Judith Wright’s poems – Paradigms of Ecosophy

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A R T I C L E  I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

‘Ecophilosophy’ or ‘Ecosophy’ indicates a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. Its aim is to explore a diversity of perspectives on human-Nature contexts and interrelationships. Because of the global awareness in Ecology, the labors to maintain and uphold it, has initiated sustained valuable programs in almost all countries of the world. Based on this feature, literary criticism has taken effective strides in interpreting creative works to promote ecological perception. Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. It includes the entire ecosphere. This paper analyses this relationship.

‘Ecophilosophy’ or ‘Ecosophy’ indicates a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. Its aim is to explore a diversity of perspectives on human-Nature contexts and interrelationships. Alan Drengson in his article “Ecophilosophy, Ecosophy and the Deep Ecology Movement: An Overview” explains thus:

Since philosophical studies in the West have often ignored the natural world, and since most studies in ethics have focused on human values, those approaches which emphasize ecocentric values have been referred to as ecophilosophy. Just as the aim of traditional philosophy is sophia or wisdom, so the aim of ecophilosophy is ecosophy or ecological wisdom. The Practice of ecophilosophy is an ongoing, comprehensive, deep inquiry into values, the nature of the world and the self. ... It fosters deeper and more harmonious relationships between place, self, community and the natural world. (http://www.ecospherics.net/pages/DrengEcophil.html) 

Because of the global awareness in Ecology, the labors to maintain and uphold it, has initiated sustained valuable programs in almost all countries of the world. Based on this feature, literary criticism has taken effective strides in interpreting creative works to promote ecological perception. Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment. It includes the entire ecosphere. It advances certain questions in a genre to alert men such as — how consistent are the values in a particular genre with the ecological wisdom? How can nature and culture be interconnected? What are the relationships do we find between the biological themes and literary works? — And so on. A Poet is the sun; and poems by him/her are the evergreen plants that attract and engage the thinking of man. Poets are the spokespersons of the society in which they live, the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Amidst the galaxy of poets, there are twinkling stars, here and there of women poets. The Australian Judith Wright (1), renowned as a conservationist and protestor, is one such brilliant star, who persistently taps her natural surroundings and consistently tries to educate her brethren and impart ecological wisdom.

Wright’s metaphors are waterfall, tree ferns, mountain gum, bud, flame tree growth, compass heart, ageless crimson rose, rising sap, implacable heart, the wattle-tree, the orange tree, cedars, the eucalypt, the pepperina, the scribbly gum and so on, that indicate human yearning for cosmic fulfillment or

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salvation. Her poetry collection *Birds* celebrates Australian birds that readily evoke metaphysical reflections in her. By observing the lives of various trees and birds and also the landscape of Australia, the poet transcends the geographical territory and reaches a space where the earthly manifestations do not matter at all. “Tree” perhaps is a common image used by the poets of the world. Tree as a natural product makes Wright not only participate in its beauty but also ponder over its silent message - the patient waiting. She sees trees as natural corollaries to the various kinds of birds, in their diversity, their resilient struggle for life in difficult circumstances and in their profound contribution to the ecosystem. The tree poems of the poet underscore metaphysical and religious meanings. The reader should read her poetry with reflective consciousness, seeking words of joy, unity and coherence that will engage him / her in a mission to seek God in all creations, which will take him / her to the Kingdom of God.

Wright sees human race as growing into a great tree. Hence, her poetry resonates with many patterns and processes indicating the purpose of life. Trees play a significant role in the poet’s mind, since they endure the weather, soil erosion, drought and happily enjoy their given fixed spaces in the landscape. They are pre-eminently seen as faithful to the needs of the human inhabitants. A discussion on a few ‘Tree’ poems of Wright will apparently expose the metaphysical leanings of the poet’s mind.

“The Wattle Tree” is a kind of celebrated attempt to focus Australian Consciousness. It is the national tree of Australia and its botanical name is “Acacia Pycnantha”.

