If our times have not been kind to poetry, they have been even more unkind to what is its source, and the source of life and language—the living earth from which we have separated ourselves, but of which we are a part and in which we cannot help participating.

—Wright, Foreword, Because

In her poem “For New England” (1946), Judith Wright explores the meaning of her family’s pioneering history in the New England region of northeastern New South Wales. She uses the image of the “double tree”—“the homesick and the swarthy native” (l. 1)—to represent both the British heritage of culture and land use her ancestors brought with them and her own feeling of rootedness in the Australian land. I would like to use the image in a somewhat different sense, for not only is Wright one of the foremost Australian poets of the second half of the twentieth century, she has for the past several decades been one of the leading figures in the Australian environmental movement. As I am using it, the double tree stands not just for her two careers but also for the fact that both of her preoccupations have changed and grown over time.

With the publication of her first two volumes of verse, The Moving Image (1946) and Woman to Man (1949), Wright firmly established her reputation as a poet. From the 1970s onward, she became as well known, perhaps better known, as a campaigner for environmental causes. She cofounded the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, was a “founding councillor” of the Australian Conservation Foundation
(Walker 3), and served on a commission formed by the Whitlam government in the early 1970s to investigate the “National Estate”; she has participated in a number of major conservation battles, including the one against oil drilling on the Great Barrier Reef. Wright is an excellent example of the author-activist, someone whose careers, rather than running in parallel streams, have informed each other.

Born in 1915, she grew up in the Hunter River district of New South Wales and saw first hand the changes European occupation had brought to the land, changes which her own family had helped to bring about. “Four generations of my forbears,” she says, “spent a lot of their time battling against Australian trees. They were, like their neighbors, highly successful; the landscape is mute tribute to that” (“Trees” 235). As she states in “Eroded Hills” (1953),

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. (ll. 1-4)

The image in the third line evokes not only the “punishment” of the land but also the early convict history of the colony. The concern over deforestation would remain throughout her career—she would later term it “the biggest environmental disaster in the history of the occupation of this land” (“Side Effects” 31).

Although early on it did not manifest itself in the political arena, her concern for the environment was there from near the beginning of her writing career. In fact, Wright dates that concern to an incident in 1951 when she and her husband Jack McKinney noted the destruction of trees caused by the construction of a road near Goondiwindi (Strauss 93), an experience suggested in “Sanctuary” (1955):

Sanctuary, the sign said. Sanctuary—trees, not houses; flat skins pinned to the road of possum and native cat; and here the old tree stood for how many thousand years? that old gnome-tree some axe-new boy cut down. Sanctuary, it said: but only the road has meaning here. It leads into the world’s cities like a long fuse laid. (ll. 8-14)

Though from the start of her career Wright’s poetry displays a sensitivity to the land and to the human histories it contains, her involvement in environmental causes deepened that sensitivity. Her growing awareness of ecology and environmental degradation influenced her development as a poet; and her prominence as one of Australia’s leading poets gave her a forum for agitating about the causes she was com-
Judith Wright's Poetry and Environmental Activism

mitted to. In a way, it is misleading to speak in terms of two careers, since for her they have been inextricably linked, especially in terms of what she saw as the poverty of feeling and imagination behind the threats to both poetry and the natural world.

From Wright's writings on conservation and poetry, I have abstracted six important concepts. At first glance, none of them will seem terribly original to anyone at all familiar with environmentalism or ecocriticism, but keep in mind that Wright came to environmentalism fairly early and that she developed her philosophy in the context of her career as a working poet. The concepts are as follows:

1. Human beings have become separated from the natural world. One way this split has manifested itself is in language, which is inherently incapable of capturing and conveying our experience of nature.

2. Poetry is imperiled for the same reasons as the environment—it has been turned into an object for study and exploitation. People have lost the ability to feel.

3. The problem is not with science, which is amoral and which can be used to solve environmental problems as much as to cause them, but with the ruthless exploitation of nature using the technologies science has made possible.

4. The science of ecology, if it does not succumb to over-specialization, can be a bridge between the arts and sciences by creating a more inclusive view of the biosphere.

5. A well-known author can be useful in environmental debates by trading on his or her publicity value to bring issues to a wider public than might otherwise be reached.

6. If any changes are to be effected by the environmental movement, not only must we gather, interpret, and disseminate information, we must engage people's feelings. Poetry is one means of doing this.

