Reconciling Humans with Nature through Aesthetic Experience: The Green Dimension in Australian Poetry

Abstract: This essay considers how the aesthetic appreciation of nature can enhance environmental bonding and caring, and contribute to engendering a reconciliation of humans with their natural environment. After a brief examination of Judith Wright’s view of Australia’s ecological predicament, some core constituents of the aesthetic experience of nature will be outlined to serve as a philosophical underpinning of Wright’s aesthetico-ethical concept of reconciliation. Major arguments taken from her essays are meant to throw some new light not only on Wright’s own poetry but on the reconciliatory character of Australian nature poetry in general. Short analyses of individual poems by John Shaw Neilson, Douglas Stewart, John Blight, Judith Wright and Ruby A. Penna focus on specific themes such as “aesthetic wealth and well-being,” “translating nature into a work of art,” “science-based aesthetic perception,” “the symbolic reversal of human ascendancy,” and “exposing ecological damage.” In my conclusion, I claim that poets could take a high profile on reconciling humans with nature. Their insights need to be put on the agenda of interventionist action. My specific concern, here, is to consider how an aesthetic appreciation of nature might enhance our practice of bonding with, and caring for, the environment.

1. Australia’s Ecological Predicament

Australian literature contains a substantial body of knowledge that could be used to constitute the core of an environmental ethic. A great many Australian literary texts could be studied with the purpose of helping usher in the desirable concept of an environmentally literate community.¹

¹ This essay originates in a research project sponsored by the German Volkswagen Foundation. The title of this project is “The Green Dimension in Australian Poetry: A Bibliographical Guide for Study and Research.” I have here attempted to compile a bibliography of Australian poems whose thematic focus is nature and the natural environment. Although this bibliogra-
There is considerable agreement that the Australian continent has been severely exploited and consequently suffered enormous damage since the arrival of white settlers. That Australia is a most vulnerable continent has been pointed out by many a specialist such as, for example, George Seddon: “No other Western highly urbanized and industrial country is as ecologically vulnerable as Australia. Advanced technology makes massive demands on natural systems” (Seddon, 1997, 67). One may also consider William Lines’ comment on the Australian settler culture’s future-oriented lifestyle as a potential cause of its conspicuous alienation from the natural environment:

Australians have transformed the continent so rapidly and extensively that the land has never had a chance to become a home. Australians have lived and continue to live in the future and so cannot possibly respect or even notice the present. The jarrah and karri forest exist only to be exploited for that future. (Lines, 1998, 3)

As is well known, Judith Wright (1915-2000) offered an unsystematic, yet eager and extensive view of Australia’s ecological predicament in her many talks and essays. Evidence of this can be found in the two collections *Because I Was Invited* and *Going on Talking*. Those who are familiar with her work will not be surprised by a stark accusation like this: “Our history isn’t reassuring. We have been predators on this country. Few of us ever thought it necessary to learn from our mistakes and care for, maintain and restore raped landscapes [...]” (Wright, 1992a, 117). Judith Wright refers to the unacknowledged causes and effects of what might be called an ‘environmental war’ which Australians have waged on their country. At bottom, the causes come down to a widely practised consumer egoism. Describing the latter, Wright uses the terms “private exploitation and uncontrolled use of land ... in the interests of profit.” 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. (1992b, 83)

In her essay “Conservation as a Concept,” Wright places Australia’s predicament in a global context by pointing to the “accelerating exploitation of the resources of this planet” (1975a, 189) as triggered off by the scientific and technological powers that are available all over the world. Yet the uncontrolled use of these powers, she claims, is destructive not only for nature but also for humans. Implicitly Wright subscribes to E.F. Schumacher’s widely accepted conclusion that...
humans have “built a system of production that ravishes nature and a type of society that mutilates man” (Schumacher, 1987, 246).

Considering the philosophical and cultural history of the West, Wright diagnoses “the separation of man from nature” (1975a, 190) as the major psychological cause of Australia’s ecological crisis. In more general terms, this “separation of man from nature” could also be identified as an epistemological, existential and behavioural rift that alienates humans from the biosphere on which their lives depend. Like other human dwellers on planet Earth, Australians too indulge in repressing environmental urgencies.

What solution does Wright envisage – both for Australia and the world as a whole? How can people reconcile themselves with Nature? In order to “remedy” the results of our ruthless exploitation, she claims we would have “to revise most radically [not only] our exploitative techniques, but [also] a whole attitude of mind and feeling that are very deeply rooted in our whole history of our dealings with the natural world” (1975a, 189). Therefore she strongly recommends: “What we have to do now is to change the way we look at the world” (1992c, 220). Such a change of “the way we look at the world” could be accomplished through a (re)discovery of the aesthetic experience of nature as was proposed and explored by the English Romantics.

2. Remedying Environmental Blindness through Aesthetic Experience

Over the last two decades of the 20th century, environmental philosophy has become a lively and prolific field of research. In the wake of and in fruitful cooperation with this increasing intellectual embrace of environmental issues, ecocriticism has established itself as a new branch of literary criticism (see e.g. Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996; Coupe, 2000). Although the latter has not yet developed a coherent methodology, the practitioners of ecocriticism all share an orientation towards a new world picture: “The starting point for the ecocritic is that there really is an unprecedented global environmental crisis, and that this crisis poses some of the great political and cultural questions of our time” (Kerridge, 1998, 5). Significantly, both environmental philosophy (in particular its branch of environmental ethics) and ecocriticism have discovered in the aesthetics of the environment a major topic worth investigating (see e.g. Benson, 2000; Pratt, 2000; Carlson, 2000). What is important for our present argument is the agreement shared by many environmental specialists that a positive aesthetic response to nature is a vital prerequisite for a positive moral response (cf. Eliot, 1997, 71). In addition, ecofeminism has also provided important insights into the relationship between nature-responsiveness and moral responsibility.

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3 An early survey is provided by Zimmermann, 1993.
4 See e.g. Warren, 1999. Murphy submits the idea of rendering nature as a “speaking subject” (1995, 12-14).
For the orientation of the reader who may not be conversant with aesthetic theory and practice, let me sketch out a few basic points and ideas. From a historical point of view it is important to note that after the key categories of *the picturesque* (Joseph Addison), *the sublime* (Edmund Burke), and *disinterestedness* (Immanuel Kant) were developed in the 18th century and cultivated during the period of Romanticism (Pratt, 2000, 143-45), the aesthetic appreciation of nature went into decline during the course of the 19th century (Carlson, 2000, 4). Since the 1990s, the Romantic mode of perceiving and interpreting nature has been reinstated as a legacy encapsulating a good many valuable ideas about how to translate “nature” into meaningful patterns for behavioural adjustment (Coupe, 2000, 6).

At a fundamental level, the core constituents of the aesthetic experience of nature may be sketched out as follows:

i. The natural world appears to us as an *aistheton*, that is, a given sensuousness (Böhme, 1992, 91).

ii. Poets and artists respond to, and appreciate, nature’s self-appearance. There is a distinct emotional component in their response. This emotional component was explored and emphasised by the Romantic poets (especially by William Wordsworth). From a modern point of view it has been argued: “Feelings were important for the Romantics partly because they thought of them as the way in which nature manifests itself to us. Therefore, in heeding feelings people heed the promptings of nature” (Pratt, 2000, 32). From a modern stance it may be convincingly argued that it is through feelings and emotions that humans can also develop an awareness of nature’s intrinsic values. The issue of nature’s intrinsic values has been moved into a prominent position by Arne Naess and other representatives of Deep Ecology.

iii. Very often the “engagement model” of response is predominant. According to Carlson, “the engagement model beckons us to immerse ourselves in our natural environment in an attempt to obliterate traditional dichotomies such as subject and object, and ultimately reduce to as small a degree as possible the distance between ourselves and nature. In short, aesthetic experience is taken to involve a total immersion of the appreciator in the object of appreciation” (2000, 7). The specific ethical benefit of such a total immersion consists in the suspension of the spectator’s utilitarian interest. Very often the spectator is struck by a sense of wonder about what s/he perceives. This “attitude of wonder is notably and essentially other-acknowledging” (Hepburn, 2000, 203). The spectator does not want to destroy what he sees but wants to keep it preserved and have it available for further enjoyment. Thus, human exploitative desires are halted (at least for the moment). Being emotionally absorbed into a natural scene, humans are

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5 Goodin mentions a natural-resource-based theory of value which “links the value of things to some naturally-occurring property or properties of the objects themselves” (1991, 64).

