Women, Nature and Poetic Dwelling:
ecofeminism and the poetries of
Phyllis Webb and Judith Wright

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The poetries of Phyllis Webb (Canadian), and Judith Wright (Australian) each evince a concern with what has become one of the key topics of our time – the degradation and exploitation of the natural world, and the relation of humans to the non-human entities constituting that world. The rise of these concerns has seen a concomitant influx of new discourses theorising both the decline of the environment and possible ways of preserving it. This aggregate of diverse yet overlapping discourses exists in a network which Myerson and Rydin, in *The Language of Environment: A New Rhetoric*, term an 'environet', which is at the same time both 'differentiated and connected' (9). It is with an understanding of such simultaneous interconnection and difference that this paper refers to ecocritical theories, and in particular to some ecofeminist thinking, as coming closest to addressing the ecological concerns evident in both Webb and Wright's poetic (and other) writings. I am not only concerned, however, with discovering what the theoretical application might bring to light in the poetry, but also how poetry, through the processes by which it comes into being, may inform an ecocritical and/or ecofeminist ethic.

Any study of literature in the light of critical theory runs the risk of privileging one term (usually the critical term) over the other. Indeed, within ecofeminist literary criticism, the prioritisation of theory is explicitly made the dominant practice. In her essay 'Ecofeminist Literary Criticism', Gretchen T. Legler defines the role of ecofeminist literary criticism as providing a vantage point from which canonical nature literature may be critiqued, and asserts the importance of such literature primarily as a setting in which 'representations of gender, race and class' (227) and assumptions about the natural world can be investigated and interrogated. Legler also suggests the potential for ecofeminist literary criticism to provide insights

into the ways in which nature and environmental concerns are imaged in contemporary women's writing.

This method, however useful, is at the same time a hierarchically dichotomous way of reading, whereby a poem comes to be treated as an artefact to be excavated, examined, and the results pressed into service for didactic (in this case ecofeminist) ends. I propose, rather, to take the literature and its own process of coming into being as the starting point – a shift in perspective sufficient perhaps to open up different ways of thinking about the non-human natural world, and the human relation to it. This paper is concerned in particular with the engagement with, and emergence of, this relation in the poetry of Webb and Wright.

In their respective countries Phyllis Webb and Judith Wright occupy comparable spaces in the literary landscape. Both were born in the early part of the twentieth century, began writing in a period when their peers were predominantly men, and also ceased publishing poetry (at least in collected form) some time ago – Wright in 1985, and Webb in 1990 – although both continued to write and publish prose essays. And each has become a crucial figure in the development of her own nation's poetry. In the writings of Webb and Wright, however, allegiance to a specific country is subordinated to a broader conception of, and concern for, the world. Both poets express a concern for the environment on a global scale that extends beyond specifically Canadian or Australian horizons, and also beyond the literary arena. In an interview with Gerry Turcotte, Webb states that she left the Canadian Socialist Party – for which she was at one time an electoral candidate – because of '[the Party's] slow movement towards realising the importance of [among other issues] the environmental movement' (116). And Wright, in her essay, 'Side Effects of the Literate Society', goes so far as to suggest that 'one might almost hope' for the abolition of printed books, 'For the sake of the forest' (*Going on Talking* 33). This despite her own inescapably vested interest.

Environmental concern on both a local and global scale is also evident in their poetry, as Webb's poem 'Paradise Island' demonstrates:

> Hundreds of acres of trees are being clear-cut today, here,
> right now, to produce the paper to advertise the sleaze,
> vitamin pills, corn removers, hair removers, cleansing
> creams, biscuits, jujubes, hairclips, fingernail polish,
> earrings, scissors, toothpaste, Timex watches. (70)

And, like Wright in the essay referred to above, Webb in her poem 'Performance' alludes to the poet's complicity in this process, through the expressed desire 'To be together briefly/with the page, the fallen timber' (67). The contradiction inherent in these lines is far-reaching: the relationship between page and fallen timber is direct, a matter of cause and effect. Yet at the same time, the poet's desire to be 'together with' both page and timber hints paradoxically toward what could be termed an ecofeminist ethos in that it seeks to be in relation 'together with' the natural world, rather than attempting to dominate it.