I would like to discuss each of these propositions in turn and then conclude with an assessment of what we can learn from the double career of Judith Wright. I should perhaps say triple career, since Wright has also been an active and outspoken advocate for Aboriginal land rights; indeed, she eventually resigned from the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland when she became "dismayed to find that her advocacy of both wilderness and Aboriginal land rights became, at times, politically contradictory" (Griffiths 267). But for Wright there was no contradiction, since she viewed both environmental degradation and the dispossession of the indigenous inhabitants as results of the white invaders' unthinking pursuit of wealth and power. As she stated in a 1985 address to the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, "All these other concerns—conservation, Aboriginal rights, human rights, and the defense of freedom of
speech—are as important to me as poetry, and indeed indispensable to the writing of poetry itself” (“Poetry” 37).

For Wright, then, there was no essential separation between her careers, although as she got older, she devoted more of her time to environmental work and less to poetry. In the view of another major Australian poet, A. D. Hope, writing in 1975,

"it is not possible to distinguish the poet and conservationist and for my part I cannot share the view I sometimes hear from others that she is in danger of sacrificing poetry for propaganda. Poetry is an incurable passion in any case; once it has taken a strong hold it absorbs all the other activities and interests of life and draws its nourishment from them. (7)"

I agree with Hope’s view to the extent that she seems to have assimilated attitudes and perspectives fostered by her environmental work into her poetry, changing it in ways I will discuss later. However, one could also take the opposite view and argue that her poetry was in a sense absorbed by her overriding concern with environmental issues.

**Proposition 1: We have separated ourselves from nature**

In her poetry, Wright has meditated a number of times on the problem of representing the natural world, an issue I have dealt with at more length elsewhere. Probably the clearest statement of the problem comes in her poem “Gum-trees Stripping” (1955), in which she observes the tatters of bark peeling from a eucalypt and realizes that she cannot capture in language her experience of the tree:

> Words are not meanings for a tree.  
> So it is truer not to say  
> "These rags look like humility,  
> or this year’s wreck of last year’s love,  
> or wounds ripped by the summer’s claw.”  
> If it is possible to be wise  
> here, wisdom lies outside the word  
> in the earlier answer of the eyes. (ll. 9-16)

In the late poem “Summer” (1985) she returns to this idea and says of the animal inhabitants of an abandoned mine site, “I try to see without words / as they do. But I live through a web of language” (ll. 15-16). For her it is not just the obvious inability to fully identify with other living things; it also has to do with how language allows us to objectify the natural world in order to be able to manipulate it:
What had been the very ground of our being, of the images on which our evolving thought and consciousness were directed and by virtue of which we lived both physically and spiritually, has now become for us ... a wholly exterior set of "objects," in themselves meaningless and valueless except insofar as we can use them to contribute to our material well-being. ("Conservation" 190-91)

Once we have cut ourselves off from the natural world, have lost the ability to empathize, it becomes much easier to see it as simply a repository of resources to exploit for our own ends. Ironically, the use of language—the raw material with which the poet works—is itself part of our human evolution, so the very faculty which enables the poet to create her art celebrating the natural world is partly responsible for our estrangement from it.

Proposition 2: Both poetry and the natural environment are imperiled

Significantly, Wright links the loss of feeling for nature with the decline of poetry as a genre, since she believes that one function of poetry is to awaken, even to educate, the emotions. In the Foreword to her 1992 collection Going On Talking, she refers to her "interest in those questions of environmental loss and deterioration ... and ... parallel interest in poetry and in its ... increasing neglect and unpopularity. I think the two facts are connected, far more than we suspect" (vii). In several of her critical essays and addresses, she deplores the way poetry is taught in the schools as a set of analyzable objects rather than as an art form like music or painting; this pedagogical practice, she believes, accounts for why most students dislike poetry, and it does a major disservice to poets. More importantly, it is part of the same process of objectification which has led to many of our environmental problems.

Proposition 3: Science itself is not the problem

However, although she laments many of the technological developments that have increased the pace of environmental destruction, she does not blame science for the problem. In a comment on C. P. Snow’s famous "Two Cultures" concept, she declares,

I think Sir Charles over-simplified the problem. The real split is not, I think, so much between scientists and literary intellectuals as between two sides of our own human nature; between the creative an imaginative, which is shared by scientists, inventors and
practitioners of the arts as well, and the mechanic or materialistic, the manipulative power-hungry side of us which seizes on the achievements of science and transforms them into technological machinery for uses which scientists themselves, as well as artists, cannot help but deplore. ("Science" 196)

Although science can be beneficial in that it creates knowledge about the world, she notes that by taking a value-free perspective, it cannot help us in decisions about what we should be doing with that knowledge and the power it confers.

Proposition 4: Ecology can be a bridge between the arts and sciences.