6 Here is a brief definition: “The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent worth). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes” (Naess, 1993, 197).
also prepared to abandon the attitude of superiority and dominance that has been deeply ingrained in Western cultural consciousness since the Enlightenment.

iv. Nature has much spectacular scenery, such as the Great Barrier Reef, for example, but many less spectacular natural qualities are concealed. Nature’s concealed (or background) qualities, however, can be revealed by acts of creative perception. The Romantics emphasised the concept of the imagination when describing the creative fusion of our sensory intake, on the one hand, and our active mental patterning that gives shape and meaning to what we see and hear, on the other. It is through such acts of active imaginative perception that the aesthetic qualities of natural objects and their ethical concurrences are revealed to our mind. Apart from this, our imaginative perception also grants us varying degrees of freedom and happiness. Admiring what we creatively see, we are able to enhance our own well-being since we feel free from the compulsion of material need and self-interest (cf. O’Neill, 2000, 208-09). We come into our own, enjoying a pleasurable state of contemplation. It is this state which poets are concerned with when creating nature poems.

v. The spectator/poet/artist interprets what s/he perceives and translates it into culturally-conditioned patterns of understanding. Therefore, both the act of translation and its embeddedness in the perceiver’s cultural background must be taken into consideration. Different patterns of responding to nature are conditioned by the specific time, place and needs of the perceiver’s cultural set-up. This cultural matrix requires attention if one is dealing with representations of nature that have their origin either in the Western world or in Asia, or have been produced by white or Aboriginal people.

3. A Thumbnail Sketch of Judith Wright’s Aesthetico-Ethical Concept of Reconciliation

This explanation enables us to see more clearly what Judith Wright has in mind when she invites us to reform our attitude towards nature. The specific mental capacity we should employ when encountering the natural environment is, in her prose works, specified clearly as the faculty of ‘imagination.’ Implicitly, she seems to subscribe to Wordsworth’s discovery that “nature and human consciousness were splendidly adapted to one another” (Kroeber, 1994, 12). We are on safe ground, therefore, if we assume that Judith Wright shares “the romantic premise that the imaginativeness essential to poetry is the primary human capability enabling us to interact in a responsible manner with our environment” (Kroeber, 1994, 21). Like Wordsworth, she, too, emphasises the vital connection of imagination and feeling: “Value is conferred, of course, not by objective rationality but by the feeling and imagination of man …” (1975a, 194). In practice this means that we should open ourselves to the cognitive appraisals inherent in our feelings and emotions. If we want to “change the way we look at the world” (1992c, 220), we cannot do so by repressing our feelings and emotions but by
deliberately acknowledging the affective qualities of the natural phenomena we see. When, in a further step, we engage in “a conscious mental struggle towards a new attitude to the world and our relation with it” (1992d, 105), we shall be prepared to acknowledge the intrinsic value(s) that reveal themselves to us when watching nature and natural processes. Our awareness of the values inherent in nature will allow us to discover “the capacity to change our values” (1975b, 256) at a more fundamental and revolutionary level. For “the capacity to change our values” is emphasised by Wright as “a human resource which is at present ... unrecognised as among our important properties” (ibid.). Since we are meant to “discover values and meanings to act as the basis for a new environmental ethic” (1992d, 105), the power of creative perception will grant us the opportunity to empathise with what we see, and, ideally, to abandon our attitude of superiority or power-consciousness. Involved in imaginative perception, we become disinterested in and hence disregard utilitarian considerations. We operate outside market conditions. The economic drive, which in Wright’s diagnosis has contributed so much to Australia’s ecological crisis, slackens: we don’t want to sell and buy. With respect to nature, we do not define ourselves primarily as greedy consumers. Our enlightened aestheticism endows the perceived natural object with the meanings and values which nature manifests in its own right. We reach a more enlightened epistemological stance, since creative aesthesis enables us to bridge the gulf between dissecting intellect and holistic feeling. Considering these arguments, we can make sense of Judith Wright’s stipulation:

[...]

