

## The Eco-poetics of Charles Harpur

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Eco-poetics has to do with the realisation of the relationship between human beings and the rest of the biosphere. It reflects on what it might mean to dwell with the earth. Before one's country can become accepted as a dwelling place for the writer's imagination, it must first be discerned, experienced, expressed, and as it were fully engaged. The foreignness of the Australian environment as envisaged by the early European settlers, together with the exploitive ideology of colonialism, proved challenging for colonial writers such as Charles Harpur who felt a sense of connection to the place. This paper examines Harpur's work to determine if it qualifies as eco-poetics as understood in recent studies of literature in relation to the environment. It also seeks to establish his work as a resource for current environmental thinkers, as a point of reference for the consideration of the pre-colonial communicative exchange with this land. His emphasis is on vision: both in a temporal and a transcendental sense.

### Listening to the 'Muse of the evergreen Forest'

Charles Harpur was born in Windsor, New South Wales (then known as Green Hills), in 1813. His parents, Joseph Harpur and Sarah Chidley, were convicts. Windsor, which is situated in the Hawkesbury River district, was first established as a settlement in 1794 to help alleviate the shortage of food and other supplies in the colony. Joseph and Sarah were emancipated and sent to the area to help work the land, and to improve the image of the colony. By the time Charles was born, his father had been installed as a schoolmaster. From a young age the boy had access to literary books, albeit a limited selection, which he devotedly read. He augmented his learning by studying and experiencing the natural world. Elizabeth Perkins points out that Harpur's life is usually divided into four periods, determined by his main place of residence: 'the Windsor or Hawkesbury period 1813-1830; the Sydney period 1830-1839; the Hunter River period 1839-1859; and the Euroma period 1859-1868' (*Works* xiii). She claims, his work (along with a few others) epitomized 'some of the distinctive forces that contributed to Australian social history' of the time (*Works* xii). According to Judith Wright 'it was not until 1853 that his first substantial publication, *The Bushrangers and Other Poems*, appeared', the only collection of his work published in his lifetime (*Charles Harpur* 13). Much of his writing was archived for over a century after his death in 1868, virtually unacknowledged until the 1984 publication of *The Poetical Works of Charles Harpur*, edited by Perkins.

During the time Harpur lived, Australia was frequently seen through European eyes as inhospitable, menacing and uninteresting to its human inhabitants. Although he acknowledged its threatening environs, Harpur saw it as a fascinating place of real beauty. He considered it his responsibility to convey the voice of the country in order to

make it known and appreciated, and to overcome the sense of alienation experienced by the European observer. In his poem ‘The Dream by the Fountain’, he prepared the way:

Listen, rejoined one; I promise thee glory  
Such as shall rise like the day-star apart,  
To brighten the source of Australia’s broad story,  
But to this thou must give to the future thy heart!  
Be then the Bard of thy Country! (*Works* 266)

Here, Harpur the poet, the Bard, is addressed by the muse, the ‘Muse of the evergreen Forest’—Australian Nature.

Harpur wrote in the visionary mode of the English Romantic poetic tradition in the personage of a poet-seer. His perceived role is detailed in a lecture he delivered (Ackland, *Charles Harpur* 34-39). Although he studied others, he took William Wordsworth as his primary guide. Wordsworth’s attitude to nature offered him not only a way of finding his own sense of truth but also a technique to express his thoughts. Wright observed that Wordsworth’s belief in the ‘integral relationship of man and nature found an immediate response in Harpur’s own love of the mountains and valleys of his Hawkesbury country’ (*Preoccupations* 7). In his poem ‘A Poet’s Home’ he speaks of the Hawkesbury River of his youth. Throughout his work, nature is portrayed as romantic and mysterious. In keeping with the Romantic tradition, the crucial aspect is the poet’s own feelings. In the poem ‘The Ineffable’ he says:

Words are the special dies of Thought,  
And well they mint its gold,  
But Feeling cannot so be brought  
Within their subtlest mould. (*Works* 392)

As expressed by Wright, ‘nature’ for Harpur provides the place of learning for the soul: learning from Nature ‘in the Wordsworthian sense’. (*Charles Harpur* 23). Michael Ackland convincingly argues that Harpur’s work, despite the Romantic influence, is (along with that of Henry Kendall) should be seen ‘not as derivative and inept, but as independent utterances of local genius’ (‘Nature’ 74).

