

“Big wind, he waiting there”: Vance Palmer’s Cyclones of Apocalypse and Their Power of Revelation.

Chrystopher Spicer

College of Arts, Society and Education.
James Cook University, Cairns.

Prior to writing his 1947 novel, *Cyclone*, Queensland author Vance Palmer drafted out many of his ideas for the story in three earlier short stories: ‘Cyclone’ (1932), ‘Big Wind,’ and ‘Tempest,’ both published in 1936. In these stories and the later novel, Palmer develops the cyclone as trope of apocalypse, an unveiling and realization of the new inherent within the destruction of the old. As a result of experiencing both the terror and the mystery of the apocalyptic cyclonic event, Palmer’s characters realize they have transcended fears and inadequacies within themselves, enabling them to re-create new lives and new worlds.

In the aftermath of the climactic storm in Vance Palmer's 1947 novel *Cyclone*, his character Fay Donolly realizes that, “She wouldn’t be so sure of her own little world again . . . a window had been opened in her mind, giving her a glimpse of the terror and mystery lurking behind the stolid face of things” (Palmer, 1947, p. 194). In fact, many characters in this novel and a connected trio of Palmer’s short stories sense the mystery and terror of cyclones, for the impact of this apocalyptic weather event is more than that of a material disaster; in the wake of these cyclones, many of the surviving characters realize, like Mrs. Donolly, that their lives will never be the same again. As Harry Heseltine observes, in *Cyclone* the storm “purges the human conflicts it has both intensified and symbolized” (Heseltine, 1970, p. 119). For Palmer’s characters, the cyclone acts as a revelation of things to come, as a catalyst for change; it lays bare the inadequacies of their lives before the event and reveals opportunities to overcome them and to move forward into possible futures. Palmer knew the power of cyclones to change people’s lives physically and spiritually through personal experience, yet he also knew people had strength to transcend that whirling storm.

Over two hundred tropical cyclones have impacted the coast of Queensland since 1858, an average of between four and five every year. Since most of those made landfall in North Queensland, where this group of Palmer stories is located, people there have necessarily established an early, significant and personal relationship with this unique weather event. Although by its very nature unpredictable, uncontrollable and unavoidable, the cyclone is part of the Queensland life and so must be incorporated into it by those who live there, and so cyclones have become an integral aspect of the history, literature and culture of their region, so integral that part of the regional year is known as the ‘cyclone season.’ It is hardly surprising, then, that Queensland writers have continued to incorporate cyclones into the literary landscape, integrating them into the Queensland sense of place. Cyclones feature prominently as image and trope throughout Queensland literature, such as in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*, Thea Astley’s *A Boatload of Home Folk*, in the poetry of Susan Hawthorne, and in the work of Vance Palmer. In his stories and then in the later novel, Palmer's whirling storms fulfill the true nature of apocalypse: destruction of the old in order to reveal the new.

The word 'apocalypse' is from the Greek *apokalupsis*, implying an unveiling and realization of future events or meanings: a revelation. As James Berger notes in *After the End*, to be truly apocalyptic an event must "in its destructive moment clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end" (Berger, 1999, p. 5). The apocalypse is not the end in itself, he elaborates, but anticipates, reveals and explains the end. An apparently destructive event such as a cyclone, then, can be apocalyptic in the sense that it also reveals and explains. In the event's aftermath, survivors are offered choices and opportunities to renew, to start again, to perceive previously unseen aspects of themselves and their lives. In this way, the incomprehensible can be comprehended, the randomness of violent weather given reason. Throughout Queensland literature, the trope of the cyclone appears as both destroyer and re-creator, as an instrument of divine will, of fate or of destiny itself, an apocalyptic revelation to characters that they are part of the inevitable and uncontrollable cycle of death and birth, of change and renewal. Palmer, too, uses the cyclone trope as catalyst and instrument of apocalypse. From the destruction wreaked by cyclones, revelations emerge in his work as old things are wiped away and new worlds revealed.