The brilliant yellow, fragrant flowers of Golden (Golden Wattles) specific name pycnantha from the Greek ‘pyknos’, meaning ‘dense’, and ‘anthos’, meaning ‘a flower’, refer to the dense clusters of flowers. In spring large fluffy golden-yellow flower-heads with up to eighty minute sweetly scented flowers provide a vivid contrast with the foliage. (http://www.anbg.gov.au/emblems/aust.emblem.html) (3)

Even if its parent plants are destroyed by fire, the germination of seeds stored in the soil get stimulated if rain follows soon after. It has the capacity to regenerate itself even after fire. It was justified as the national flower for being found in all colonies, because its bark was used in tanning hides and it offered a unique, bright beauty.

The poem “Wattle-tree” relates to the greater forces of renewal in the universe. This poem is composed of twenty-four lines and in four irregular verses. It meditates on growth, mortality and identity. The wattle-tree, like the universe as a whole, is composed of four elements earth, water, air, and light, which can be related to Man’s mind – imagination, mercy, knowledge and wisdom. In its growth and abundance the tree voices “one great word of gold” wishing to learn that word, the poet exalts it. “She suggests”, says Greg Smith, “that in the permanence of the word, even in its certain eternity, the wattle tree symbolizes eternal renewal”, it “welds love and time into the seed”. Combining earth, water, air, and light, the tree symbolizes abundant wisdom in its cascading gold”. The poet concludes with a personal reflection, saying that like the tree, the poem makes its immortality. Smith observes:

Just as the tree in its renewal is true to its nature, “is forever tree”, so she hopes that in her vocation as a poet she can ultimately be true to herself, to speak the truth “into a million images of the Sun, my God”. Thus, just as the wattle-tree is child, the fruit of the Sun, the poet’s truth is fruit of, and images that greater truth, her God. (http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejit7/greg.htm) (4)

The golden wattle images the cascading light of the Sun. Its natural aroma is responsible to use it in perfume making is instantly distinctive and appealing. It welcomes the arrival of spring by spreading its perfume which pervades the landscape of Australia. It identifies itself as spring’s harbinger and emblem. Smith also observes:

The poet successfully transfers these processes to describe her own poetic process of voicing the truth in her poetry, for in finding a voice in her mature years, she reflects she has followed the natural progression from experience to wisdom. The glory and beauty of the tree thus analogizes her poetry’s work. It could be read that she views her very capacity to voice truth as being a work of the source of truth, her God. Just as a meditation on the laws and beauty of the physical creation is a path by which to read the mind of its Maker, so too God is imaged in some millionth degree in the aspirations of her poetry.

The tree’s participation in the creation work, combining the truths of the four physical elements for its growth and the blossom’s prodigality which reflects the sun’s (God’s) superfluity make us understand that the wattle-tree mirrors the sun. The poet hopes as a poet, she is true to herself and to speak the truth “into the million images of the Sun, my God”.
In the poem “Camphor-Laurel” another kind of Australian tree, Wright juxtaposes the opposition between the foolishness of the human beings and the persistent life of the old Camphor-Laurel Tree:

Under the house the roots go deep,
down, down, while the sleepers sleep;
splitting the rock where the house is set,
Cracking the paved and broken street,
Old Tim turns and old Sam groans.
“God be good to my breaking bones”,
and in the slack of the tireless night
the tree breathes honey and moonlight.

Camphor-laurel is commonly known as Camphor tree (Cinnamomum Camphors) is a large evergreen tree that grows up to 20 to 30 metres tall. The leaves have a glossy waxy appearance and smell of camphor when crushed. It produces cluster of black berry-like fruit around one centimeter in diameter. It has a pale bark that is very rough and fissured vertically. Camphor, a white crystalline substance obtained from this tree is also an insect repellent and a flea-killing substance. In Australia it is commonly called Camphor-laurel. Its massive and spreading roots disrupt urban drainage and sewage systems and degrade river banks. Its leaves have a very high carbon content, which damages water quality and fresh water fish habitats when they fall into streams and rivers. Though it is an attractive shade tree, it can also be very destructive. It aggressively replaces native vegetation.

