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Howard McNaughton

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## From animism to expressionism in the early James K. Baxter

### **Abstract**

The earliest critical writings of James K. Baxter make frequent approving reference to animism as a basis of poetic experience. This tendency reached an extreme with the writing of his first play, *Jack Winter's Dream*, in 1956, after which the term 'animism' virtually disappeared from his critical vocabulary. It will be argued that with *Jack Winter's Dream* Baxter moved from animism to expressionism, the logical source of his major confessional poetry of the 1960s. This transition is particularly important in view of the recent popularity of the play, which in 1979 appeared in a new edition and was released as a feature film.

HOWARD McNAUGHTON

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## From Animism to Expressionism in the Early James K. Baxter

The earliest critical writings of James K. Baxter make frequent approving reference to animism as a basis of poetic experience. This tendency reached an extreme with the writing of his first play, *Jack Winter's Dream*, in 1956, after which the term 'animism' virtually disappeared from his critical vocabulary. It will be argued that with *Jack Winter's Dream* Baxter moved from animism to expressionism, the logical source of his major confessional poetry of the 1960s. This transition is particularly important in view of the recent popularity of the play, which in 1979 appeared in a new edition<sup>1</sup> and was released as a feature film.

Baxter was specific about the location of his play in the South Island of New Zealand:

When I was a child I spent a good deal of time in Otago and the Lake district — an area, I suppose, that has come often into my poetry — and this landscape I tried to make come alive, to play its part, animistically, in the story. What I had in mind was somewhere near Naseby, but whether the yarns told me by my father which form a basic stratum in the play were really centred there, I would be unable to say.<sup>2</sup>

Another New Zealand poet had already produced a major animistic treatment of the Central Otago landscape: Alistair Campbell's 'Elegy' (1948) is a response to the death of a young man in the mountains, and Baxter appears to have been the first critic to understand how Campbell's animism worked. In 1950, he wrote:

The most remarkable feature of Mr Campbell's poetry is a passionate sympathy with natural objects which produces at its strongest the effect of genuine animism.<sup>3</sup>

Five years later, he wrote:

Campbell's strongest personal symbols are always of separation and death. In his superb 'Elegy', mountain, gorge, tree, and river, become protagonists in the drama of the death of the young mountaineer. In 'Hut Near Desolated Pines', perhaps his finest poem, he considers the death of an old recluse; the rats, the spiders, the wind which bursts the door open, are all animistic and hostile. The old man himself is on one level the isolated self, on another the bearer of ancestral wisdom.<sup>4</sup>

The similarities between Baxter's favourite poem by Campbell and his own first play are too great to be coincidental. Campbell's old recluse is found dead by a rabbit on the mud floor of his hut; Jack Winter is found dead by two girl hikers inside the ruins of an old pub, 'a house made out of clay'.<sup>5</sup> Even the idea of the dream may be traced to Campbell:

Fantastical images may have stirred  
His mind when the wind moaned  
And sparks leapt up the chimney  
With a roar. But what great gust  
Of the imagination threw wide  
The door and smashed the lamp  
And overturned both table and chair<sup>6</sup>

It is that 'great gust of the imagination' that Baxter expanded into

dramatic substance for the main body of his play, but whereas the dynamics of hallucination and death in Campbell's poems are alien and inexplicable, in Baxter's play they are generated psychologically and are thus expressionistic.

By 'animism', Baxter clearly meant what philosophers call 'naïve pansychism', commonly observed among primitive tribes and children; in 1951, he wrote:

Animism is an essential factor in the artist's view of the world. The generative power of poetry comes largely from the rediscovery and revaluation of childhood experience.... I consider that the animism of the child and savage is an essential ingredient of good poetry.<sup>7</sup>

In Campbell, the environmental antagonists are presented as predatory, autonomous, and unknowable, to the poet as well as to the poetic character. Even 'the imagination', the instrument of the old man's death, is viciously active but utterly inexplicable, a mystery which the poem endorses as a mystery. This poetic method, in which the energy source is extraneous, Baxter correctly termed animistic, and Campbell continued working in this manner until *Sanctuary of Spirits* (1963).

In Baxter's own poetry, the animistic world view only rarely governs a whole poem, and even then it appears as an awkward residue of a childhood vision. 'The Giant's Grave'<sup>8</sup> refers to a deep hole in the Brighton River in Otago, a name which is a simple illustration of childhood animism. In Baxter's poem, however, the grave is associated with specific mythopoetic elements, including allusions to Atlas, Antaeus, and Adam, so that childhood credulity is invalidated beside adult sophistication; the grave is no longer the active menace to youthful canoists, it is the passive repository of imposed learning. Many of Baxter's poems, from *Beyond the Palisade* (1944) through beyond 'The Waves' (1966), reflect the consciously hopeless attempt to revitalize the animistic Brighton environment; the attempt fails because the poet has verbally and often rationally mastered his environment.