Set during a fictional version of the 1934 Cape Tribulation cyclone that also impacted Cairns, Vance Palmer's novel *Cyclone* revolves around three men: Brian Donolly, Ross Halliday and Clive Randall and the developing tension in the relationship between them embodied in the on-coming cyclonic storm. Donolly and his wife Fay have rented out their farm and come to the North Queensland coast with their family to establish, in partnership with Brian's old army friend Halliday, a coastal shipping business that is primarily financed by another army buddy, Randall. However, their dreams of developing a thriving shipping business do not work out in the face of Depression-era economic hardship and the loss of their first boat in a fire, leaving them to struggle along with a battered old launch, the *Gannet*.

Afraid that the business will fail and leave her family stranded, Donolly's wife Fay becomes increasingly unhappy, remembering their farm as a place where they were together and economically and socially secure. Here, they are risking everything and Donolly is constantly away from home. With a cyclone approaching the coast, he's now decided to sail north with Halliday because there's no other crew available, and he and Fay argue over his decision. The heightened tension between the characters parallels the meteorological tension in the atmosphere. Fay suspects Clive Randall of having an affair with Halliday's wife, Bee, while Fay's brother, budding writer Tod Kellaher, has abruptly abandoned his job aboard the *Gannet* to live in an encampment of unemployed at the town show-grounds and is prepared to risk all to stand in solidarity with them in the face of threats of violence from local business men. These human conflicts will, however, eventually seem irrelevant within the cyclone as characters realise that it is the strength inherent in family and community that contributes to surviving such disasters.

Vance Palmer evidently began thinking about cyclone stories while he and his wife Nettie were living for nine months during 1932 on Green Island, near Cairns, where they came to know many people from the local maritime community such as Bill Millard, who captained the trading boat *Mossman*. Like the protagonists of the novel, the Palmers made plans: when he returned to Melbourne, Vance discussed with friends a future tour of the Barrier Reef aboard the *Mossman*. However, on 12 March, 1934, a cyclone struck North Queensland near Cape Tribulation, and the destructive winds along with a nine metre storm surge caused widespread damage along with the loss of many boats and some eighty lives including, to Palmer's sorrow, the *Mossman* and his friend Millard, and this is the storm that Palmer fictionalizes in his novel. He also includes some earlier local trauma that occurred while he was in the area. The bloody

'Battle of Parramatta Park' exploded on Sunday, 17 July, 1932, when approximately one hundred Cairns unemployed who wouldn't leave their camp at the show-grounds were surrounded and severely beaten by between 1000 to 2000 local vigilantes armed with iron bars, clubs, and fence posts wrapped in barbed wire and encouraged by police and local business owners. While no-one was killed, some 80 combatants were injured, some badly enough to be hospitalized.

Perhaps because of subsequent regional sensitivities, it was a decade before Palmer returned to those events in long fictional form, yet *Cyclone* still seethes with those tensions and conflicts, meteorological and personal. The town is "a stew of quarrels small and big" (p. 19), typified by Fay Donolly, who is as unsettled as the people and the weather. "You get screwed up in this wet season, feel as if some particular person or thing is twitching at your nerves" (p. 8), she anguishes. Around her, outhouses are rotting in a yard where rampant vegetation hides potential hazards of rusting tin and fencing, where there is "a touch of something sinister in that fecundity of the warm water-logged earth. You could almost feel in the thrusting pressure against anything that had been built by human hands the assertion of a blind, destructive will"(p. 13). For Fay, the elements around her have animistic qualities: the wind is "like a spiteful bird," a brown sea-eagle poised above their house is "watching it with baleful eyes for a chance to strike in earnest" (p. 1). Disturbed from a prophetic nightmare about the wreck of a boat by her children's encounter with an egg-stealing python, she sentences the serpent in her Eden to death despite Brian's protests that the python is harmless, declaring her loathing for "all the slimy growths that come out of this jungle"(p. 17). For Fay, this is no paradise.

Instead, this is a much darker garden in which serpent and cyclone will later merge when Fay envisions the storm as the wounded Leviathan rearing its scaly bulk from the depths of the sea, thrashing it, convulsing in a death agony during which lightning sparks from its forked tongue as it sweeps its tail "over cays and coral reefs, sending the tides roaring up little rivers and swamping the mangrove beaches." The snake rises again, resurrected and so strong this time that Fay feels it cannot be destroyed, "for he was in league with the dark forces behind the deceptive appearance of things"(p. 159). This is a serpent "ready to raise his dragon head and turn the known world to an evil waste"(p. 160). Yet in the end, Fay is able to defeat her personal apocalyptic beast, experiencing her own revelation that she has been changed by this experience and will never again accept her world at face value.

Fay does not just survive her cyclone experience, she transcends it, seeing behind and beyond the mundane rituals of everyday life to the "terror and the mystery," sensing she has gained access to a new dimension. Her insight into the spiritual aspects of her cyclone experience reveals Palmer's interest in developing deeper emotional and psychic responses of his characters. Rather than merely recounting how Fay resolves her visions, Palmer uses her as a vehicle for something more unformed, more suggestive: a concept of the realm of nature as part of the unconscious, inclusive of death and destruction as well as the will to live.

Like Fay, other characters in *Cyclone* survive the storm within relationships in which life itself, though blind and battered, is "yet moving to some pulse in its secret core"(p. 189). They have to make choices about those relationships, and in many ways the cyclone reveals to them their options. It is only when Donolly finally relies on his intuition and sense of portent and chooses to leave behind his confrontation with Halliday, for example, that he can marshal his energies to survive the cyclone. Up until now, he has chosen not to recognize the change in Fay's circumstances, that she now feels more responsible because she is concerned about the children's future. He doesn't want to admit, either, that his business relationship with Halliday

has now reached a crisis point and that he may have to accept defeat. So while part of him recognises the seriousness of their current situation, he stubbornly keeps Halliday and their business afloat, partly out of loyalty to his friend but partly out of loyalty to his dream of a life without the pressures of worry about the future. In doing so, Donolly has become Ishmael to Halliday's Captain Ahab as they both chase the elusive White Whale of their respective dreams. It will only be Halliday's death in the cyclone that finally frees Donolly to move on, as Ishmael was freed by the death of Ahab.

Palmer's cyclone also reveals tests and opportunities for Fay's brother Tod. He can pursue the elusive and alluring shop assistant Con Daly, despite her dubious ethics, or he can stand with the unemployed and risk the wrath of vigilantes, or he can be a writer. In the storm's wake, Tod comes to realize that a potential allegory made up of all the "teeming images that had filled his mind during the storm" has taken shape in his head, if only he can find the right words (p. 195). His cyclone experience has in the end revealed a possible future for his dream of being a writer.

Revelations are there for the town as a whole, too. Before it makes landfall, people there are argumentative and lethargic. Having forgotten what it means to care for their fellow man, they are even ready to forcibly evict the unemployed. In the aftermath of the storm, though, calm descends on the port "as though with the passing of the storm some conflict had been resolved, some cord of tension relaxed" (p. 190). The grass somehow looks greener, the buildings fresher, the streets newly washed and there is no longer any suggestion of lurking evil in skies now clear. Instead, there is a new-found sense of economic opportunity, of employment, support and co-operation as people work together to repair buildings and clear streets of debris.

Although, according to Deborah Jordan (2011, p. 26), the manuscript of the novel was written after a ten-year hiatus by Palmer within only a few months during 1945, *Cyclone* reads as a thoughtful, tightly constructed and controlled work, with allusions to Edenic fall and recovery as well as to apocalypse and revelation, upon which the author had evidently been reflecting for some time. In fact, an examination of plot and character elements in three of his earlier short stories reveals that Palmer may indeed have been considering and experimenting with some aspects of his future novel for some years prior to its publication.

During the 1930s, Palmer wrote three short stories in which major characters experience revelations about their lives during cyclonic events. In the earliest of these short stories, "The Big Wind," published in 1932, the fearful left-at-home wife who discovers her strength is Mary Shenton who survives child-birth during a cyclone. "I won't be afraid of wind again. Afraid of anything else either," she declares afterwards. "You just clench your teeth, and at last you come out the other side" ("Big Wind," 13). The second short story, "Cyclone," published in March, 1936, reveals an earlier version of a captain who feels duty-bound to take a boat-load of supplies north into a cyclone. The third short story "Tempest," published in September, 1936, reveals early references to the cyclone as beast, as 'leviathan,' as well as to a Randall-like airplane pilot, Gessler. Scarred and embittered by an earlier cyclonic encounter that cost him love and endangered his life, Gessler finally understands during his second encounter with the beast that the revenge he sought by revealing his rival's faithlessness to his wife is not part of his true self.

Much like his novel, Palmer's short story "Cyclone" begins with signs and portents of bad weather, feelings of dread and of "terrors lurking on the edge of the skyline" coalesced within a dream ("Cyclone," 30). In this case the dreamer of near-disaster is the protagonist, Shirlow,

who like Fay Donolly and Gessler is a character with a sixth sense, “a capacity for seeing things before they happened, hearing the wind before it came” (“Cyclone,” 31). Here, Shirlow’s suspicion that his crewman Gourlay is trying to seduce his wife, Flora, is the serpent in this Eden, “rearing its ugly head, looking at him with snaky, insinuating eyes” (“Cyclone,” 30). When, despite his own misgivings, Shirlow takes Gourlay with him on the boat up the coast, their journey into the storm descends into a struggle for survival. As in *Cyclone*, they attempt to seek shelter from the storm but the boat is overwhelmed and the men are washed overboard as it sinks. While Shirlow fights ‘demons of the air’ to live, he has an epiphany that he has been paralyzed by fear of the future. “I’m free now at last,” he realizes. “It was the fear of what was ahead that paralyzed me” (“Cyclone,” 31). The sole survivor of the wreck, an enlightened Shirlow discovers that Flora resisted Gourlay’s temptations and remained true. So this cyclone, too, apocalyptically cleanses the protagonists’ world of evil and reveals a new earth in which they will be able to begin again.

As well as revealing powerful forces at play, then, Palmer's apocalyptic cyclones also reveal human frailties. But, although they test the physical and moral strengths of his stories’ characters, his storms reveal opportunities for them to remedy, to renew and heal. The simple moral sermons of the short stories become more complex in the novel *Cyclone*, in which Palmer elaborates further on themes of powerful warnings underlain by mythology that are revealed through dreams and in nature. Not only are there tempting serpents in this Eden, but also more elemental, mythic beasts of land, sea and air. “Big wind, he waiting there, jus' over skyline,” a Murray Island man says to Donolly in a bar. “Big wind, he bunch himself up, all ready to spring. I know. Feel 'm in head here, feel 'm in belly, feel 'm in bones”(Palmer, 104). In proving they have the strength to defeat these beasts and survive these storms, Palmer’s characters find within themselves that which the elemental apocalypse has revealed in order to rebuild upon their new earth.

Such an elemental beast also stalks Palmer’s story “Tempest,” in which people feel “something of terror in the thought of that wild thing moving across the sea-wastes beyond the still horizon” (“Tempest,” 30). The pilot protagonist, Gessler, a more complex character than his counterpart Randall in *Cyclone*, is scarred and blind in one eye as a result of a plane crash during a previous cyclone. Much like Tom Fury, the lightning rod salesman of Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, Gessler is intimately sensitive to changes in the weather. As a result of their violent encounters, Fury and Gessler are harbingers of storms, warning heedless people of their approach. Like Gessler, Fury feels a storm approaching that “like a great beast with terrible teeth could not be denied” (Bradbury, 1969, p. 5).

