



ENVIRONMENTAL MEMORY AND WAR TRAUMA IN JUDITH WRIGHT'S POEMS

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Abstract

Judith Wright is one of the most important voices in Australian literature, and what makes her poetry stand apart is not only its lyrical beauty but also its deep ethical weight. This paper examines how Wright uses the Australian landscape as something more than a scenic backdrop — she treats it as a living archive, a space that holds memory, grief, and the consequences of human violence. Drawing on selected poems, this study argues that Wright establishes a kind of 'environmental memory': the idea that the land itself bears witness to human trauma and carries its scars forward across time. The paper reads these poems through the lens of ecocriticism and trauma theory, drawing on the work of Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard, and Cathy Caruth. Rather than treating these as separate frameworks, this study sees them as naturally intertwined in Wright's poetic vision, where ecological destruction and human suffering are never entirely separable.

Keyword:

Judith Wright, environmental memory, war trauma, ecocriticism, Australian poetry, landscape, colonial guilt, trauma theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is something quietly unsettling about the way Judith Wright describes the Australian landscape. The hills, the rivers, the birds — they are all vividly present in her poems, yet they are never simply beautiful. They carry something. There is always a shadow underneath the colour, a silence beneath the sound. For Wright, nature is not a refuge from human history but a record of it — and that record includes violence, displacement, loss, and grief that refuses to go away. This paper explores what I am calling environmental memory in Wright's work: the way the natural world in her poems functions as a site of accumulated trauma, holding the marks of what human beings have done — to the land, to Indigenous peoples, to each other through war — even when the people themselves have moved on or fallen silent. Wright wrote during a period of enormous historical pressure: the aftermath of the Second World War, the growing awareness of what colonisation had meant for Aboriginal Australians, and the accelerating destruction of the natural world in the name of progress. Her poetry registers all of this through image, feeling, and a language that gets under the reader's skin. This study focuses on a selection of poems where these concerns are most clearly visible, bringing them into conversation with ideas from ecocriticism and trauma theory. What emerges is a clearer picture of how Wright understood the relationship between environmental damage and human suffering — and why that relationship still matters.

The concept of environmental memory, as used here, describes something Wright's poems enact again and again: the





landscape does not simply exist in the present but holds within it the residue of past events — particularly violent or traumatic ones — returning that residue to anyone willing to look closely enough. Lawrence Buell, in his foundational work on environmental writing, argues that place carries ethical weight — that how we describe landscape reflects and shapes our moral relationship to it. For Wright, this was not merely a literary observation but a lived reality. She grew up on a cattle station in Queensland, on land taken from its original inhabitants, and she spent much of her adult life as an environmental activist.

"Bora Ring" (1946) is perhaps the clearest early example of environmental memory at work. Wright meditates on an Aboriginal ceremonial site overtaken by European settlement. The poem opens with a striking directness:

"The song is gone; the dance

is secret with the dancers in the earth," (Collected Poems 7)

These two lines do something precise and difficult. They do not describe the site as merely empty. The song is gone, but the dance is secret — hidden, preserved underground, still present in a form that the dominant culture cannot read. The land becomes a kind of closed archive, holding what the colonizers cannot access or destroy. This is environmental memory at its most concentrated: the earth as keeper of what human violence tries to erase.

Later in the same poem, Wright describes the absence of the ceremonial fire and the dancers who once gathered around it — and the silence that has replaced them — through imagery that makes the land itself feel like a mourner. Greg Garrard has observed that ecological literature must make visible the connections between human activity and environmental consequence. Wright's poetry does this, but in an unusual direction: rather than tracing damage forward, she traces it backward, showing how the marks we leave on the land are really marks of who we are and what we have done.

The Second World War enters Wright's poetry in a way that is easy to underestimate. She was not a war poet in any conventional sense — she did not write from trenches or battlefields. But the war is present in her work as a kind of atmospheric disturbance, a grief that changes how everything else is seen. Her husband, the philosopher Jack McKinney, suffered profound psychological damage during the war, and Wright lived alongside that damage for years. This was not distant history but something she encountered every day.

