poem modern urban society is condemned as sterile, artificial and shallow, for it attempts to insulate against, that is to hold at bay, the powerful forces of the natural world: not only fire and flood, but human sexuality:

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\text{Comptometers and calculators compute the frequency of fires,}
\text{adduce the risk, add up the years.}
\text{Drawn by late-afternoon desires}
\text{the poles of mind meet lustrous equators.}
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(1972; 11-15)

The focus of the poem is the Phoenix Building, which houses insurance firms, and the immature sexless beings who work there. The males are 'half-cock clerks', the typists 'shelter in their sex', and the corridors are 'fire proof', thus precluding sexual excitement. The train in the second stanza is a powerful image of male sexuality which in the poem is associated with pain and failure. Judith Wright's use of symbolism is clearly sensual, demonstrating an awareness of sex as a vital and indivisible component of reality. Much of her symbolism is implicitly sexual, as in the great palm of "The Bushfire" and the spring which
rises beneath it. The attenuated trunk of the palm tree suggests the phallus, and the spring within the grove is a feminine symbol, representative of the inexhaustible fecundity of the earth and of the water which is spontaneously generated by it. The implicit sexuality is a consistent factor in the poetry, suggesting always a unity between the sexuality of man and the fertility of the natural world.

The recurrent cycles of nature are mirrored not only in the birth, life, and death cycle of man, but in his diurnal cycle as well.

"Night and the Child" dramatizes the child's tentative search for the pattern of his world; his coming to an awareness of the underlying relationship between his own sleep, the death of the hawk, and the night journey of the sun:

The night comes up over you, faceless and forbidden,
Over the hawk sunk in earth and the sun drunk by the sea,
and who can tell, the child said, no matter what they say -
who can be sure that the sun will rise on another day?
(1972; 7-10)

The myths of all cultures are grounded in an awareness of such underlying relationships, relationship which guarantee the subjective or spiritual affinity between the mind of man and the external world. These relationships are an expression of the basic congruence of all the cycles of the natural world, including those of man's life. Judith Wright defines the native and undifferentiated awareness of being at one
with nature which belongs to the consciousness of the child, then rejects the possibility of sustaining it, and finally points forward to a more valid and sophisticated sense of unity based not only upon the exhilaration which nature arouses in the blood, but upon an awareness of all aspects of being; of evil and suffering as well as of simple joy. An awareness of the price which unity with nature demands is characteristic of Judith Wright's thoughts. There is, throughout, a clear recognition of the individual vulnerability which is involved in the identification of the human life cycle with the rhythms of the natural world. The poet probes the ultimate position of the individual within nature and within the complex scheme of evolution. The unified vision must assimilate the polarities of experience; not only life and love, but pain, evil and death. This is the point of "Spring after War" where the resolution of the poem is based upon the dichotomies of the title (regeneration and death) and is sanctioned by the example of the natural world. The poem is beautifully balanced in its movement back and forward from the questioning mind to the exemplary world.

Though the poetry of Judith Wright is certainly expressive of feminine sensuality, this sensuality is always modified by a strong awareness of its metaphysical significance. This involves an acceptance of the feminine role in its fullest sense; of an involvement in creativity which is akin to and partakes of the dynamic creativity of the natural
world. The poetry transcends the feminine sensuality and the feminine experience which undoubtedly inform it. The poet’s voice, at its most powerful, is the voice of the primordial feminine, speaking of the inexhaustible and eternally recurrent fertility of the earth’s cycles of which birth is the human expression. Her characteristic imagery too is that of the regenerative cycles of physical life; imagery which is defined by Jung, and later by Neumann, as pertaining to the eternal feminine. The sympathetic identification of man with nature is not only constantly maintained, but is strengthened, for it is in sexual love, and eventually in childbirth that the poet at last feels herself at one with the earth and the regenerative cycles of nature:

I hold the crimson fruit
and plumage of the palm;
flame-tree, that scarlet spirit,
in my soul takes root.

(‘The Maker’; 1972; 1 - 4)

At the same time, Judith Wright is able to include her personal reservations towards her role, thus adding realism to her total projection of the feminine sensibility. These reservations are either overt (‘oh hold me, for I am afraid) or sublimated within the symbolism, such as that of light and darkness and are in line with the strain of ambiguity and conflict throughout her poetry. The poet embraces physicality as the
viable counter to time, yet is fearful and resentful of the implacable,
impersonal and often cruel forces which control the physical world.

One of the strangest things about Judith Wright is that she has no juvenilia to show, no period of youthful and immature development. She appeared on the Australian literary scene with her talents fully grown. Her poems lack the complexity, the dark and yet urgent presence of the poet herself in them. Yet it has another quality - it is magnificent poetry of projection, of subtle and unobtrusive self-identification. The poet is there, not in the poems as a character, but within the characters themselves, and within the framework of the language. It is a measure of the complex nature of Judith Wright that the poet who is capable of losing herself within the subject of the poem can, almost in the same breath, produce a love poem of the most turbulent subjectivity. Also with the surest possible hand, Judith Wright has created a technical framework for a kind of poetry which could quite easily have slipped over into the abyss of nostalgic sentimentalism. "Brothers and Sisters" is written in a comparatively free run on form. It is near to the conversational, but not too near:

The pianola-oh, listen to the mocking bird -
wavers on Sundays and has lost a note.
The wrinkled ewes snatch pansies through the fence
and stare with shallow eyes into the garden
where Lucy sluivels waiting for a word,
and Millie's cancos loosen round her throat.
The bush comes near, the ranges grow immense
(1972: 14-20)

The skill here lies in the detached quality of the verse: the emotional
tone is not loaded with technical accentuation.

Throughout the poetry of Judith Wright, the evolutionary
process is given a mystical significance. Through it the individual life
gains a transcendent value, in that it is the product of all previous
existence and effort. The individual life is also set in perspective as
part of a process which preserves and ensures the continuity of the
race, thus conquering time. The triumph however is achieved only by
love, suffering, strife and death. The poems of "Woman to Man" as
a whole are the clearest and most integrated expression of unity of
being in the poet's entire canon of work. Central to the total concept
of unity which these poems convey is the sexual act and the birth of
the child which integrates man into the creative cycles of the physical
world. In "Midnight" at least this state is analogous to the state of
pure love known only to the mystic or to the artist in an intense state
of creativity:

So let my blood reshape its dream,
drawn into that timeless stream:
that shadowless and burning night
of darkness where I find my sight.
(1972: 17-20)
Allied to this is the creative act (seen in a number of poems as a sexual act) which unites the creative imagination with the phenomenal world of nature. Moving through and validating both physical and psychic unity is the life force which is love. The system is in a state of ceaseless flux which both manifests and guarantees its vitality. And, underlying all is the source of all creativity, whether it is the generative earth, the fertile darkness, or the creative unconscious.

Works Cited:


