

BIOCENTRICISM IN THE POEMS OF JUDITH WRIGHT

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Judith Wright an Australian poet opposed the insensitive attitudes that humiliate human life and the environment. She advised human life to take a biocentric approach towards nature and used her poetic talents to do something to prevent ecological disaster. She campaigned against ecological issues like deforestation and climate change. Radford Ruther views,

Climate changes are also being caused by the rapid destruction of the world's forests, particularly the rain forests in the tropical zones....This deforestation is caused primarily by clearing land for lumber and cattle. In the process an enormous and largely unstudied wealth of biotic diversity is being destroyed (98).

Wright, in her poems 'A Document' and 'Eroded Hills' deals with an important ecological issue, deforestation; the clearing of earth's forests on a massive scale, often resulting in damage to the land. The poem 'A Document' exposes man's ruthless act of destruction of the forest causing vast imbalances in nature's system. The European government dominated by anthropocentric thought, looked at the trees in terms of their instrumental value. Wright was obliged to vend eight hundred strong coach wood forests to the government in order to aid the Australian war effort. The 'coach wood' trees were used during the Second World War in the Mosquito Bomber, a twin-engine aircraft. She had no other option but to sign the title deed as "it was World War Two / their wood went into bombers-planes" (CP 244). There is self-forgiveness when Wright says, "I signed uneasily" and "I was much younger" together these phrases hint at injustice performed under the authority of the conquerors:

Ceratopetalum, Scented Stainwood:
a tree attaining seventy feet in height.
Those pale-red calyces like sunset light
burned in my mind. A flesh-pink pliant wood
Used in coach building. (CP 244)

As a perfect eco critic, Wright decries the destruction of trees due to human rapacity. Her approaches to trees were both scientific and artistic. Just like a good botanist, she describes the physical details of trees like the height of the trees, the colour, shape, and texture of their leaves: 'Scented Satinwood' grows up to 'seventy feet in height' and grows over a long period.

Wright anxiously compares the length of time needed for the trees to reach maturity to the rapidity with which they were chopped down. "They grew / hundreds of years to meet those hurried axes" (244). The phrase, 'hundreds of years' has the effect of stressing the process of growth, almost as though the trees are identified with the passage of centuries.

Wright, an eco critic, speaks for dumb nature through her powerful personification of the tree. She uses terms that suggest the animate, almost human, nature of the trees: "Uneasily the bark smells sweetly when you wound the tree" (CP 244). She portrays the trees with a certain

innocence and inability to defend themselves. The suggestion of pain inflicted in the act of selling the trees for timber is the reason for the ‘wound.’ It recalls ‘burned’ in the second stanza, reinforcing the fine suggestions of the identity between the human and natural orders; to ‘wound’ an aspect of natural environment is to damage humanity as well. The poem brings to light the poet’s guilt in violating the natural order, even though she was justified in arguing her liability towards her country. The words ‘burned in my mind’ mean that the harm done to the trees has created a deep wound in her mind because she feels guilty that she was indirectly responsible for the felling of the trees.

Similarly in the poem ‘Sanctuary’ she bewails the fact of its reckless destruction—“here the old tree stood for how many thousand years? -that old gnome tree / same axe-new boy cut down” (CP 140). In the poem ‘For a Pastoral Family,’ she says “If now there are landslides, if our field of reference / is much eroded, our hands show little blood” (JW CP 407). Wright points out that the cutting of trees by the colonizers has led to soil erosion resulting in landslides. She believed that the only way to rectify the problems of soil erosion caused by deforestation is by replanting of trees. Wright uses the terms, “private exploitation and uncontrolled use of the land ... in the interests of profit” (qtd. in Platz 258). These factors, she argues poignantly,

Have left us with a country whose soils are depleted, eroded, salinised and piled in our waterways and estuaries, whose water itself is chemically and organically polluted, whose forests are disappearing and no longer profitable, and whose income drops yearly as the effects of our waste and greed sink deeper. (qtd. in Platz 258)

‘Eroded Hills’ expresses regret for the de-forested landscape and she urges replanting trees to mend the eroded hills. She wished to re-establish life in an act of compensation for her grandfather’s clearing of the land for grazing. Besides tree-planting to redress the crime of the rampant tree clearing, long-term wisdom and yearning for liberation imaged in her poetical words. She openly expresses her anger at the settlers’ destructive practices and articulates her antipathy towards clearing the trees. This poetic tradition conceived the life of nature as a source of health and integrity, in utter contrast with the corruption wrought by human beings. As Patsy Hallen an Australian ecologist opines: “We are here to embrace rather than conquer the world” .qtd in Naess 24.