Harpur’s notes (which will be discussed later in relation to naming the various entities of nature) are a valuable addendum in that they supplement the philosophies and attitudes of his poetics. In his preface to ‘The Kangaroo Hunt’, for example, he describes the feelings he experienced during the writing process. Initially, he refers to the individual entities of nature (all that which is other-than-human) as objects in the pictorial composition of the poem. After he beholds them ‘through an imaginary process of self-diminution’ in the process of his understanding, nature ‘becomes savagely sublime’ (*Works* 456). From then on he refers to nature not as object, but as subject. ‘Thus,’ he says, ‘it [the poem depicting nature] is truth sublimated, compressed, epitomised;—truth raised to its height . . . direct from Nature’ [sic] (*Works* 456-457). Nature is the essential subject; he, the poet, is the conveyor of sublime truth. On the nature of Truth he adds:

In fine, if the Poet has been wholly true to his missionary insight . . . and to his re-creative instincts . . . the licence taken, and the modifications made by art, will reach only to its pictorial manner and assemblage of objects: in its spirit it will still be very Nature . . . it will be Something yet more precious . . . . (*Works* 457)

Ackland argues that Harpur sees the individual observer, and in particular the poet, 'as a centre of spiritual regeneration in an age presided over by scientific advancement and soul destroying materialism' ('Nature' 79). In 'The Kangaroo Hunt', Harpur says:

While thus Euroka riseth red,  
Up, even to the kingly head  
Of some proud eminence, we climb,  
Where high amid the crags sublime,  
Australia's yet unchristened Muse  
A Wandering Spirit of beauty rare,  
Loves oft to gem her streaming hair . . . (*Works* 459)

Rather than being clear-cut landscape descriptions, Harpur's poetry is concerned with the communication between the intellect and 'that Spirit of the World / Called Nature' ('The World and the Soul' *Works* 302). Ackland considers that Harpur 'is not concerned with nature as the subject for empirical or mimetic recording, but with discovering the "purer issues" or divinely appointed ministry of phenomena' ('Nature' 79). This is evident in the poem 'A Storm in the Mountains':

Strange darings seize me, witnessing this strife  
Of nature; while, as heedless of my life,  
I stand exposed. And does some destined charm  
Hold me secure from elemental harm,  
That in the mighty riot I may find  
How through all being works the light of Mind?  
Yea . . . (*Works* 186)

The worldly and the spiritual are shown to be mutually informing. As will be discussed later, however, empirical recording is also important for this poet.

To establish that Harpur is a naïve poet (in the sense that Schiller uses the term in his essay 'On the Naïve and the Sentimental in Literature' (1795)) is essential since it confirms his sense of oneness with the natural world. The argument for this paper, however, complicates Schiller's approach to the analysis of naïvety in that Harpur appears to possess an intuitive belief in his poetic role and in this sense he is naïve, yet he also seems to be an idealist with a sense of his own divinely appointed destiny to communicate the natural world. He, however, complies with other aspects of Schiller's analysis of naïvety. Schiller says: 'It is a prerequisite of the naïve that nature is victorious over art' (24). In the short poem 'Art: Labour and Nature' (*Works* 555) Harpur asks 'what can give beauty to a forest tree / Or a vast lake with mountain scenery?' He answers 'Nature alone—dame Nature, working lonely,' not 'Art and Labour's wisdom.' He acknowledges that art is subordinate to Nature. Schiller determines that the naïve poet