In her writings on conservation, she remarks a number of times on the importance of scientists, especially ecologists, in creating an understanding environmental problems and formulating solutions. She takes up this issue most fully in her essay "Conservation as a Concept" (1974). She argues that whereas the sciences are becoming too specialized, "one hopeful new science has arisen in the new studies of ecology, which are moving into the human as well as biological fields and may shed a good deal of light on the problems they are undertaking" (193). She calls

the new interest in conservation and its allied ecological studies . . . a groping movement towards a new understanding which shall take into account actual living processes and interdependencies, and can see man as a part of a wider process subordinate to laws. What is more, this interest also seems to represent a point at which a new spark can perhaps jump across the gap that . . . separates the arts and sciences . . . and allow a new kind of understanding and cooperation to grow up between them. (193)

She is wary about the possibility of ecology also becoming too specialized to serve this essential linking function. But ecology is significant for her in that its focus on interdependence can incorporate the human, including language use and the peculiar form of language use called poetry. As opposed to those sciences which have spawned the worship of reason and have banished value-driven decision making, "The newly emerging concept we have called 'conservation', and its allied science of ecology . . . are concerned with life. They hold the possibility, at least, of a renewed humility and a revival of imaginative participation in a life-process which includes us, and to which we contribute our own conscious knowledge of it" ("Conservation" 194).
What does this mean in terms of Wright's poetry? Take as an example "A Document" (1966), which develops an idea presented in "Eroded Hills" thirteen years earlier:

"Sign there." I signed, but still uneasily.
I sold the coachwood forest in my name.
Both had been given me; but all the same
remember that I signed uneasily. (ll. 1-4)

The poem grows out of her decision to allow the logging of some old-growth forest on her property during World War II so that the wood can be used in the building of bombers. Here, it is not just her ancestors who are complicit with the destruction of the trees; it is the poet herself. "A Document" is a stronger poem than "Eroded Hills" because of the pervasive ambivalence it conveys. The speaker realizes that in a legal sense she has the power to dispose of the trees, but at the same time she feels a connection to them greater than that of legal ownership. The conflict seems to be between reason and emotion: she signs the document to "help the nation" (l. 16), but she knows "the bark smells sweetly when you wound the tree" (l. 19). However, there is also a struggle with her own past: her ancestors have bequeathed her her name as well as her title to the forest, and the land is, like it or not, part of her own heritage. And in being true to the nation, which has, as she says, waged a relentless war on trees, she feels she is betraying the land itself. Her signature is on the land; there is a connection between reason, writing, and environmental destruction. The reader comes away with a sense of loss; the trees are evoked as sympathetic living things, and humans are the ones making war, not only on each other, but on them as well.

A different view comes across in "Australia 1970" (1971):

Die, wild country, like the eaglehawk,
dangerous till the last breath's gone,
Clawing and striking. Die
cursing your captor through a raging eye. (ll. 1-4)

Here the poet conveys a bitterly ironic tone as she praises the land for revenging itself upon the European invaders by making it uninhabitable for them:

For we are conquerors and self-poisoners
more than scorpion or snake
and dying of the venoms that we make
even while you die of us. (ll. 17-20)
The whole point of the jeremiad is that humans cannot escape from the natural processes that they are affecting through their unconscionable greed. The feedback loops which enmesh humans in the natural world are viewed as ironically self-destructive.

Proposition 5: Well-known authors can help publicize environmental causes.

This poem also raises the issue of the poet as social commentator, a role Wright increasingly took on throughout her career. In *The Coral Battleground* (1977), she recounts the story of the fight to save the Barrier Reef from exploitation by mining and oil drilling. Given the heat of the battle, she employs a surprisingly matter-of-fact tone in the book, probably because she wants to show the day-to-day dedication and hard work of the small group of volunteers who came to the defense of the Reef. She also wants to dispel the myth that they were scientifically uninformed and basing their actions solely on emotion. There is therefore little of the bitterness that comes across in a poem like "Australia 1970." Wright, though she was just one of a number of conservationists who took part in the battle, does at one point note that her career did give her a different status: "I had the special advantage of being a kind of 'curiosity' showpiece in the conservation movement—a poet who spent most of her time on conservation was, after all, newsworthy" (99). Thus, of the environmentalists fighting this battle, she is best suited to publicize their cause. It is not just a matter of proselytizing through poetry; she can also cash in on her status as a well-known literary figure (even if only a figure known to most Australians through a few poems in school anthologies).

Proposition 6: To change people’s views on the environment, we must engage their feelings.

