

The Lie of the Land: Grounding the Work of Douglas Wright in Aotearoa-New Zealand

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New Zealand is central to Douglas Wright's life and his art and yet he has considerable antipathy and affection for the Antipodes. He is acutely aware of the cultural insecurities that its small island nation status creates within the collective psyche and delights in pricking the bubble of over-inflated claims about the nation and its relationship to the rest of the world:

I had noticed on television that people kept saying, 'This'll put New Zealand on the map,' and "This'll really put New Zealand on the map,' and 'Now this has definitely put us on the map,' and, by the amount of times these phrases were repeated and the vigorous way they were said I realised that no matter how many times we were put on the map we kept slipping off again. (Wright 2004)

Two years before he wrote these words Wright made the observation: "I have finally realised that when distance did look our way it couldn't see us". (Wright 2002)

Part of Douglas's antinomy embraces the idiosyncratic and the strange: the singularity of those individuals in Kiwi society who have managed to create an identity beyond the confines of a narrowly prescribed parochialism. He has been an avid admirer of the work of Janet Frame since his childhood. Frame's work is both a critique and a celebration of humanity, with her stories often set within the peculiarities of a provincial New Zealand landscape in which she finds 'the extraordinary beneath the ordinary'. It is a mission they have in common and one that often places them at odds with the notion of a cosy island nation. The inner worlds they reveal make connections between our prosaic lives and the deeper mysteries of existence. In both artists the spiritual is made manifest.

Douglas is a voracious reader and it was perhaps Janet Frame's creative imaginings that whet his appetite for the world of the mind contained in great literature.

Video One: opening image from *Ore*

An ore is a native mineral containing a precious or useful metal in such a quantity as to make its extraction profitable: it is something to be mined. The opening image is a potent visual metaphor: the burning candle suggests an erect penis ardent and fiery in the darkness, a potential weapon of mass destruction, a link in the aetiology of AIDS, as redolent as a smoking gun in a crime thriller. The visual trope implies the 'ore,' which is the very stuff of his life, amplified by the groaning effort of his traverse; Wright is the native mineral as he insinuates himself across the filmed landscape. What is revealed by the dance that follows is the 'gold' not only of excavation but alchemy. Peter Wells describes it as:

....those inimitable Douglas Wright touches – the incandescent image, the lovely bravery of the dance – and the shimmering, plangent, undimmed energy. (Wells 2002)

Douglas has been living with the spectre of death since he was diagnosed HIV positive in 1989. As I write this I realise these words cannot convey the immense burden of such a reality, or the brutality of such a fact. He could have chosen to simply give up on life or certainly on the creative life of an artist. Instead he has chosen to accept his condition as a gift. Part of that gift is a 're-valuation of values' and a questioning of the cultural prescriptions that distinguish and govern appropriate public and private behaviour. When you have looked death in the face 'transgression' takes on a totally new meaning.

The choreographer Shona McCullagh talks of Douglas in this manner:

Douglas, both as a person and as an artist, represents a kind of paradox of intensities from this respect and faith in the natural world in a loving sense as opposed to this rage and anger

about the way human beings treat each other. I see him as a kind of dark angel that can open portals to our enjoyment and our perception of what life is but he's got this terrible anger and fury that seeps out of his work. (McCullagh 2003)

Douglas has spoken about the intensity of his emotional energy as:

Anger can turn into passionate joy – it's more about exploring the way energy can be transformed through movement. I'm lucky in a way that I've been given more than my share of anger so I've got a lot of it to transform and I've worked with it. (Wright 2003)

Douglas admits there is a lot of darkness in his work but sees it as “darkness pregnant with light.”

What you are about to see is a brief moment from Wright's 2002 work called *Inland*. Because the camera has zoomed in on the protagonists I would ask you to imagine the actual stage picture in which the Farmer, his/her dog and the sheep are dwarfed by the vast magnificence of the landscape.

Video Two: the Farmer (*Inland*)

Oh God....I hate this fucking country
The grass is so green
The sky is so blue
Baa baa black banks of grass
Have you any fully adjustable shelves and door(s) and cabinets

Inland 2002

In close-up the Farmer's plaintive cry is simply humorous until you realise the immensity and awesome power of the terrain and this expletive becomes explicable as an existential

cry from a heart in awe of nature's extraordinary majesty. Wright describes the power of the Otago landscape making comparisons with contrapuntal musical form:

The hills were so attenuated and grave they were like the visual equivalent of the opening theme in a Bach fugue, slowed down by years. As their rhythm deepened, the dark, low-hanging curtain of mist lifted slightly, sounding a note of muted colour: white, iron grey, sullen brown, and the blackest black in blackdom. When the horizon was just one long in-held breath, a ray of light thrust its arm through the clouds and painted a fleeting patch a kind of venomous green. The whole space seemed to ring with a strict joy, like the last metallic shivers of a struck bell. It was as if some vengeful God had just left.