acknowledges the existence of nature according to its own unalterable laws (21). Adrian Mitchell reminds us that ‘what Harpur postulates through his imagery is his belief in an invariable, orderly, harmonious, stable realm of existence’ (*Charles Harpur* xxvii), albeit one that is not always comfortable or convenient for humans. These essentials are evident in poems such as ‘The Bush Fire’ (*Works* 173) and ‘The Creek of the Four Graves’ (*Works* 161). Another qualification for a naïve poet according to Schiller is that there must be no metaphysics of loss in the relationship between the narrator and the natural world (31). Many of Harpur’s nature poems are presented as immediate experience rather than belonging to a vanished past: he does not search for lost nature.

For Harpur, the natural world is sensuously perceived to be all around. There are no signs of longing for oneness with nature, which itself identifies alienation. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty says ‘my body is not only one perceived among others, it is the mesurant (*mesurant*) of all . . . the dimensions of the world’ (248-49). I am suggesting that Harpur sees himself as one among the other parts of nature, and the one who is the *mesurant*, the one who listens to the Muse of the evergreen Forest and interprets meaning. His relationship with nature is not one of ownership or control, then, but of submission; not the condescension of enlightenment, but the compliance of mutual dwelling.

### Dwelling Poetically

Martin Heidegger, when discussing the relation between the human and the other-than human, explains his theory of what it means to dwell relative to language. He says ‘The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling’ (‘Building’ 145). In ‘Poetically’ he claims ‘Poetry is what really lets us dwell’ (213). Heidegger borrowed the key phrase ‘poetically, man dwells’ from the German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin. Placing these words in context in Hölderlin’s poem and focussing on the word ‘measure’ adds extra meaning to Harpur’s poetics. Hölderlin says: ‘man / Not unhappily measures himself / Against the godhead’. In Heidegger’s words, ‘The taking of measure is what is poetic in dwelling. Poetry is measuring’ (‘Poetically’ 219). This ‘taking of measure’ and writing in a way that is ‘fourfold’ (involving earth, sky, divinity and mortals) as suggested by Heidegger (‘Building’ 147-149), applies also to Harpur’s work. One example of these concepts is evident, for example, in the poem ‘Happiness and Faith.’ He says: ‘Love, so mighty in itself, / So God-like, and thence capable to make / And keep the heart’s integrity divine’ (*Works*, 287): the godhead is the measure by which Harpur assesses his dwelling. He lovingly maintains his place of habitation and ‘saves’ the earth in that he is, in a Heideggerian sense, freeing something into its own ‘presencing’ (‘Building’ 148). In his poem ‘The Poet’, Harpur writes:

The poet,—he whose glorious gift,  
Free of the world, and making free,  
Heavenward on wings of melody  
Can all things lift! (*Works* 356)

Here, his poetry presents a kind of mandate based on individual perception of a natural world in which the individual entities work in symbiosis: there is an interactive domain operating between humans and the rest of nature. Personal reflection on the relationship between the observer and the observed is a facilitator of natural experience. This is evident in his long poem 'A Poet's Home'. It begins:

As erewhile pictured in a sweet day-dream  
Amid the cloudlands of Hope's vernal sky,  
In soul-born colours—such as only beam,  
To enhance all beauty, through the Poet's eye. (*Works* 224)

Sometimes it seems the natural world is not presented for its own sake alone but also as impetus for the poet to engage in thinking and pondering. This type of poetry engages with meditations and feelings. In 'Dawn in the Australian Forest' the narrator says:

And the great soul of Man with a relief  
Surpassing joy, as thereby given afresh  
To feel the presence of the greater Soul  
Which makes all Nature . . . (*Works* 198)

These poems are in keeping with what Wordsworth declared in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) to be the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (598), and that it 'takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility' (*Preface* 611). For Wordsworth powerful feelings should be tempered by the 'music of harmonious metrical language . . .' (611).