The first stanza refers to her grandfather’s ecological atrocity:

These hills my father’s father stripped,
And beggars to the winter wind
They crouch like shoulders naked and whipped-
Humble, abandoned, out of mind. (CP 83)

The poet was annoyed with the anthropocentric outlook of her ‘father’s father’ and laments the sorry sight of the stripped hills. She continues to describe in eco aesthetic terms that the earth was ‘stripped,’ ‘whipped’ and ‘naked.’ As timber gathering was a lucrative business the red cedars, woods of the rainforests were mercilessly cut by the colonizers. The certainty that the taller the trees, the richer must be the soils under them, caused a great deal of valuable timber to be cleared and burned for farmland. Within the next few decades the land often became ruined and weed-infested as the first fertility of ash and humus was exhausted. Such forests often grew on soils quite unsuitable for farming and on slopes whose hill led to erosion. Wright mentions in her memoir, **Tales of a Great Aunt**: “Trees have suffered a lot from us, and even this book is made out of paper, which usually comes from trees” (62). Wright indulges in

loving memories of nature in her childhood where “Of the scant creeks I drank once / and ate sour cherries from old trees” (CP 83). She writes in her memoir **Tales of a Great Aunt**,

They are more like gardens in the air, than trees, when I remember them; orchids and ferns scrambled all over them, and all kinds of birds and animals and insects lived on them. But red cedar is good tree for furniture-makers and so they were sold and dragged out to the timber mills. (62)

The land that is owned, bartered, ‘stripped,’ ‘whipped’ and blinded is the ancient earth that roots the tree that bears the fruit. “I dream of hills bandaged in snow / their eyelids clenched to keep out fear” (CP 83)

Wright was also alarmed about the harm done to the birds owing to deforestation, which has lead to the extinction of rare birds. The poem ‘Extinct Bird’ mourns the loss of birds which vanished with the abuse of nature. All now are vanished with the ‘fallen forest’ which is the natural habitat of the birds. She is angry that some destructive human hands had felled the trees and destroyed the forest which was the abode of these birds. She says,

Charles Harpur in his journals long ago
recorded the birds of his time’s forest
birds long vanished with the fallen forest-
described in copper plate on unread pages. (CP 182)

Wright refers to Charles Harpur, a poet who has made a record of birds of his time’s forest which are now extinct. The rare variety of birds has ‘vanished’ because of the ‘fallen forest’ as the most critical threat facing the birds is the destruction of habitat. Habitat loss has been implicated in a number of extinctions, including the ‘scarlet satin bird.’ Wright mentions with love the satin bird which ‘swung like a lamp in berries’ (182). Wright mourns that “There was a bird, blue, small spangled like dew. / All now are vanished with the fallen forest” (182). She feels sad for the extinct bird and poses the question “who helped with proud stained hands to fell the forest” (182). The forests were converted into plains and other natural systems into agriculture, mines, and urban developments, this reduced potential habitat for many species. The colonizers with ‘proud stained hands’ (182) have destroyed the home of these birds. At present the ‘brightly tinted’ Australian native birds dwell only in the ‘unread pages’ of Charles Harpur’s book.

Similarly another poem ‘Lyrebirds’ makes an appeal to leave the birds to their own way of living. The message is simple: they should not be disturbed in anyway. “Some things ought to be left secret, alone;/ some things-birds like walking fables-ought to inhabit nowhere but the reverence of the heart” (CP 178). She expresses her concern for the Lyrebirds which have become extinct. “I’ll never see the lyrebirds - / the few, the shy, the fabulous, / the dying poets” (178). Alike in appearance to the peacock, rarely seen by humans, it is native to eastern Australia. These birds look like a perfect lyre, “a splendid bird, bearing / like a crest the symbol of his art” (178). Now they have become like ‘walking fables’ and they ‘inhabit nowhere but the reverence of the heart.’

Wright, in another poem ‘Brush Turkey,’ deplores the way man destroys and pollutes the habitat of the birds. Brush turkey is a spectacular large bird with black feathers and a red head. The poet, with great admiration, describes the bird “Ash- black, wattle of scarlet, / and careful eyes, / he hoaxes the ape” (CP 180).

Right to the edge of his forest
the tourists come.
He learns the scavenger’s habits

With scrap and crumb-
 His forest shrunk....(CP 180)

With the eye of an eco critic, Wright points out the trouble given to the birds by the tourists who are also in a way responsible for the destruction of the forest; some insensitive tourist may pollute the place with plastic or throw away food which is not suitable for the birds. The Brush Turkey becomes a beggar in its own rightful place. 'He learns the scavenger's habits /with scrap and crumb-/ his forest shrunk, he lives / on what the moment gives; / pretends, in mockery, / to beg or charity' (CP 180). The tourists who enter the forest throw food for the birds:

The backyard bird is stupid; he trusts and takes.
 But this one's wiles are wary
 To guard against the axe:
 Escaping, neat and pat,
 Into his habitat. (CP 180)

Wright expresses anguish over the attitude of the callous human beings for destroying the habitats of those birds which add beauty and colour to Australia. The parrot in the poem 'Trap' says, "We must be / their prisoners, boy, and in a bitterer cage" (CP 229). The drab, brown plains of inland Australia are brightened by the brilliant plumage of parrots, one sixth of the world's total. The illegal smuggling of parrots out of Australia remains a problem. In 'Peacock,' she is critical of the aldermen who deny dignity to the ever-beautiful peacock in its dirty cage. "Shame on the alderman who locked / the Peacock in a dirty cage" (CP 163). Despite being trapped there for the idle amusement of human eyes, ever-resistant and Phoenix-like, nature rises above it all, as she muses: "Love clothes him still, in spite of all" (163).