Unable to reconcile with Gessler’s injuries, his former lover Claire has left him to marry the womanizing Harry Monaghan, captain of the trading ship *Kestrel*. Monaghan has “always had the devil's own luck” (“Tempest,” p. 30), and Gessler suspects temptation may have lured him away up the coast. Still feeling an obligation to Claire, he agrees to search for Monaghan, who has not returned in the face of the oncoming storm, but once in the air he begins to doubt free will as the impression grows within him he’s facing some appointment with destiny. Eventually discovering Monaghan with another woman, Gessler becomes mentally blinded by rage and a desire for revenge and he fails to heed his interior weather warnings as he recklessly takes off into the storm to tell Claire. As the storm's increasing power threatens his control of the plane, Gessler too experiences an epiphany that in succumbing to violent emotion he has risked being subsumed into the raging storm, into “this idiot leviathan from the outer spaces that had turned earth and air into a meaningless welter of sound and fury,” but this is not who he really is. Instead, Gessler realizes that he must resist being tempted into a vengeful darkness and so he

prays for light, which duly streams down from above to transfigure him. Whether Gessler survives or not, he has found his true destiny in “knowing more deeply what had been saved from destruction” (“Tempest,” p. 31). Within the apocalypse, he has found revelation.

As neither “Tempest” nor “Cyclone” has strong female protagonists, the search for a prototype of Fay Donolly goes back to Palmer's 1932 story “The Big Wind” and the character of Mary Shenton. Although she doesn't appear in person until nearly the end and speaks only a few words, Mary dominates the entire story as its catalyst. Because she is approaching child-birth as a cyclone approaches Cowrie Island, on which she and her husband live, he has to sail to the mainland in their small boat to bring back the doctor. Like Gessler and Shirlow, her husband has ignored all the natural signs that a storm is imminent and is now suffering fear and guilt for perhaps leaving his voyage too late, even for persuading Mary to live on the island in the first place. Yet, they knew the dangers: he and the courageous Mary had heard the stories of the previous ‘big wind’ that had uprooted trees and thrown water-tanks through the air. Now, he's had to leave her there. On the return journey, he and the doctor are forced to take shelter on a neighboring island while the cyclone rages during the night. Finally reaching Cowrie Island the next morning, they discover the baby was born during the night without difficulty: Mary has faced her fears and emerged triumphant. “I won't be afraid of wind again,” she declares defiantly. “Afraid of anything else, either?” (“Big Wind,” p. 13). In surviving her apocalypse, Mary has experienced a revelation of new life, both for her and the baby, a revelation that points to genesis.

“What tongue does the wind talk?” enquires Bradbury's seller of lightning rods. “What nationality is a storm? What country do rains come from?” (Bradbury, 1969, p. 7). Like Tom Fury, Vance Palmer's characters in his group of inter-connected cyclone stories sense and experience the mystery as well as the terror of these apocalyptic weather events, for the impact of these spiraling storms is more than that of a material disaster. In their wake, Palmer's characters experience epiphanies in which they realize their lives have been changed. These cyclones act as a revelation of things to come, a catalyst for change; they lay bare the inadequacies of lives and reveal opportunities to overcome, to move forward into the future. These are storms with the power to destroy but also to create and to build new lives, new worlds.

Works Cited

- Berger, J. (1999). *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bradbury, R. (1969). *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. London: Transworld/Corgi.
- Heseltine, H. (1970). *Vance Palmer*. St Lucia, QLD: Queensland University Press.
- Jordan, D. (2011). Heeding the Warnings: 'Sucking up the Seas' in Vance Palmer's *Cyclone*, *etropic*, 10, 20-31.
- McKellar, J. (1954). Vance Palmer as Novelist, *Southerly*, 15(1), 16-25.

Palmer, Vance. (1947). *Cyclone*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

Palmer, Vance. (1936). Cyclone, *The Bulletin*. 4 March, 30-31.

Palmer, Vance. (1936). Tempest, *The Bulletin*. 9 September, 30-31.

Palmer, Vance. (1932). The Big Wind, *The Sydney Mail*, 2 November, 12-13.