Harpur also recorded his opinion on the metrics of poetry, saying:

I conceived that such an unconfined many-metered structure of verse as might be varied and paragraphically moulded (after the manner of a musical movement) to the peculiar demands of every occasion, and appear therefore to result spontaneously from the very nature of things depicted . . . (*Works* 457)

It could be said that Harpur saw his poems' musicality as 'a recurring cycle, a heartbeat', as 'an answering to nature's own rhythms, an echoing of the song of the earth', as expressed by Jonathan Bate (*Song* 76). In understanding his work we might come to see his *poiesis* as a path to our *oikos*, our place of dwelling.

Harpur is stimulated by natural phenomena and is primarily concerned with human experience within the natural world. As with many of his poems, the aesthetic experience, which involves sensuous perception, is paramount. In 'The Poet's Home,' for instance, aesthetic experience distils the essential nature of being in the world. There is a keen sense of the moment lived in a great cognisant domain, the actual world as it reveals itself. The plants, the poultry and other animals and insects appear dynamic, and vibrantly present. They are more than backdrop and much more than symbol; the details act as a kind of communication, offering a tapestry of information in which the modality of poetry operates. To use one of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's idioms, Harpur's poetry discloses the 'intertwining' of the visible rational world, and the invisible, as revealed

through the senses; there is a ‘bond between the flesh and the idea’ (*Visible* 130-155). As is the case in the more somnambulant poem, ‘A Mid-Summer Noon in the Australian Forest’ (*Works* 199), the human observer is as if absorbed in the world; s/he is part of it. Out of the mighty brooding stillness unexpected complexities of nature emerge. Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, says perception brings into play sensory spheres and ‘primitive complicities with the world’ (448). And for it to enter our lives, as Merleau-Ponty points out, each natural object ‘must be made of colours and of tactile and sonorous qualities’ (363). Harpur uses sensuous perception to connect all things.

He looks at things in terms of their own essence, their own ‘indwelling spirit’, their power to exist in the sense suggested by Friedrich von Schelling (1807), bringing to bear a ‘spiritual eye that penetrates their husk and feels the force at work within them’ (‘Concerning’ 327). In ‘A Mid-Summer Noon’, for instance, it seems as Schelling suggests that ‘the spirit of nature is liberated from its bonds and feels its kinship with the soul’ (‘Concerning’ 342). This is established by the ‘cool murmur’ of the rill and tranquil play of gentle movements. Nature is allowed the faculty of *feeling*. Harpur’s metaphor for the poetics of revelation awakens the inner voice of nature:

Tired Summer, in her forest bower  
Turning with the noontide hour,  
Heaves a slumberous breath, ere she  
Once more slumbers peacefully. (*Works* 200)

Poetically refining the essential sense of being in the world while acknowledging the right of the other-than-human to exist in terms of its own being, I propose, identifies true ecopoetics. This will be discussed later in relation to the pastoral. Perhaps Kate Rigby might agree poems such as this lean toward the recovery of the earth as a ‘locus of the holy’ (*Topographies* 114). The poet is connecting with the natural world, providing a way to rescue humanity from the perceived post-industrial and colonial sense of alienation from its source of divine Being. Nature, for Harpur, is not alien but a component of his life, a refuge for his consciousness. He is doing more than what Rigby calls ‘constructing’ a view (*Topographies* 77). What matters in poems such as ‘A Mid-Summer Noon’, and what constitutes ecopoetry for Rigby, ‘is not verisimilitude but ambience: the intimation of what happens when the boundaries of subject and object become blurred and the self is radically opened to a circumambient natural world’ (*Topographies* 226).