What is remarkable is how this personal grief gets processed through the landscape. In "The Moving Image" (1946), Wright writes about time not as comfort but as relentless dissolution:

".....And the clock begins to race.

We are caught in the endless circle of time and star

That never chime with the blood;we weary, we grow lame,"(CP3)

The image of time as something mechanical — moved by "little fidget wheels" — captures a post-war world in which ordinary human rhythms have been disrupted. Clocks still tick, but the inner time of grief and trauma runs differently, thicker, like flood water that does not flow. Cathy Caruth's account of traumatic experience is relevant here: trauma does not enter conscious memory cleanly but returns in fragmentary, indirect ways. In Wright's poetry, the landscape becomes one of the surfaces onto which traumatic experience is displaced — not hidden, but held in a different form.

"Nigger's Leap, New England" (1946), written in the year the war ended, is one of the most haunting examples of how Wright connects war-time grief to colonial violence and environmental memory. The poem describes a cliff from which Aboriginal people were driven to their deaths by colonial settlers. Wright writes at night, and the darkness carries the weight of what she cannot fully face:

"Night lips the harsh





Scarp of the tableland and cools its granite.

Night floods us suddenly as history

That has sunk many islands in its good time.”(CP 16)

Writing in the immediate shadow of the Holocaust and the Pacific War, she turns the confrontation with mass violence back onto Australian history, asking her readers to see the violence at home they had preferred to forget. The cliff is still there. The night is still there. The land holds the event in its geography, in the literal fact of the drop and the darkness below. This is environmental memory at its most ethically demanding: the non-human world as an uncomfortable witness.

Birds appear throughout Wright's poetry with a regularity that goes beyond personal preference. They are quick, alive, and — crucially — free from the property relations and historical guilt that weigh so heavily on the human world in her poems. But they are also fragile and threatened, and in many poems their presence is shadowed by the awareness that they are disappearing. Wright's ornithological attention was not merely aesthetic; she understood species loss as genuine catastrophe.

In "Egrets" (1962), the birds arrive almost as a vision, clean and white against the muddy complexity of the world below them:

“Once as I travelled through a quiet evening,

I saw a pool, jet-black and mirror-still.”(CP156)

The stillness here is fragile — mirror-still is also the stillness of something that could shatter. The egrets that appear over this dark water become a temporary revelation, beautiful precisely because they exist apart from the damaged world the speaker inhabits. But the poem does not end in consolation. The beauty of the birds is inseparable from the awareness of how precarious they are, how easily the pool and everything around it can be lost. This is where ecocriticism and trauma theory converge most productively in reading Wright. The traumatised mind, as trauma theorists have described it, is often oriented toward loss rather than the future. Wright's environmental imagination works in exactly this way: her descriptions of the natural world are always marked by the knowledge of what is being destroyed.

In "Flame-Tree in a Quarry" (1946), Wright turns to a flowering tree growing against a background of rock blasted for human use:

“From the broken bone of the hill

Stripped and left for dead,

Like a wrecked skull,

Leaps out this bush of blood.”(CP 57)

The tree's blood-red blooms against the quarried rock form a stark image of natural persistence in the face of industrial violence. Wright does not romanticise the tree's survival — the cliff is broken, the quarry is real — but she does invest the tree with a kind of stubborn witness. It survives in a damaged world without pretending the damage is not there. This is the posture Wright's own poetry tends to adopt: fully present to beauty, fully awake to destruction, refusing to choose between them.

One of the most original aspects of Wright's poetic vision is how she refuses to separate environmental damage from colonial history. For her, these are not two different problems but expressions of the same underlying orientation: a European relationship to the Australian continent defined by extraction, control, and the suppression of Indigenous knowledge. This is not polemic in Wright's poetry — she is too good a poet for that — but it is a persistent moral pressure that shapes how she sees the landscape she grew up in.





In "At Cooloola" (1955), Wright describes a landscape that is both extraordinarily beautiful and morally complex. She is watching the heron, the light on the water, the reed beds, and yet something prevents full surrender to the moment:

“but I’m a stranger, come of a conquering people.