An ethical implication of cultivating “our poetic faculties” is: We do not any longer seek governance over what we see. Here a brief comment is in order to illustrate that Judith Wright was indeed a progenitor of vital ideas that have gained momentum in more recent ecological thought. As is well-known, the dichotomy between ‘self’ and ‘other’ plays an important role in many branches of contemporary philosophical, social and cultural theory. Historically, nature has very often been constructed as the ‘other,’ representing a subordinate antithesis to the ‘human.’ As the downgraded other, this construct of nature could easily be submitted to human domination. This has led to the questionable and dangerous “claim that humans by their very nature are superior to other species” (Taylor, 1993, 70). However, if we practise an aesthetic perception of the natural environment, we tend to discard the idea of human ascendancy, while acknowledging an egalitarian relationship between human selfhood and nature-based alterity, or

7 “Historically, one finds the self/other dichotomy being translated into the mind/body, male/female and humanity/nature dichotomies, with woman and nature both embodied as the antithesis of spirit, mind, and culture. [...] What we find repeatedly is the construct of alienated Other being used to repress or suppress the relationship, the otherness between groups in order to objectify and distance one group or culture from another in the service of some form of domination” (Murphy, 1998, 41).
in more concrete terms, an egalitarian relationship between us and the natural phenomena that surround us.\footnote{In this connection, Shirley Walker’s astute observation deserves mention: “To redress this over-emphasis upon the power of the mind, Wright urges the return to a belief in both an exterior world of value, and a creative imagination, conferring value and meaning, and the inter-dependence of the two. In any such reconciliation the poet must play a crucial role, for poetry, Wright states, is ‘a reconciling force where self and outer image can come together in understanding’” (1991, 10).}

Up to this point, I have been quoting selectively from only a couple of Judith Wright’s essays, but in her prose work there are many more useful passages which could be cited to support my argument. However, I do not intend to focus on Wright exclusively. The major arguments taken from her essays are merely meant to outline in more general terms how poetry might be conducive to those attitudinal changes which would promote human reconciliation with nature. What I have been driving at so far is a tentative conceptualisation of the ethical potential enshrined in poetry. The insights provided can be applied not only to Wright’s own nature poetry, but also to nature poems written by a great many other Australian authors.


In the following section I should like to turn theory into practice and test the usefulness of the outlined considerations by analysing a few selected poems. On the basis of these examples, some conclusions may be drawn as to the reconciling effects embodied in the specific aesthetic experiences which the poems convey.

4.1 Aesthetic Wealth and Well-Being in John Shaw Neilson’s “The Poor, Poor Country”

In “The Poor, Poor Country” (1986, 23), John Shaw Neilson (1872-1942) explicitly focuses on a significant evaluation that underpins a good deal of Australian nature poetry – the aesthetic wealth and well-being that can be experienced in nature.

\begin{verbatim}
Oh ’twas a poor country, in Autumn it was bare.
The only green was the cutting grass and the sheep found little there.
Oh, the thin wheat and the brown oats were never two foot high,
But down in the poor country no pauper was I.\footnote{Here, and in the following quotations, the emphases in italics are mine.}

My wealth it was the glow that lives forever in the young,
’Twas on the brown water, in the green leaves it hung,
The blue cranes fed their young all day – how far in a tall tree!
And the poor, poor country made no pauper of me.
\end{verbatim}
Throughout the six stanzas of the poem, aesthetic wealth and well-being are axiomatically contrasted with economic wealth. Aesthetic well-being compensates for social poverty in such a way that the speaker is able to redefine his living conditions in acceptable terms. Of course, there is no denial that he was born and grew up in the “poor country” of South Australia. A compensation, however, is provided by the natural phenomena he observes – “the brown water,” “the green leaves,” “blue cranes,” and, in the following stanzas, the singing of the swans and mountain ducks. In the refrains of each stanza the speaker asserts: “in the poor country no pauper was I.” Even when the “blue cranes” fly out of his sight (in the final stanza), he does not feel poor because he has stored his aesthetic wealth in his memory. His personal existential choice liberates him from social constraints.\(^\text{10}\)