One thinker who theorises this relation usefully is Martin Heidegger. The contiguity of Heidegger's thought with recent ecocritical and ecofeminist theories has been noted by the philosopher John Llewellyn and by the ecofeminist writer Carol Bigwood, who contends that Heidegger's later writings in particular 'offer a self-critical understanding of our ecodestructive age' (5). Part of Heidegger's attractiveness to ecocritical discourses is also his protest against a human-centred conception of the natural world: what he terms 'technological thinking': a view of the earth as object, and the natural environment as a kind of storehouse of natural resources. On this view, the 'Being' of the elements of nature (including plants and animals) is ignored, reducing them to the 'present-at-hand' – that is, they have meaning or significance only in terms of their usefulness to humankind.

Heidegger proposes a different view of the earth, one which correlates to his perspective on human Being. Using the Greek term *phusis* (variously translated as 'life' or 'nature') to refer to the nature of things, Heidegger – returning to an older, Heraclitean understanding – redefines the term as an unfolding or 'self-emergence'.[1] By this definition, every entity, whether human or non-human, has its own essence (its own ground in Being) and everything it is or does is part of its emerging into its own Being. It is a process of accretion, whereby each stage of its development (for instance, a flower's budding, blooming and wilting) makes it a little more itself, its own identity, or being what-it-is. Heidegger's recognition of this self-emergence in non-human entities opens up a way of thinking about the natural world in terms other than those of human dominance and exploitation. In *Inhabiting the Earth: Heidegger, Environmental Ethics, and the Metaphysics of Nature*, Bruce Foltz elucidates:

> the pervasiveness of *phusis* understood as a trait of being as such undermines all the traditional oppositions by which 'nature' has become narrowed. If nature is understood by means of self-emergence, there can be no hard dividing line – let alone opposition – drawn between nature and history, nature and art, nature and spirit, nature and freedom, nature and grace. (127)

And I would add: between nature and humankind. Some important ideas arise out of this conception of the world. One is the 'letting-be' of the world, which involves a respect granted to every entity, on the basis of its self-emergence. Another is 'dwelling', which Heidegger, in his essay 'Building Dwelling Thinking', defines as not only a passive dwelling-with, but an active caring for, and conservation of, the Being of all entities within their self-emergence (*Poetry Language Thought* 147).

Heidegger's theorising of the Being of entities or beings, however, goes beyond notions of self-emergence. Equally important is his conception that, at the same time as it emerges, each entity also retains a concealment. To quote Foltz again:

> the concept of *phusis* signifies being not only as presence [Heidegger's self-emergence] but also, to the same degree, as self-withholding. Thus while the plant sprouts, emerges, and extends itself into the open, it

simultaneously goes back into its roots in that it fixes them in the closed and so takes its stand. The (process of) self-unfolding is inherently a going-back-into-itself.' Self-emerging as such simultaneously inclines toward self-concealing; yet the latter is 'not a mere self-closing but a sheltering in which the essential possibility of emerging is preserved'. (13)

In Webb's 'Paradise Island', the 'letting-be' of the world, as evinced by the expressed desire to be 'together briefly/ with the page, the fallen timber', is simultaneously undermined by the fact of the timber's having fallen. This dualism, between mastery over the world, and dwelling within it, is also evident in Webb's poem 'A Model of the Universe' which begins:

> The arrogance. The above it all.
> Ministrations of angels,
> little holy ghosts fiddling
> while the planets burn, sing.
> For instance, superstrings,
> immense smallness of, tangled
> spaghetti, the metaphor
> materializing unimaginable
> piquant sauce, restores us
> to middling size, for comparison:
> minute white floss on the rose-
> mary plant, one flower in bloom
> of Queen Anne's lace. (13)

Here, the poet-speaker begins with an angel's-eye view of the universe, or perhaps it is merely satellite photography: 'The above it all'. Under her view, and her pen, the entire structure of the universe is reduced to the 'smallness' (if an immense smallness) 'of spaghetti.' The zooming-in effect, down to 'middling size' and then to 'minute white floss,' reflects differently on human relationship to the world and on the poet. For while human potential and significance seem to be both as vast and as tiny as the universe the 'us' of humanity is intricately connected to, the poet on the other hand retains a God-like overview, outside of this connection, a complicity with 'the arrogance' of the scientists. This view, seeing the universe from all angles, is retained in the second stanza:

> shady dealings in the lab.
> A hand-made mouse with cancer
> for generations, patented,
> marketed, sold, as transgenetic
> engineering steers us to the
> unity of all things. (13)

The all-powerful poet-viewer now sees through walls and behind doors, uncovering 'shady dealings in the lab.' Scientific theory, distant and benign in the first stanza, becomes warped and terrible in the second. The degradation, not only of the world, but of human attitudes toward the world, finds its apotheosis in the incongruously tiny 'hand-made mouse with cancer.' The poet, in a dark, if ironic, prognostication, conflates science and environmental doom, proclaiming an unheard-of coming-together of all beings. But not through world peace, human rights, or political accord. Instead it is 'transgenetic/engineering' which steers us, presumably through some ghastly mutations, 'to the/unity of all things.' Although this poem begins with a recognition of the human connection to the world, that connection becomes horribly mutated in the hands of physical and experimental sciences, with the poet suggesting complicity, and at the same time protesting against the ghastly effects of 'all this/weighty knowledge'.