Baxter's animistic interpretations of other New Zealand poets were less cogent than his reading of Alistair Campbell. In particular, he used similar terminology in a 1953 review of Denis Glover's *Arawata Bill*:

The peculiar power of Mr Glover's landscape poetry rises from the fact that mountain, river, bushland and sea assume in it the proportions of animistic powers; and the chief importance of *Arawata Bill* is that it constitutes an extension of this frame of reference.<sup>9</sup>

In the persona of Arawata Bill, Glover created a lens figure who subjectifies any animistic detail and thus nullifies any numinous properties. When a drunk clings to a lamppost because the world is spinning around him, his environment is not animistic but merely a projection of his own mental disorder, a crude form of expressionism.<sup>10</sup> Arawata Bill's vision is governed by a similar dementia; as the barmaid observes, 'the only gold he'll ever pan/ Is the glitter in his eyes'.<sup>11</sup> From the first poem in the sequence, where 'golden nuggets bloom/ In the womb of the storm',<sup>12</sup> to the last, where Bill is informed 'You should have been told/ Only in you was the gold',<sup>13</sup> the natural world is presented as a macrocosmic distortion of the old miner's single-minded pursuit of wealth. In the true animism of Alistair Campbell's early poetry, there is never a simple explanation for 'the womb of the storm'.

The title character of *Jack Winter's Dream* is an amalgam of Arawata Bill, Campbell's old hermit, and a seasonal king, sacrificed in the manner of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. At the start, Winter is introduced by the Narrator in the style (as Baxter acknowledged)<sup>14</sup> of Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*; Winter enters Abelstown, a ghost town from the gold rush era, and drinks himself to sleep in the ruins of 'The Drover's Rest. Before the dream begins, Baxter establishes its rationale very clearly through a dialogue between Winter and Bottle, representing the alcoholic factor in him. In expressionist terminology, Bottle may be called the 'control factor', the dramatic mechanism whereby the subconscious processes are released from their realistic container. Bottle speaks in a female voice; Baxter had very little dramatic use for women, but the control factor in his plays and relevant poems is very often female, an antagonistic mother-destroyer figure who pushes the expressionistic reverie into an almost exclusively male world.<sup>15</sup>

Neither Winter nor Bottle actively intrudes into the central dream narrative, although the Narrator frequently reminds us of their presence. The central dramatized story which makes up the dream is a simple tale about Will Trevelyan, travelling through the goldfields in the 1860s with a thousand pounds worth of dust and nuggets, and arriving at The Drover's Rest for the night. He meets Webfoot Charlie (the publican), Jenny (his daughter), and various guests: Preaching Lowry (Scottish), Ballarat Jake (Australian), and an anonymous Dane who does not speak. The naïveté of Trevelyan in talking about his prosperity, coupled with the stark suggestiveness of the ballad poetry, makes it seem inevitable that he will be murdered for his gold. They all go to bed, Trevelyan with Jenny; they talk about marriage, and he has just left her attic when

Charlie cuts his throat, pushes the body downstairs, and puts the razor in the hand of the drunken Dane who is here implicitly identified with Winter. It seems likely that Charlie, who has already hidden the gold will succeed in his villainy; but the dream at this stage fades out into the morning scene, and the discovery of Winter's body by the two girl hikers.

No other figure in the drama is as explicit in its expressionistic function as Bottle; for example, although Baxter thought of Preaching Lowry as 'the conscience of the piece',<sup>16</sup> in his dramatic context he is just another example of fragile humanity. This vagueness was possible because the main interpretative gesture comes through the imagery used by the Narrator for the theme of human frailty. The main action occurs on a 'clay crumbed floor', around which 'wrists of broom heave now at the sundried slabs of clay', an image that is expanded when Winter 'sees time past and time to be, and the heart of man a clay image melting on the palm of God's hand'.<sup>17</sup> The clay symbolism is clear by the time we are told that 'an illumination ... pierces the double night, the house of clay and the house of flesh',<sup>18</sup> and the two story elements, that of Winter and that of his dream, fuse when the Dane 'lies like a second fallen Adam full length on the frosty earth'.<sup>19</sup> The Edenic references are characteristic of Baxter's poetry even before his conversion to Catholicism, and are here heightened by the location of the action in Abelstown; however, the biblical connotations of the clay symbolism are only implicit, so that, as in most of his later plays, the values that are to be attached to the temptation and sacrifice that constitute the essential action are left ambivalent. The ending parallels that of a seminal work of dramatic expressionism, the Capeks' *And So Ad Infinitum*, in which a woodcutter discovers the body of the old tramp whose drunken hallucinations have supplied the central action, but the interpretative precision that is possible in 'the insect play' has no place here. The final comment on the human condition comes from the First Girl: 'Oh Hilda, isn't it quaint? Who'd live in a house made out of clay?'<sup>20</sup> The question is rhetorical: the clay house, the turf hut used by many New Zealand pioneers, is as inevitable a dwelling for Jack Winter, the fallen Adam, as the 'wide open cage' is for the non-drinking alcoholic protagonist of Baxter's first stage play.<sup>21</sup>