As we drove further into the emptiness the name 'McCahon' started to float in the air between us like a speech-balloon. (Wright 2004)

We will return to Colin McCahon and the Otago landscape in a moment but first we visit Douglas's childhood:

Video Three: Douglas – childhood (*Haunting Douglas*)

In Tuakau, South Auckland, in the early 1960s a dancing boy was frowned on with a frown handed down for generations. (reading from *ghost dance*)

It was a typical New Zealand family of the time. The roles were quite rigidly separated. My father was not there a lot and I was just a disappointment because he wanted me to play footy (laughs) which I loathe and despise (laughs) to this very day. (Wright, 2003)

Here is another provocation. Rugby is a religion in New Zealand and 'footy' - 'the game they play in heaven' – is itself a metaphor and a barometer of the state of the nation. The seminal 1981 play *Foreskin's Lament* places the game of rugby at the centre of a drama that explores the contested territory of identity in New Zealand society. Difference is to be feared when you don't know who you are. There is a repeated refrain throughout the

play, posed as a question but really a bellicose cry, a challenge to any manifestation of difference: *Whaddarya? Whaddarya? Whaddarya?* As Michael Neil comments about the play's conclusion:

....that particular pack-snarl, with all its force of hatred, contempt and naked fear, will never sound quite the same again – it separates the men from the boys all right. (Neill in McGee, 1981)

In the microcosm of provincialism that was Wright's childhood and adolescence, those 'unmentionable writhings' of a 'SISSY SKITING' could only be met by *Whaddarya?*, particularly by a father who was a former halfback for the Counties.

Wright states:

When I danced, his disapproval forced me into a kind of parallel world. The wounds he inflicted on me were probably the best thing that ever happened to me. In fact you probably find that most gay people have that experience, that at a certain point you split into two and realise you have to pretend that you're something that you're not and so it's a gift in a way. (Wright, 2003)

The following poem by Emily Dickinson (much loved by Wright), takes on the force of personal revelation:

A Wounded Deer – leaps highest -
I've heard the hunter tell –
Tis but the Ecstasy of death –
And then the Brake is still!

The Smitten rock that gushes!
The trampled steel that springs!

A Cheek is always redder
Just where the Hectic stings!

Mirth is the mail of Anguish –
In which it Cautious Arm,
Lest anybody spy the blood
And “you’re hurt” exclaim!

165 Emily Dickinson (1860)

And in a sense his journey has been to escape provinciality without submitting to debilitating definition by ‘the other’ and someone else’s resonance. Yet there is the paradox of these particular material circumstances throwing up such a singular artist: it is the Lie of the Land.

In a 1996 interview Wright talked specifically about how he found the life of Janet Frame (now, recently deceased) inspirational in terms of his own ‘condition’:

From her I take heart, I mean she’s been so hurt but she’s not bitter, and I think that that is extraordinarily powerful.

Part of what Janet uses to rise above that reality and to see it clearly is the knowledge of the power of nature, that in the face of the forces of nature we are powerless. Acknowledging that helps you begin to be truthful about your reality, your limits, which is very hard to do. (Whyte 1996)

The power of nature may overwhelm him but it does not preclude his wonder and imagining of exotic landscapes populated by fabulous hybrid creatures. The following excerpt shows the beauty of these pastoral constructions without the embedded critique that so often accompanies such representations as this quotation suggests:

With its pastoral settings and beautifully articulated animal images there is little doubt that this dance theatre speaks of New Zealand society in less than glowing terms. (Cooper 1994)

Video Four: *As It Is – a fragment*

Vaslav Nijinsky has been a great inspiration for both his dancing and his creative imaginings. Wright states:

When I look at the photographs of him now it is the quality of transformation that strikes me. He seems to change not only costumes and positions but even his own shape as if he was subject to a series of possessions. Most uncanny are the half-human, half-animal, even half-floral beings. Bird of fire, spirit of the rose, panther, faun, he incarnated metaphysical links in an unknown evolution (Wright 2004)

The writer, Thorpe re-inforces this point and cites the sculptor Rodin's response to a performance by Nijinsky as she contextualises Wright's solo *Faun Variations* which he created and performed while a member of the Paul Taylor Dance Company in New York:

Becoming the movement is something Wright seems to have had in common with his first role model, Vaslav Nijinsky. When Nijinsky performed *L'après-midi d'un faune* in 1912, Rodin was struck by how, in the dancer's animal gestures and poses 'form and meaning are indissolubly wedded in his body, which is totally expressive of the mind within'. Dancing his own *Faun Variations*, Wright says he felt he could become the faun. And once, in New York, seeing a bird fly overhead, he remembers how he felt it flying. Curiously, animals seem to litter his choreography. There are centaurs, sheep, a hawk, dogs, a faun, stags – and those casually lethal, bent-back legs waving like a scorpion's tail in *Hey Paris*. (Thorpe 2003)

Video Five: *Faun Variations*

When I was dancing that solo I felt, not so much an affinity with Nijinsky, but more that through him I was able to in some way become the faun. (Wright, 2003)

In the work *Inland*, Wright has, as we have already seen, constructed an extraordinary tension between omnipresent nature and the sentient life that exists within it. The farmer, his dog, and his sheep are dwarfed by the confluence of earth and sky. In this scene the performers dance a passage of considerable beauty and complexity in which they are transformed into a flock of sheep gamboling on the hillside. The “T” of Colin McCahon’s later religious word paintings, which has been materialised as part of the stage set, has lost its verticality and creates an elongated plinth for the aural contretemps between the solo violin and the Caledonian call of the bagpipes:

Video Six: *Inland* (trio into ensemble)

Of this work, Wells comments that:

Perhaps the continuous lyrical rolling across the floor illustrates the inner message of this ballet by Wright, hinting at a continuity expressed through energy, a flickering, urgent, pulsing present: a life force that articulates an eternal kind of becoming. (Wells 2002)

The following video excerpt concerns the ‘Plunkett Nurse’ an iconic presence in the rites of passage of most New Zealanders. What appears as a simple moment of drollery evokes deeper resonances which Maggie Burke describes in this manner:

Wright’s choreography springs from that twilight zone where ordered formality and the known give way to deeper patterns of symbols and archetypes, yet his work is uniquely grounded in New Zealand life and culture. It shakes the consciousness of the watcher, inciting alert participation – a little shocking, like jumping into a mountain stream. (Burke 1996)

Video Seven: the Plunkett Nurse (*Forever*)

In a 1996 interview published in *Landfall*, Wright responds to the issue of cultural diversity in New Zealand dance:

Dance here, as elsewhere, has a relationship to the whole social, spiritual, geographic fabric of the country. As we are more of a subconscious culture that is still emerging, the work does have an aspect of that. We've always been in the shadow of America or England, us whiteys, that's what we have to think of as our cultural heritage. A lot of work in this country has obviously been influenced by snatches overheard, you just catch a fragment, or a few bits of things that send you off on a tangent. I think that we are influenced in an unusual way, because it's not a complete knowledge of what our influences are.

There is a burgeoning, a deep river of indigenous culture that flows in this country which is starting to come out in contemporary dance. If you look at the work of Steve Bradshaw and *Te Kani Kani o te Rangitahi*, for example, when they started back in the mid 1980s, and this year Neil Ieremia's work for *Black Grace*, you see new things emerging, coming out strongly. (Wright in Whyte 1996)

The next two videos illustrate this burgeoning of interconnections across cultures. (For those of you with an obsessive compulsive nature the male chorus falls to the ground 19 times while Neil Ieremia performs the *fa'ataupati* or traditional Samoan slap dance.)

Video Eight: Fa'ataupati (*Forever*)

This example of the Samoan slap dance celebrates adolescent bravura and demonstrates the considerable cultural pride of the performer within the narrative structure of the work. The same dance is reprised and subverted at a later point in the work by the drag queen figure (*takataapui/f'afafine*) performed by Taiaroa Royal.

Video Nine: Takataapui- F'afafine (*Forever*)

The cultural specificity of the traditional Samoan slap dance (*fa'ataupati*) has been appropriated and Wright explains the melding of different cultures within New Zealand in this manner:

My works have elements of these three cultures meeting (Maori, Pakeha and Samoan), because there are Maori and Pacific Island dancers in my company and all my dancers contribute to the works we make. That meeting of cultures is a unique aspect of our country, our shared heritage, and the challenge is to find a way for that to be 'used' in our art, to be acknowledged as a living thing, and that's a challenge for all of us to come to terms with. But for me it is an instinctive theme, not an ideological one. (Wright in Whyte 1996)

And now we turn to that much neglected and most needed quality of dance: manifestations of the metaphysical. Wright's work is centrally concerned with transcendence, the spiritual and ecstatic release. Douglas speaks about the paradox in Christian theology between the idea of a vengeful God and a 'state of grace'.

Video Ten: (*Halo*)

The idea of *Halo* was to try to examine how the idea of the flesh can at once be so evil, you know we can be taught that our sexuality is so evil, and that we are sinful beings and how does that co-exist with this incredibly beautiful idea of "grace" that is in the (Perotin) music.