### 4.2 Translating Nature into a Work of Art in Douglas Stewart’s “The Snow-Gum”

In “The Snow-Gum” (1994, 64) by Douglas Stewart (1913-1985) we participate in an epiphanic “translation” of a piece of landscape into a work of art.\(^\text{11}\)

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\begin{align*}
&\text{It is the snow-gum silently,} \\
&\text{In noon’s blue and the silvery} \\
&\text{Flowering of light on snow,} \\
&\text{Performing its slow miracle} \\
&\text{Where upon drift and icicle} \\
&\text{Perfect lies its shadow.}
\end{align*}
\]

The speaker is “grabbed” immediately by a striking phenomenon in the landscape he beholds. The central object in this landscape is a snow-gum in a winter setting. In Stewart’s text the snow-gum is “silently” performing its “perfect” “miracle” for the beholder. In the course of the poet’s visual interaction, the snow-gum is endowed with expressive qualities that yield pleasure. This emotional element of pleasure is ratified in Western cultural history as an end, and value, in itself. As an unsurpassable value, pleasure is the constitutive criterion of what in traditional aesthetics is called “aesthetic pleasure” (Sheppard, 1987, 64). In the context of the philosophy of art, we cannot overlook the fact that the notion of “perfection” is referred to four times in Stewart’s text as a whole. This is significant, insofar as ‘perfection’ and ‘harmony’ have been regarded as basic formal prerequisites of ‘pleasure’ since classical antiquity. What strikes us is that “the arrangement of shapes and colours” in Stewart’s real landscape can be appreciated in the same way as “we can appreciate a similar arrangement in a painted landscape” (Sheppard, 1987, 59).\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{10}\) Whether or not a Marxist would approve of Neilson’s existential choice is something which, for the moment, is left out of consideration. Yet it is interesting to note that the 19th century social critic John Ruskin also gives pre-eminence to one “[class] of precious things in the world” being “those that God gives us for nothing – sun, air and life” (2000, 30).

\(^{11}\) For the landscape painting model of representing the environment see Carlson, 2000, 6.

\(^{12}\) For a similar kind of pleasure-yielding aesthetic perception one could also examine Stewart’s “Spider Gums” (1991, 138-39).
What is important from an ecocritical perspective is that poetry is capable of sensitising us to the benefit of cost-free pleasure. There is, as might be expected, an ethical concomitance of the pleasure principle. If we have a refined awareness of the kind of pleasure we can enjoy in a natural scene, we do not want to have the latter damaged or destroyed. There is a lot of good sense in a basic insight provided by the philosophy of aesthetics, that we have “a desire to continue or repeat the experience” (Sheppard, 1987, 64) that has pleased us. When we enjoy a vintage wine on one occasion, we want to have many occasions to enjoy it again.

An abundant variety of plants, birds, fish etc. have provided topics for poetry. Browsing through Australian poetry anthologies, one can find countless poems that translate selected objects from natural scenery into textual representations which remind us of paintings. The aesthetico-ethical message that can be distilled from such poems is to preserve species diversity.

4.3 Science-Based Aesthetic Perception in John Blight’s “Crab”

“Crab” (1991, 132) by John Blight (1913-1995) has been chosen because this sonnet is typical of another feature of Australian nature poems: It shows a science-based critical probing into the process of evolution.

Shellfish and octopus, and all the insane
Thinking of the undersea, to us is lost.
At most is food, in our higher plane.
But, what of this submarine ghost –
Life, without its meddling monkey? Can
The crab regenerate into prototype merman?
Sea, of nightmare pressure and mask –
Green faces in the gloom – what is your task
In creation; or is it over? Has space
Such aquariums of planets trapped? Was
Eden thus? Oh, pressures which the lace
Sponge of the brain survives. What has
The life of the sea of my ignorance,
But such creatures; much of this wild-shaped chance!

The crab fascinates the person who watches it. The speaker is at a loss as to how the crab’s position and function in the natural world can be defined. The science of biology has a simple answer to this, by categorizing the crab in the Linnean hierarchical system. Here, on the other hand, the crab is approached by a speaker who has changed his vantage point. He first ascribes to the crab a facetious position as a “meddling monkey.” Then he considers alternatives: could the crab climb up on the ladder of evolution and become a “merman”? The very existence of the crab, whose habitat is the gloomy darkness of the sea, causes the speaker to ask provocative questions about the purpose and current state of evolution, e.g.