Judith Wright's overall purpose was to arouse a social conscience about the natural environment. In her fervour for it, a sarcastic fringe emerged at times to her conservation agendas. The presentation of birds in Wright's poems is not like the English Romantics' nightingale or skylark, which seems a messenger from heaven to inspire or encourage the poets. The birds are free and dispassionate; they sing out of instinct, not for God or human beings. In Wright's poems, as in nature, birds act purely out of their own impulse.

In the poems like 'Trapped Dingo,' 'Flying Fox,' and 'Platypus,' Wright expresses her anguish for the loss of habitat of animals through deforestation, dams and irrigation projects. In the poem 'Trapped Dingo,' she conveys the social message to protect the wild dingoes. The dingoes were caught in traps by the farmers because they preyed on calves and sheep. The dingoes and wild dogs are viewed as a threat to livestock. In the poem 'The Trapped Dingoes':

So here, twisted in steel, and spoiled with red
 Your sunlight hide, smelling of death and fear,
 They crushed out of your throat the terrible song
 You sang in the dark ranges. (CP 9)

The grief of the trapped dingo is typical of the treatment meted out to so many species on the earth. In the opening lines, the voice reveals the sight and smell of death in the trap: "twisted in steel and spoiled in red" (9). Harsh dental sounds, for example, in "twisted steel," spare no relief. Peter Singer strongly defends the position that animals have rights, and that humans have corresponding obligations towards animals. "If a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration" (qtd. in Behrens 276).

Wright's nature is not a decorative backdrop upon which human dramas are played; rather, detailed facts of a natural scene or of animals themselves often constitute the main texture

of her poems, while human beings become irrelevant or trivial. She places the animal in the centre and human beings only as a part in the poem. In the cowardly facelessness of the merciless killers “they crushed out of your throat” (CP 9); it is a reference to men who had set the trap like cowards. This horror is increased by the remoteness and indifference of the onlookers. The poem resembles Ted Hughes’ ‘The Howling of Wolves’ which evokes pity as these wolves are uncomprehending creatures living by blind instinct. In another poem ‘Wolf Watching,’ the wild wolf is locked up in a cage; the natural habitat for a wolf is a forest, when it is imprisoned in a cage it is a violence done to animals. Hughes expresses worry for the loss of wild species as they are victims of their own predatory nature, that has made them live like this according to their wildest whims and inherent instincts. This impulse in them inevitably stresses on the theory of survival of the fittest without any reservations.

Wright wanted the society and the people in power to be aware of animal rights. In her compassion, she empathizes with the dingo in its drawn-out, grueling death. Wright disapproves of the insane cruelty of the human hand that has inflicted pain on a brave dingo. She says “Did you hear / my silent voice take up the cry?” (9). She sympathizes with the wild animal in torment. This poem is an ode to all victims of horror.

Wright simply adores the alien, sovereign beauty of the animal, without making any attempt to impose presumptions. She admires the dingo “I heard you, desperate poet” (CP 8). The dingo is described as the “drinker of blood, the swift death bringer” (8) in allusions to ancient Greek tragedy and Homer. The suffering of the wild dingo is compared to that of the tribulation of great Greek heroes. She says,

Achilles is overcome, and Hector dead,
and clay stops many a warrior’s mouth, wild singer.
Voice from the hills and the river drunken with rain,
For your lament the long night was too brief. (CP 8-9)

Wright elevates the dingo to the level of a bard. Usually the dingoes are described as cunning predators but Wright’s language lends the dingo a personality while respecting his autonomy. “Hurling your woes at the moon, that old cleaned bone, / till the white shorn mobs of stars on the hill of the sky / huddled and trembled, you tolled him, the rebel one” (CP 9). The phrase ‘the rebel one’ shows the resistance of the dingo like Lucifer in Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost’ and it makes the dingo admirable and independent. Further, the tragic end of the trapped hero reminds us of the demise of great Greek heroes: “Insane Andromache, pacing our towers alone, / Death ends the verse you chanted; here you lie” (9). Gary Snyder rightly views:

An ecosystem is a kind of mandala in which there are multiple relations that are all powerful and instructive. Each figure in the mandala—a little mouse or bird ... has an important position and a role to play. Although an ecosystem can be described as hierarchical in terms of energy-flow, from the stand-point of the whole all of its members are equal. (238)

Wright grieves for the loss of animistic undifferentiated and non anthropocentric relationship to the natural world. She explored the lives of plants, animals and birds; nor to proclaim her superiority over them but to praise them and in this way to establish community with them.

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