It is in and through the phenomenology of the natural world that Harpur finds expression for poetic language: his consciousness is *presence* in the world; and space is experienced through bodily presence. These concepts of *presence* and *experience* are in keeping with what Gernot Böhme comprehends as the ‘production of atmospheres’ (‘Atmosphere’ 116). Böhme’s new aesthetics regards *perception* as ‘the experience of the presence of persons, objects and environments’ (116). Harpur produces atmospheres. In discussing Böhme’s theory of aesthetics, Rigby acknowledges that Harpur’s verbalisation of the ‘atmospheric experience of place and season’ in the companionship of ants, grasshoppers, locusts, hornets, beetles and the murmuring rill in ‘A Mid-Summer Noon’, invites readers to ‘share in the feeling of quietude invoked by his words’ (*Ecocritical Theory* 148). There

is a certain atmosphere produced that can influence the reader's *feelings*, and alter his/her mood. Harpur's nature poetry provides an infinite supply of images for the expression of human thoughts, feelings, and interactions. He is guiding the reader through an emotional space, reminding them of their own emotional susceptibility.

He also produces atmospheres that are perceived as not agreeable. There is tension between environment and culture in his poetry: the colonists struggle for survival in environs outside the settlement; from a colonists perspective these areas are true wilderness. Threats to humans are evident, for instance, in 'A Storm in the Mountains' (*Works*, 181-187), 'The Bush Fire' (*Works*, 173-180), and 'The Creek of the Four Graves' (*Works* 161-172). In the latter, the reader is invited to behold a wonder as chaos is eclipsed by the 'conglobing' moon. In this poem, nature is potentially a hostile stranger, bent on its own processes, heedless of the circumstance humans find themselves in: it is 'the perilous vast wilderness / That lay around them like a spectral world' (164). All of nature, including the moon and the stars, goes silently about its business untouched by the dire predicament of the men in that poem who, after much tribulation, lose their lives. The environment is presented as a process; it absorbs everything, including humans. When the story-teller, Egremont, seems to have vanished into the bush, the natives are fear-struck. They identify him as part of their legend about the creek; he becomes part of the wilderness. Later he emerges from the natural world as if reborn. As pointed out by Mitchell, Harpur reveals the 'confrontation between the old and new cultures, the European sensibility and the local place-sense' (*Harpur* xxvi). In these poems, the domestic is pitted against the extremities of the natural world (the other-than-human); the narrator (and the reader) must stand by as natural processes take their course. From Harpur's white-centric perspective, the natural world always resists human control. The events that unfold for the four men in 'The Creek of the Four Graves' occur because they venture beyond the known area of settlement.

### **An Ecocritical Reading of Harpur's Pastoral**

In 'The Creek of the Four Graves', a settler and his four shepherds travel into unknown territory to find water and pasture. In relation to this poem Ivor Indyk claims a 'magnification and inversion of the pastoral order' primarily because the Australian natural environment is not responsive to human needs ('Pastoral' 839). I suggest Harpur, in that poem, intentionally overthrew the pastoral conventions; he knew the potential for dramatic affect. He, after all, understood how to successfully capture the pastoral mode in poems such as 'A Mid-Summer Noon in the Australian Forest' in all its Wordsworthian tranquility (as in 'What a mighty stillness broods'), in minute pastoral detail, the scene replete with pastoral comfort. I propose that rather than being, as Indyk suggests, an 'unpopulated pastoral', given that 'the elements of nature take on the roles normally played by humans in the pastoral', or that the poet considers the Aboriginals as 'improper subjects' ('Pastoral' 839), Harpur has populated the poem with powerful components of nature to augment the drama. Indyk states that he has traced the existence of the Aboriginal in white Australian writing as 'a disturbing force, reordering or exceeding the pastoral code' ('Pastoral' 850). I suggest Harpur intended the Aboriginal people to be

part of the wild element; perhaps all the entities of nature, including the Aboriginal, are *meant* to unsettle and negate pastoral priorities.