Wright has always felt that the poet can best contribute to environmental causes through his or her art, mainly because rational argument is limited in its ability to sway opinion:

Our feelings and emotions must be engaged, and engaged on a large scale. Whether scientists like it or not, it is feeling that sways public opinion, far more than reason; and it is feeling that spurs us to protest and act. Conservationists, with the world’s most urgent battle on their hands, must begin to enlist not only rational recognition of the problem, but human concern, distress, and love. ("Nature" 207)
As Shirley Walker observes of Wright’s philosophy, “Poetry can heal the break between man and nature, for the value which has been abstracted from the natural world by the analytic and objective world view can be recaptured by the poet” (101-02). Put another way, language has helped to create the predicament we find ourselves in, and poetry offers a possible way of getting out of it. In “Lament for Passenger Pigeons” (1973), the poet decries the pervasive and harmful human influences on the global environment. But she concludes:

What is the being and the end of man?
Blank surfaces reverb a human voice
whose echo tells us that we choose to die:

or else, against the blank of everything,
to reinvent that passenger, that bird-
siren-and-angel image we contain
essential in a constellating word.
To sing of Beauty, its escaping wing,
to utter absence in a human chord
and recreate the meaning as we sing. (ll. 34-43)

Here the poet, in a kind of wish fulfillment, imagines singing the birds back into existence, opposing the poet’s power to that of the earth’s hyper-rational destroyers.

Conclusions

People in the United States sometimes forget that environmentalism has a global reach. In order to avoid a dangerous parochialism, and in order to put our own work in perspective, we need to be aware of those in other cultures who have responded, in both imaginative writing and direct action, to the same sorts of problems that we have long been concerned about. Conservation movements in other countries have also had their outspoken advocates and their heroes, and the literatures of other cultures can be fruitfully studied using ecocritical ideas.

Did Wright’s activism affect her poetry? I believe that it did in a couple of ways. First, she became more concerned with rhetorical matters and less with form after she began active work in conservation. Compare a relatively early poem such as “The Cycads” or “Gum-trees Stripping” with a later one like “Rainforest,” and one can see that in the later poem seems more overtly concerned with conveying a message—a notion that would have been anathema to Wright the literary theorist a few decades before. Also, from the mid-1950’s onward, Wright’s concerns as a poet seemed to shift somewhat, as though even in poems not overtly
about environmental matters, the subject matter has been passed through a filter: what does it mean to live in a world dominated by a species seemingly bent on self-destruction?

But that may just reflect my concerns as a reader. At the very least, I would say that the two careers interacted in the sense that she saw both poetry and the natural world coming under threat. Although she has never been just a nature poet, she has always written sensitively about nature. And certain themes, in particular the idea that human beings are part of the ongoing cycles of life and death, were evident in the earliest verse. Indeed, the harshness and impersonality that she saw in nature began as a source of terror for her; only later did she come to accept the human participation in an ongoing evolutionary process. She saw language itself as a product of evolution—it provided the medium for her art as well as the means of separation whereby humans could “name and know” the world and come to exploit it.

Her impact on environmental activism in Australia has been great—partly, perhaps mainly, because she was already well known as a poet (despite the marginal status of poets and poetry there as here). She was able to gain a public hearing for environmentalist viewpoints. Though she could be as hardheaded and calculating as anyone, it has been her commitment to feeling, whether it be in human relationships, in treatment of the environment, in matters of social justice or in education, that she has had an impact.

Reflecting on the battle over the Great Barrier Reef, she recalls thinking how we have missed an essential point:

there was seldom a day without some news item or article on the Reef and its problems. Piling up my newscuttings in a large box, I thought bitterly that there was only one danger to the Reef, and that nobody had yet pointed it out. The danger to the Reef was civilisation; and if the Reef was sick, that sickness was caught from us. But no one was suggesting research into people. (Coral 96)

As Jennifer Strauss asserts, “It was necessary . . . for the relationship between man and nature to be re-imagined before a dialogue of mutual respect and understanding could take place between ‘the arts, affirming the truths of feeling, and the sciences, affirming the truths of the intellect’” (6).

These remarks remind me of Gary Snyder’s observation that what we need is “a rhetoric of ecological relationships. This is not to put down the human: the ‘proper study of mankind’ is what it means to be human. It’s not enough to be shown in school that we are kin to all the rest: we have to feel it all the way through” (68). And this leads me to my final conclusion about perhaps the most important aspect of Judith
Wright's double careers, that poetry itself, in the words of Shirley Walker quoted above, "can heal the break between man and nature" (101). A. D. Hope notes that many people "possibly do not realize how deeply the active and contemplative life may combine in a poet" (6). The example of Judith Wright should serve as a reminder how necessary the two can be for each other.

NOTES

1. All poems quoted are from A Human Pattern: Selected Poems. The dates given are the dates of their first publication in collections.

2. See "Judith Wright's Nature Poetry: The Problem of Living 'through a web of language,'" in which I discuss her concern about the problem of representation from an ecocritical perspective.

3. To be sure, Wright shows awareness (and in some cases almost envy) of North American environmentalism. In The Coral Battleground, she tells of using American evidence on the effects of offshore oil drilling, and in her essays she cites authors such as Aldo Leopold. But the flow of information and influence cannot be all one way.

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