I've been lucky enough to have a couple of experiences where I discovered that god is actually a verb. It's not something separate from you. It's something that you can experience. (Wright 2003)

Douglas has studied deeply in the areas of yoga and meditation both of which 'gave me little sips of something that both quenched and reawakened my thirst for bliss.' Through this journey he has come to realise that *satori* or sudden enlightenment and *nirvana*, the state of beatitude attained by extinction of individuality and desires, is a surrender he cannot make. In an article titled 'The power and truth of a paradox – Douglas Wright'

Wright is asked about the title of his work and goes on to give a rationale for his philosophical position as a practicing artist:

Why does he call all this “Forever”? When asked this, Wright stands up, spontaneously, and shows a short sequence from the work. His body pulls itself cautiously upwards, with heels teetering as if the feet are trying to leave the ground. “That’s hope”, he says, smiling. “There’s always something that stays behind, that keeps going, even after death”. He had a look at Buddhism and Vipassana meditation, taking part in two 10-day retreats. He was fascinated by their attentiveness, the concentration on breathing. But then he decided not to leave his everyday desires, anxieties and projections behind. “If I am solely in the moment, truly at one with my breathing, what can I show on the stage?”, he asks, joking. He keeps going by using contradictions, the power of the paradox, as in the poem of Emily Dickinson, quoted in “Forever”: ‘I felt a funeral in my brain’. “That’s like a koan”, says Wright. And he continues – “The truth shines out through paradoxes”. Here is a man living a quiet life, isolated at the other end of the world, yet who presents us today with one of the world’s most impressive works. (Bucher 1995)

The quest for a ‘state of grace’ or ‘divine regenerating and strengthening influence’ allows him to continue to strive to connect his inner life with the rest of humanity. Like many artists before him Douglas states that these metaphysical states are beyond words:

For me it is the ultimate mystery and ultimate joy: dancing, performing for people, being able to give them something that cannot be given in words. That’s why I can’t talk to you about it. It’s something that’s beyond words. (Wright 2003)

Yet unlike many other artists he has the capacity to articulate its contours. Back in 1996 in response to a question about the benefits of watching dance he responded by saying:

I think that dance is probably one of the languages that we have that can intervene....I think that in spoken and written language the vocabulary has been so distorted by the media and words have become so meaningless and twisted now that it’s hard to say some things unless

you are a great poet. Dance is one area where the language hasn't been distorted and there are some things you can say with movement that are inexplicable in any other form. Dance has a really important role to play in feeding the soul and the spirit. So when people come, they get something from it – you can't put your finger on it.... We neglect the spiritual part of our being, and that is the part that needs quick attention. Dance is something that can address that part of people. (Wright in Legat 1996)

And further on, in relation to the act of dancing he articulates his understanding of this state of being:

For me, when it works, it's like you're on fire. You feel like you're incandescent, actually, and that it's reaching everybody. It's like you're beaming out all this stuff and you're in relationship to a lot of things that are invisible. It's also like you're in the eye of the storm....it's a privilege to be in that moment because you receive so much. (Wright in Legat 1996)

More recently in *ghost dance* Douglas reflects upon his life as a dancer and comes closer still to articulating the transcendent, the spiritual and the sensation of ecstatic release:

After 20 years I was just beginning to be able to transform the shit of my fear into gold when my body said enough. My relationship with the audience, which began at primary school, was even more primary by the time I danced myself to a standstill. When a dancer reaches the stage where they can stop thinking about technique, something else comes into play. Some people believe the dancing body is an instrument of the intellect. For me, the choreography, the music and the people watching were all ingredients in a journey I took every time I danced in public. At times I felt like a being set free in an enchanted sphere, one wing despair, the other – jubilation; plundering the gaps between the notes where the nectar is, with the watching gazes somehow fused into one giant eye, drinking. And what the audience drank was absorbed, enriched and purified by their understanding, then sent back to me. This mysterious give and take, back and forth went on and on until it was no longer clear exactly who was watching and who was dancing. (Wright 2004)

I would like to finish this paper with the funeral scene from *Forever* which begins with Douglas reciting a poem by Emily Dickinson and ends with his solo.

Video Eleven: Funeral (*Forever*)

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading – treading – till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through –

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum –
Kept beating – beating – till I thought
My Mind was going numb –

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space – began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here –

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing – then –

280 Emily Dickinson (1861)

Video Twelve: Solo (*Forever*)

Douglas Wright is a gardener who tills the soil of his little piece of earth in Mt Albert, Auckland New Zealand and tends the imaginative yearnings of the Artist in us all.

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