13 For a science-based model of presenting natural phenomena see Carlson: “... we must appreciate nature in light of our knowledge of what it is, that is, in light of knowledge provided by the natural sciences, especially the environmental sciences such as geology, biology and ecology” (Carlson, 2000, 6).
what is your task / In creation; or is it over? Has space / Such aquariums of planets trapped?

The climax of this disconcerting questioning is: “Was / Eden thus?” The speaker’s ignorance of “all the insane / Thinking of the undersea” (referred to at the beginning) is disclosed in the final lines of the text:

What has
The life of the sea of my ignorance,
But such creatures; much of this wild-shaped chance!

The poem imaginatively ‘transfers’ the crab, which for the consumer is “food, in our higher plane,” into the deep mystery of earth history by tentatively focusing on the evolutionary potential underlying the lower plane in which the crab lives. The text thus creates provocative “new cognitions and emotions” (Shibles, 1995, 165) concerning the uncertain human stance in the biosphere. In a poem like this, anthropocentrism and human ascendancy are questioned. Numerous other Australian poems also underline our myopic awareness of the creative potential of evolution. They claim both the cognitive and moral need to redefine the human position in the universe.

4.4 A Symbolic Reversal of Human Ascendancy in Judith Wright’s “Swamp Plant” (1976)

The subject of this poem is an inconspicuous little plant, “Half-size to a grasshopper,” that lives on “swamp-edges.” There is nothing striking about this little plant. It is less impressive than the narcissus which in Greek mythology the goddess “Persephine could have gathered.” So far it has been noticed only by science which gave the plant its “dog-Latin” name *Mazus Pumila*, *pumila* meaning “very little,” “dwarf-like”:

Only science, then, has noticed you, not poetry.
It’s that way round in this country,
upside down as ever.
Living on swamp-edges
turning your face down shyer than Wordsworth’s violet,
no words but dog-Latin
have tagged you.

Science cannot ascribe any value or meaning to this little plant, emphasising its unimportance by imposing the epithet *pumila* on it. The lyrical I, on the other hand, uses her imaginative and empathic powers on it. What is interesting is that the persona first discovers some barely noticeable features of this little plant, and then encircles them with a subtle verbal contour:

small earth-hugging rosette,
stem like a thread and downward-turning bell
of meditative blue.

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14 Here I am quoting a phrase used in another context.
15 In Wright, 1994a, 367.
Needless to say, the cognitive interest in the little plant is triggered off by a feeling of compassion and wonder. Significantly, the persona then enters into a dialogue with the little plant, in the course of which it is addressed as though it were a human partner:

    Half-size to a grasshopper,
    what insect is small enough
to drink from you?

This dialogue is maintained throughout the poem. Repeatedly the speaker uses the second-person singular: “But for your colour;” “to your less-than-a-finger’s height;” “Leaving you there, I take you home with me.” Thus the non-human other is constituted as a speaking subject rather than constituted merely as an object of our speaking. 16

What is also striking is another detail which throws into relief the persona’s revised concept of the relationship between the human and non-human world: The persona kneels down in order to look at the tiny plant more closely. In doing this, she deviates from the normal response characteristic of the average Australians, who would not do this. “Nor do our people go / down on their knees at swamp-edges,” Wright states. In a symbolic gesture the speaker deliberately reverses the culturally-ratified human ascendancy typical of Western thought by lowering herself to gaze at the tiny plant. This contact is becoming increasingly relevant to her. What she takes home with her is a new awareness of this plant’s intrinsic worth that has been revealed to her through her humble dialogic interaction with it.