Wright also voices protest in her poem 'At Cedar Creek,' although this poem considers environmental degradation more directly. Four stanzas exemplify the concerns of the poem: the first, last, and two from the body of the poem. These verses occur as a refrain, although it is transformed and reformulated in each instance:

> How shall I remember the formula for poetry?
> This morning I have abandoned the garden.
> Too overgrown to recall the shapes we planted,
> it flourishes with weeds not native to this country.
> . . .
> Where to look for the formula?
> Complex ritual connections
> between Culture and Nature
> are demonstrated by linguistic studies.
> The myths of primitive people
> can reveal codes
> we may interpret.
> . . .
> There was a formula
> under the willows of Babylon.
> But the children have never seen Zion.
> They condemn alike
> our action and our inaction.
> They, however, also base their politics
> on the exchange of women
> and speak a language
> clotted with ancient metaphor.
> . . .
> By the waterfalls of Cedar Creek
> where there aren't any cedars

> I try to remember the formula for poetry.
> Plastic bags, broken beer bottles
> effluent from the pig farm
> blur an old radiance. (*Collected Poems* 379)

Here Wright pre-empts some key concerns of what would later come to be ecofeminist criticism. One of the central tenets of ecofeminism, of course, is that there are 'important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other' (Warren xi). Wright's poem, too, recognises this integral connection between the degradation and exploitation of the non-human natural world, and the oppression of human minority groups. The refrain stanzas reveal a nexus of oppressed groups: 'primitive people', 'women' who are merely pawns of 'exchange', the land denuded of cedars, and the river choked with 'plastic bags, broken beer bottles/effluent from the pig farm.'

But the poem also expresses a concern with language, and its connection to nature. In this sense it is a variation on the theme of Psalm 137, in particular verses 1 and 3:

> By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. … How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land.

The poet laments because she, too, cannot sing 'the Lord's song.' She has lost the 'formula for poetry', the creative word. As the land and rivers have become increasingly degraded and polluted, so words have begun to fail her. And she does not even have the comfort of the return to a mythical homeland. It is here, in her Zion, that wholesale ecological devastation is occurring. The repeated lament for the loss of the formula for poetry depicts a notion of a creative Word, which arises repeatedly in Wright's poems. With relation to the natural world, her outspokenness about its exploitation arises out of a 'letting-be' of the world, evident in many of her poems: in 'Encounter', for instance, where she writes 'Beetle never recognized me. Nevertheless/it was a double event, a wild encounter' (*Collected Poems* 368), and in 'Rockface': 'I've no wish to chisel things into new shapes/The remnant of a mountain has its own meaning' (*Collected Poems* 420). A concomitant 'letting-be' of language, however, occurs less often in her poetics. 'At Cedar Creek' foregrounds language and the process of poetic creation, but here there is a chiselling of language into new shapes, couched in terms of a formula, an ultimate Word of cohesive meaning and closure. The ambivalence which was manifest in Webb's positioning of the poet in a power relation *vis-à-vis* the world is echoed here in Wright's conceptualisation of language – the Word.

It is at this point that her poetic diverges markedly from Webb's. Webb, too, is explicitly concerned with language in her poems, but in a way which is more playful, elliptical and that leans toward the postmodern in its conception. The letting-be which Wright evinces toward nature can be seen in Webb's approach to language.