Appropriately, the girl finds the clay 'quaint'. For Baxter, human frailty is male territory, to which women are generally insensitive. He entitled his selected poems *The Rock Woman*, and used the same image in this play; the images of the clay man and the rock woman are spread throughout his later poetry, several of his stage plays, and his unpub-

lished novel, *A Ghost in Trousers*.<sup>22</sup> Jack Winter's empathy with Will Trevelyan becomes most intense with the appearance of the publican's daughter:

He weeps for the immortal joy of the dead, who has never wept for a living man or woman. The wound of the world's grief opens in the starless grave and ice mountain of his heart; and the tears flow as he listens. From the living light that is, was, and will be, ghosts no longer, the true dead speak.<sup>23</sup>

Only subjectively are the dead 'ghosts no longer'. Winter is himself in the process of becoming a ghost, and the dead are becoming, for him, 'true'. The affinity between Winter's body and the earth which accommodates it is neither a religious mystery nor an animistic world view; it is a psychological ploy directly engineered by the catalyst of the dream, the Mephistophelian Bottle, slowly asking Winter 'Do you want me more than Heaven?'<sup>24</sup>

Jack Winter, like Arawata Bill, is an intermediary lens figure whose patently unreliable perception governs all observed detail within the hallucinatory context, in the manner of traditional psychoexpressionism. The perception of the Narrator, however, is free from the obvious limitations of Winter, although he adopts a sympathetic pose, and this means that the Narrator's observations on the mutability theme are allowed more authority. At the end of the play, Winter's vision has dissolved, the Narrator's stance of objectivity has yielded to the facile irony of the girls, and the absence of an authorial voice means that the play's metaphysical energies are dissipated.

The reconciliation of psychological and environmental energies through an authorial persona was a central preoccupation of Baxter's confessional poetry of the 1960s, and achieves its most elaborate proportions in 'The Waves', the poem with which he ended *The Rock Woman*.<sup>25</sup> In the first section, the socially and sexually disorientated speaker finds consolation on the shore, anthropomorphically conceived; the pubic grass on the arid beach and the wave which 'bangs in channels of gnarled stone' are presented as environmental correlatives to the loss of poetic inspiration. In the central and final sections, the poet gradually accommodates his sexual and metaphysical propensities into the mutability ethos that is epitomized in the waves themselves, and the poem emerges, literally as evidence of that accommodation. The structural pivot of the poem is, however, in the second section, in which the problem of reconciliation is personalized:



exploring the symbolism of their energies Baxter achieved a personal statement of 'the fences of the mind' without affecting a return to childhood animism.

## NOTES

1. James K. Baxter, *Jack Winter's Dream* (Wellington: Price Milburn for the Victoria University Press, 1979).
2. Baxter, 'Jack Winter's Dream', *New Zealand Listener*, 19 September 1958, p. 8. With the exception of this article, all of Baxter's critical writings referred to below have been collected in *James K. Baxter as Critic*, ed. Frank McKay (Auckland: Heinemann, 1978).
3. Baxter, review of *Mine Eyes Dazzle* by Alistair Campbell, *New Zealand Listener*, 8 September 1950, p. 12.
4. Baxter, *The Fire and the Anvil* (Wellington: New Zealand University Press, 1955), p. 63.
5. Baxter, 'Jack Winter's Dream', *Landfall* X, 3, 1956, p. 193. All references are to this text.
6. Alistair Campbell, *Kapiti* (Christchurch: Pegasus Press, 1972), p. 13.
7. Baxter, *Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry* (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1951), pp. 7, 19.
8. Baxter, *Howrah Bridge and Other Poems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 20.
9. Baxter, review of *Arawata Bill* by Denis Glover, *Landfall* VII, 3, 1953, p. 215.
10. To Freud, of course, such expressionism was a precondition of animism. See *Totem and Taboo*, Chapter 3.
11. Denis Glover, *Enter without Knocking* (Christchurch: Pegasus Press, 1964), p. 89.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
14. In his *New Zealand Listener* article on the play (see Note 2), Baxter also stated that his use of a narrator was influenced by Laurie Lee's *The Voyage of Magellan*. No other parallels are apparent.
15. This is most blatant in a poem such as 'Henley Pub', in *The Rock Woman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 59.
16. Baxter stated this in his *New Zealand Listener* article (see Note 2).
17. Baxter, 'Jack Winter's Dream', pp. 183, 185.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
21. 'The Wide Open Cage' is included in *Contemporary New Zealand Plays*, ed. McNaughton (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1974).
22. Manuscripts are held in the Hocken Library, Dunedin.
23. Baxter, 'Jack Winter's Dream', p. 189.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

2 5 . Baxter, *The Rock Woman*, pp. 83-6.

2 6 . Ibid, p. 83.

2 7 . Baxter, *The Man on the Horse* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1967), p. 154  
(untitled poem).

2 8 . Ibid, p. 155.