4.5 Exposing Ecological Damage

When browsing through anthologies, one can find legions of poems that expose the ecological mismanagement of the Australian continent. The major characteristic of these poems is not a poetic embodiment of reconciling attitudes (as is the case with the texts we considered above) but a rhetorical attack on the violent ecological treatment inflicted on the land. These poems are also based on the sensory input experienced by the personae. However, the afflicting input does not yield beneficial feelings but, on the contrary, arouses righteous anger, indignation and sadness. Some of these poems lament the loss of something gone for ever, as is the case in Judith Wright’s “Eroded Hills” (1994b, 81). Other, sometimes less sophisticated texts, express a kind of criticism that invites action and intervention, as is the case in Ruby A. Penna, “The Usurpers” (1980, 48).

“Eroded Hills” is one of Wright’s first poems to deal explicitly with environmental issues. It is remarkable that as early as 1953, when environmental

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16 To render nature as a speaking subject, “not in the romantic mode of rendering nature as object for the self-constitution of the poet as a speaking subject, but as a character within texts with its own existence” (Murphy, 1995, 14) is a representational mode strongly advocated by recent ecofeminist criticism.
concerns did not yet worry people, Judith Wright focused on the settlers’ de-
structive practices. 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

In the lines that follow, the persona indulges in fond memories of the integrity
of nature and an undisturbed relationship between humans and the natural envi-
ronment. But there is also the awareness of an imminent process which might
lead to the further extinction of plants and animals. This becomes obvious at the
very end of the poem, when the possibility of the disappearance of “the last leaf
and bird” is mentioned: “When the last leaf and bird go / let my thoughts stand like
trees here.”

Penna’s “The Usurpers” shares with Wright the theme of the irresponsible
clearing of native trees from the Australian landscape. Whereas Wright criticises
the settlers’ attempt to gain usable land for agricultural purposes, Penna attacks
the logging industry for its profit-oriented cutting down of native trees such as
jarrah, sandalwood, wandoo and marri. (The devastating logging practices are of
of course also a major theme in Judith Wright’s essays; cf. 1992b, 90). The disap-
ppearance of these trees has put an end to irreplaceable ecosystems. Reafforesta-
tion programmes could not supply comparable ecosystemic equivalents. These
deficiencies have considerably threatened the survival of native species of flora
and fauna.

Gone are the old hollow logs of the forest
Where shy native creatures found refuge or home;
Gone, too, the hollows for possum and parrot –
Pines have but clean trunks and feathery domes.

Penna’s “The Usurpers” drives home its moral message in the final rhetorical ques-
tion:

Must everything living
Be subject to use or to balance of trade
While so much of beauty and fragrance forever
Lies smothered in pine leaves in pine forest shade?

5. Conclusion

“Life on planet Earth is no longer guaranteed by a divine order; it now rests in
the weak and fumbling hands of us all” (Melucci, 1996, 128). What can the poets’
“fumbling” words do to reconcile us with a better way of living that would en-
hance the chances for human survival? As we have seen, an aesthetic experienc-
ing of nature grants us an immediate awareness of its intrinsic values. Thus one is
entitled to conclude that the aesthetic insights to be gained by interacting with
natural phenomena also have a political dimension. Aesthetic insights basically
question the ideology of consumer capitalism and its monopolistic assumption that ‘value’ is identical with profit and money. Unlike the power-crazy users of Australia, Australian poets are aware of the so-called “intangible” benefits of the natural environment, benefits that can be enjoyed in hearts and minds. They manifest what in the words of Tim Winton could be called “a respectful curiosity” (Winton, 1999, xxviii) about the natural world, and thus widen our understanding of it.

An impressive contingent of Australian nature poems does not just constitute an isolated sanctuary of its own. On the contrary, these poems widen our knowledge of nature and thus deserve consideration in a modern knowledge-based society. Since poets have accumulated a good deal of environmental wisdom, their voices should be respected when decisions concerning the future of the natural environment are to be made. If under the given circumstances “human culture must learn to circumscribe again the territory where silence and respect are due to whatever exists purely because it exists” (Melucci, 1996, 128), the aesthetic experience embodied in poetry can vitally contribute to this learning process. Poets take a high profile on reconciling humans with nature. Their insights ought to be put on the agenda of interventionist action. Therefore let us give nature poems a chance to unfold their cognitive power by reading and teaching them.

Works Cited


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17 Term used by Goodland and Lédec, 1998, 555.
18 Allusion to Pollak and MacNab’s title *Hearts and Minds*, 2000.