What is often foregrounded as a result is the process by which the poem comes to be written and by which it is read. Her poem '"Krakatoa" and "Spiritual Storm"' exemplifies this. Like Wright's 'At Cedar Creek', '"Krakatoa" and "Spiritual Storm"' is explicitly concerned with environmental crisis, although what occurs is natural devastation rather than human spoliation. Stanzas one and two read:

> Hot magma
>   indigo dawn
> wild yelps
>   of pure physics
> crack open deep sea
> buttocks thrust up love lava
> world heart/broken/cardiac
> arrest.
> *Krakatoa. Krakatau.*
>
> The small gods gather
> for countdown, each lifts
> a finger to the wind (quake,
> tide, tsunami) tastes
> the cost of all-paroxysmal
> sexual storm, lid blown off,
> creator creating, a whim,
> wham of blowup on shores –
> Java, Sumatra, Hawaii –
> blasting away 2200 miles heard,
> Krakatoan wind circling the dust
> up high enough. Radiant. (14-15)

Both '"Krakatoa" and "Spiritual Storm"' and 'At Cedar Creek' reach into history to draw on events which, in one way or another, inhabit a kind of mythical consciousness. Wright reinvents an ancient authoritative text, while Webb's poem seems at moments to reflect a much more recent authority, perhaps the newspaper or the six o'clock television news:

> May 20, 1883, 'paroxysmal'
> blast August 26, 'climax' eruption August 27,
> 10 a.m. Masses of floating pumice near the
> volcano so thick as to halt ships. Surrounding
> region in darkness two and a half days.
> Temperature world-wide lowered 0.27°.
> Plant and animal life gone five years.
> Anak (child of) Krakatoa active into
> the 1980's. (14-15)

"'Krakatoa" and "Spiritual Storm"' differs markedly, however, in the way in which the creative or poetic process is figured. Rather than a search for a 'formula for poetry,' Webb's poetic process occurs as an emergence – or self-emergence – which can be usefully elucidated through Heidegger's thinking on the subject, and becomes evident also through Webb's own comments on the way her collection *Hanging Fire* came together.

Heidegger's concepts of self-emergence and concealment are recalled through the language of "'Krakatoa" and "Spiritual Storm"'. Most obvious is the emergence of Krakatoa the volcano, which is the literal subject of the poem. But the compilation of statistical detail, the poet's emotional response – 'God how I suffer to get this down as if I'd been there watching the lava hit and run' – and the minute attention to the individual lives of 'dogs and children and hens', also delineates a self-emergence within the poem, where each detail adds cumulatively to the intensity and identity of "'Krakatoa" and "Spiritual Storm"' the poem, making it with each line a little more itself.

But a concealment is at the same time also evident. Akin to a concept of the Other, images of concealment recur in Krakatoa, for example the 'world heart/broken', 'Devolution. Darkness at noon', 'Sun's eclipse', and 'Fire hanging/back'. Darkness and eclipse imply hiddenness, while 'devolution' depicts a drawing back into itself of the world's 'heart', paralleling the impossibility of ever bringing the event totally under the human gaze, or of expressing it completely in language.

Less obvious, but nevertheless significant, is an analogous relation which is enacted through Webb's own process of writing the poems which make up *Hanging Fire*. The 'found' phrases that guide the initial conception of each poem, 'arrive' Webb explains 'unbidden in [her] head,' and are evidence of an emergence of a thought from the unconscious, its grounding in concealment. This would seem to be a common, and common-sense, process in the emergence and writing of a poem, as Wright's as well as Webb's poetry amply reveals. Webb foregrounds this process, however, in the book's preface, stating that 'Titles of poems in quotation marks are 'given' words, phrases, or sentences that arrive unbidden in my head'. This reference to the poetic process makes explicit the relation between thought and writing, and between the 'self-emergence' of the poem, and its simultaneous retention of a concealment, a hiddenness.

It is this simultaneous openness to both self-emergence and concealment, as evident in the poetic process, that has the capacity to be potentially illuminative and generative for the discourses of ecocriticism and ecofeminism, shedding light as it does on a possible rethinking of the relation between human and non-human entities. Acknowledging that which remains concealed within the self-emergence of an entity grants that 'Other' a space in which to be what-it-is, thereby acknowledging and respecting its subjectivity. It is not a matter of human identities, but a renegotiation leading to an acknowledgment of subjectivity – and the rights which accompany it – to the non-human natural world.

Although their beliefs about language – and their working within it – are very

different, poems by both Wright and Webb reveal a common recognition of the rights of the natural world. It is a recognition which extends to the world in a global sense: Webb's universe of 'superstrings' (13) for instance, or Wright's lament at the devastation of 'Zion' (*Collected Poems* 379). At the same time, their poetries demonstrate an attention to the local which contextualises each writer within a national framework. And indeed they are acknowledged nationally as much for their roles as committed conservationists, as for their poetry. Nevertheless it is through poetry – through a nuanced, complex and subtle attention to language – and the processes by which it arrives, that the inevitable tensions between word and world are simultaneously explored and endlessly held in play.

Notes

[1] See Bigwood 79-83, where she gives a useful explanation and history of Heidegger's usage of the term.

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