In spite of being a destructive plant Camphor-laurel could yield medicinal products quite useful to the human beings. Judith Wright through the metaphor of the camphor tree obviously criticizes the evils perpetuated by men. The first four lines of the poem indicate not only the non-stop growth of the tree but also the unrelenting evil acts of men. While the tree also yields medicinal products, evils done by men yield only evil results. Even the stationary tree has its logic against the foolish revelry and willful injustice of men. The metaphor of the Camphor-laurel tree at once refers to two crucial thoughts: i) the need to eradicate the deep-rooted evils in the individual as well as society ii) the need to deep-rooted installing of the cardinal virtues. The tree critiques the evils of the uncaring society. It gives off “honey and moonlight”. Wright makes it a symbol of permanence, sweetness and honesty compared with man’s short-term foolish, facile and unethical ways.

Wright in the poem “The Cycads”, once again insists on cultivating the virtue of togetherness amidst men. Cycads are seed plants characterized by a large crown of compound leaves and a stout trunk. They are evergreen plants having large pinnate compound leaves. They are frequently confused with and mistaken for palms or ferns, but are only distantly related to both. They have very specialized pollinators. Some are renowned for survival in harsh semi-desert climates, and can grow in sand or even on rock. They are able to grow in full sun or shade and some are salt tolerant. Though they are a minor component of the plant kingdom today, during the Jurassic period they were extremely common. Although, because of their hardy nature, cycads do not necessarily require the most tender or careful treatment they can grow in almost any medium, including the soil-less ones.

The poem comprises five stanzas and the poet visualizes an old cycad tree looking at the rising forest around it when the climates are changed and also is the soil. As the changes happen the species of Cycads get slowly shrunken. The remaining few cycads show their presence through their flame like flickering. They now seem to be antiques carved in stone.

Their smooth dark flames flicker at their own root.
Round them the rising forests of the years
alter the climates of forgotten earth
and silt with leaves the strata of first birth.
Only the antique cycads sullenly
Keep the old bargain life has long since broken;
And, cursed by age, through each chill century
they watch the shrunken moon but never die,
for time forgets the promise he once made
and change forgets that they are left alone.
Among the complicated birds and flowers
They seem a generation carved in stone.
However, the dying cycads happily participate in the life that goes before them and they do not fail to enjoy the beauty of the sun or the chirping of the birds.

Leaning together, down those gulfs they stare
Over whose darkness dance the brilliant birds
that cry in air one moment, and are gone;
and with their countless suns the years spin on.

The last stanza of the poem is the poet’s message to humanity. Man has to learn lessons from the trees. As said earlier, the seed of virtue must be sown in the mind, where it will stay dormant and grow silently and reach a measureless depth. Beyond that man remembers only the sleep.

Take their cold seed and set it in the mind,
And its slow root will lengthen deep and deep
till, following, you cling on the last ledge
over the unthinkable, unfathomed edge
beyond which man remembers only sleep.

The poet also informs through the poem how old age should be accepted by men. Just as the old cycad tree whose agedness is inevitable, man also has to face old age. He is also left alone amidst other human being and sees the generation growing before him. Like the cycad, he should also learn to be happy and enjoy the growth around him and not become cold in his mind. What he has experienced throughout his life-span must remain dormant in the mind and flourish in the old age as wisdom.

Judith Wright’s poems offer an affirming message that only love brings resurrection and that seems to be her thought process and mindscape formulation. At this point, to recapitulate what Herbert Read says in his article ‘The Nature of Metaphysical Poetry’ published in The Criterion (2) will be worthwhile:

All the poets’ senses and thoughts radiate from and return to one minute centre of self, and as a result he becomes disparate and insignificant in the process of nature and a prey of acedia and despair. . . . thought is the expression of experience—of all the experiences registered by the brain; and on the capacity of that brain for analyzing its experiences, and even more on its capacity for selecting its experiences, will depend the value of the thought. If in addition that brain has the ability to reduce its thought to the emotional unit of the poem, we shall have the purest kind of metaphysical poetry as a result. (257-58)

References