I cannot share his calm, who watch his lake,

Being unloved by all my eyes delight in,

And made uneasy, for an old murder’s sake.”(CP 131)

These lines are among the most direct Wright ever wrote about colonial guilt, and they are striking precisely because they appear in the middle of a poem that is otherwise given over to natural beauty. The sudden first-person declaration cuts through the lyrical surface like a blade. Wright does not reach for consolation or resolution. She holds the contradiction open: she loves this place, she is implicated in its taking, and the Aboriginal dead are present in the poem as an unspoken weight pressing against its otherwise luminous imagery.

This is also where war trauma and colonial guilt become intertwined in Wright's vision. Both are forms of historical violence that refuse to stay in the past. Both leave marks on the world — on the land, on the minds of survivors, on the cultures that inherit the consequences. And both require, in Wright's view, a kind of witnessing that is willing to be uncomfortable, that does not reach too quickly for consolation.

What holds together the different threads of Wright's engagement with environmental memory and war trauma is an ethics of witnessing. She is a poet who insists on looking, even when looking is painful. She does not turn away from colonial violence in the Australian landscape. She does not aestheticise the suffering that war produces. She holds these things in her attention and asks her reader to do the same.

In "Train Journey" (1949), Wright describes travelling through New South Wales and watching the landscape pass outside the window. The poem turns suddenly when she becomes aware of the history embedded in the land she is moving through:

“Glassed with cold sleep and dazzled by the moon,

Out of the confused hammering dark of the train

I looked and saw under the moon’s cold sheet

Your delicate dry breasts, country that built my heart;”(CP 70)

The land mourns alongside the human mourner; or rather, the human mourner discovers that the land has been mourning all along. This is environmental memory expressed at the level of atmosphere: grief as a quality of light and air and passing country seen from a train window.

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have argued that true witnessing is not a passive act but a form of ethical engagement — that to truly witness is to take on some of the weight of what has happened, to refuse the comfortable position of the bystander. Wright's poetry enacts exactly this kind of witnessing. It asks its reader to be present to losses that are ongoing, to acknowledge complicity in histories that are still producing consequences, to resist the temptation to let the beautiful surface of the landscape conceal what lies beneath it.

In "For New England" (1946), she writes directly to the land of her childhood, in a gesture that is part homecoming. The settlers cannot own the land in the way they imagine. The land has its own depth that resists their claim. And the speaker, descendant of those settlers, knows it. This knowing is the beginning of ethical responsibility in Wright's poetic world.

Judith Wright's poetry does something that very few poets manage: it makes the environmental and the traumatic, the ecological and the historical, feel like aspects of a single continuous reality. Her landscapes are archives. Her birds are





elegies. Her colonial guilt is inseparable from her love of the land she is implicated in having taken. And her response to war — conducted not through battle scenes but through the grief of living alongside someone permanently damaged by combat — finds expression not in protest poems but in poems about hills and rivers and birds that seem to carry the weight of everything human beings do to each other and to the world.

The concept of environmental memory helps us name what Wright's poetry is doing: not projecting human emotion onto a neutral landscape, but perceiving in the landscape a genuine record of human action, and insisting that this record demands a response. This is ecocriticism and trauma theory working together not as competing frameworks but as complementary insights into how the natural world and human history are wound around each other.

Wright died in 2000, but her concerns feel urgently contemporary. The environmental losses she mourned in the 1950s have only deepened. The colonial histories she insisted on naming are still being contested and reckoned with. The traumas of war continue to shape lives and landscapes in ways that outlast the conflicts that produced them. Her poetry does not offer solutions to any of this. What it offers is something perhaps more valuable: a way of seeing that holds the damaged world in full view, without flinching and without despair, and finds in that difficult seeing a form of love that is equal to the difficulty.

That, finally, is what makes Wright's poetry worth returning to now — not as a historical document but as a living provocation. She asks us to look at what we have done and what we are doing, and she does so in language beautiful enough to make that looking bearable.

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