Harpur also inverts anthropocentric reason: he moves beyond familiar experiences which are identified by logical and utilitarian categories by giving vision and voice to the other-than-human. The sun, the waters, the trees and the Indigenous people all contribute to the atmospherics of the poem. They *do* usurp human characteristics. It is the sun whose 'last glances fell / into the gloomy forest's eastern glades'; the waters possessed of 'sylvan eyelashes' gleam and bicker 'Between the margins of some eager stream'; the four men bedded down under the 'dark arms' of the 'circling forest trees' in the 'perilous vast wilderness'; and the Aboriginals issued their 'dire cries, so terrible to hear'. This is the world of 'presence culture' (as opposed to 'meaning culture') as described by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht where the entities of nature keep coming closer and where humans can inscribe their bodies into the rhythms of the surrounding cosmology: the cosmology 'of which these humans consider themselves to be part' (*Production* 82-3).

### The Relevance of Place

The sense of identifying with a place where we feel we belong is established in dwelling: the inhabitant associates with the happenings of the place. The outsider might appreciate only the outward appearances while the resident will connect with 'inside' knowledge. The use of the indigenous names for the animals, birds and the other entities of the natural world in 'The Kangaroo Hunt', for example, points to Harpur's inside knowledge of a people and language that seem embedded in the natural world. These names (along with detailed information) can be found in the notes as recorded in *Works* (491-510). They include, but are not limited to, the kindyne (the 'ring-tailed' possum), the bidawong ('the flying squirrel'), gooburra (the 'Laughing Jackass' or the 'Settler's Clock', commonly known now as the kookaburra), warragl (the native dog, or dingo), teleltella (the 'bell-bird'), the yerowala (the blue-mountain parrot), and the duaralli (the 'kangaroo-rat'). Euroka, a word which Harpur uses several times in his poetry, is an aboriginal name for the sun. According to Wright, many of the Aboriginal names for these animals and birds survive now only in Harpur's poems and notes (*Charles Harpur* 31).

In his notes the poet implies that the indigenous people lived in harmony with the natural environment. The Hawkesbury region is the ancestral home of the Darug people. Harpur observed the diminishing number of Indigenous people in the wake of colonialism, and claims that for this reason the balance of nature was upset. The goanna, for instance, was no longer consumed in sufficient numbers to check their increase. He writes:

. . . our future ornithologists will look in vain for many kinds of birds which they will find mentioned in earlier Colonial records . . . . The unchecked increase of the large tree-climbing gwana [goanna] in the waste portions of those districts in which the aboriginal have become extinct or nearly so, is a main cause of the extinction as well of many kinds of our native birds. (note e, *Works* 501-2)

In the poem 'Aboriginal Death Song' he refers to the Indigenous man as 'Brother' (Ackland, *Charles Harpur* 86). In a swipe against the exclusions and excesses of



colonialism he says in 'Eden Lost': 'Excluding brotherhood / He only with disnatured mind, / becomes the Tyrant of his kind' (*Works* 406). Humanity, after all, is the common denominator.

### **Conclusion**

Discerning via the historical and literary writings the feelings some settlers experienced with this land supports and reinforces current efforts towards environmental connection and discussion. Retrieving, referencing and reassessing the poetry of writers such as Charles Harpur is an important starting point. His poems are irreplaceable: they are unique as an environmental text of the time. By recording Aboriginal words and their meanings in his text and by recognising the perceptive, agential gift of these first inhabitants to relate to the land—people who have invoked the land poetically for millennia—Harpur's writing has the capacity to relocate the European settler, as well as others of our cosmopolitan nation, within a network of established symbiotic relationships. His extensive notes support his credentials as an eco-poet. He is not as articulate or eloquent as Wordsworth, the poet he admired and tried to emulate; his approach, however, is fresh, and it reveals an original eco-poetics. For Harpur, human history is forever implicated in natural history: he recognises the interconnectedness of all things. His work is foundationally relevant for Australia in this environmentally conscious age. It has the capacity to hold up the image of areas as yet unaltered by non-indigenous people in this country, and to remind us of the vulnerability of natural habitats and their other-than-human inhabitants.

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