

## A PASTICHE OF CULTURE, POLITICS, AND LAND IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT WRIGLEY

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### Abstract:

Robert Wrigley is an important voice in contemporary American poetry. His writings echo the romantic and postmodern resonations side by side. Wrigley offers a keen observation on US politics, culture, society and landscape, and makes an authentic leap from common to uncommon. A pastiche of culture, politics, and land is seen in the poetry of Robert Wrigley. He handles it delicately. The present paper offers an analytical note on the major issues in his poetry with a close reading of major texts.

Keywords: Robert Wrigley, American Poetry, Culture, Politics, Land.

In 1971, with a draft lottery number of 66, he was inducted into the U.S. Army. Wrigley attended Southern Illinois University and the University of Montana, where he studied with the late Richard Hugo, and with Madeline De Frees, and John Haines. It was in Montana that he developed an abiding love for the western wilderness. Since 1977 he has lived in Idaho, teaching first at Lewis-Clark State College, in Lewiston, and since 1999, at the University of Idaho, where he teaches in the MFA program in creative writing. He has also taught at the University of Oregon, where he served as acting Director of the MFA program, and twice at the University of Montana, where he returned to hold the Richard Hugo Chair in Poetry. He has also taught in the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College, in North Carolina.

Wrigley has published ten works of poetry: *The Sinking of Clay City* (Copper Canyon Press, 1979); *Moon In a Mason Jar* (University of Illinois, 1986); *What My Father Believed* (Illinois, 1991); *In the Bank of Beautiful Sins* (Penguin, 1995); *Reign of Snakes* (Penguin, 1999); *Lives of the Animals* (Penguin, 2003); *Earthly Meditations: New and Selected Poems* (Penguin, 2006); and most recently, *Beautiful Country* (Penguin, 2010), *The Church of Omnivorous Life: Selected Poems* (UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2013) and *Anatomy of Melancholy & Other Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

He is the recipient of two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as two fellowships from the Idaho Commission on the Arts, and a fellowship from the John

Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. In 1987-88, he served as the state of Idaho's Writer-in-Residence. Among his awards are the; J. Howard and Barbara M. J. Wood Prize, as well as the Frederick Bock Prize, from Poetry magazine, the Wagner Award from the Poetry Society of America, and six Pushcart Prizes. His poems have twice been selected for reprint in Best American Poetry anthologies. In the Bank of Beautiful Sins received the San Francisco Poetry Center Book Award for 1996; it was, in addition, one of the five finalists for the Lenore Marshall Award from the Academy of American Poets. Reign of Snakes was awarded the 2000 Kingsley Tufts Award in poetry. Lives of the Animals won The Poets' Prize for 2005. Wrigley's poems have appeared in prestigious magazines and literary journals, including The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly, and Poetry.

He lives with his wife, the writer Kim Barnes, in the woods, near Moscow, Idaho. In a personal communication, on the question of what inspires him to write, he says, "Everything inspires me to write because writing is both what I do and who I am. Inspiration, for me, is not something that comes to me; it's something I work my way into. Inspiration requires sweat and toil and failure; I'm good at those." (Communication with R.P. Singh, 8 November 2012)

Moon in a Mason Jar (1986) is the testimony of Wrigley being a keen observer of everything happening around him. Life is shown in different shades-strong, imaginative, real and resolute, which keeps a subtle urge for the rhythms and keen longing for cadences. "Appaloosa" seems to be the best poem of this collection.

In What My Father Believed (1991) we find many famous poems like "American Manhood", "At The Vietnam Veterans Memorial", "The Big Dipper", "Body And Soul", "C.O.", "Camping", "Economics", "Flight", "The Flight Line", "The Grandmothers", "His Father's Whistle", "In The Dark Pool, Finding You", "Invisible Men", "Light After Light", "A Memory Of Garlic", "Night Calls: His Children", "Night Calls: His Heart", "Night Calls: His Wife", "Night Calls: Locusts", "Night Calls: The Midnight Whistle", "Night Rising", "The Scar", "Under The Double Eagle" "What My Father Believed" and "The Wishing Tree". These poems with almost self-explanatory content, make an epic of the American psyche.

As a refreshing narrative, set in both intellectual and aesthetic patterns, In the Bank of Beautiful Sins (1995) works out a draft on psyche, behaviour, and perception of the human being. A human being in one life and one body simultaneously lives many lives, those of the human being, that more and less than human, that of an animal, an angel, a predator, a prey, a sinner and that of a saint. It reflects through the poems that Robert Wrigley is a master in the art of finding beauty and utility even in the margin –put, and negligible events. He makes a fusion of myth with the daily chores of life. In "Majestic," he finds nature as "white Lincoln's arc/ from the crown of the downriver road/ and the splash it bellied in the water." This attention to the complexity of the moment as experienced also shows up in "About Language," in which a child innocently curses as geese fly gracefully overhead. A tone of pleasing sadness spreads overall.

Earthly Meditations: New and Selected Poems (2006) is a collection of eighty-odd poems, nineteen out of them are original, and the rest sixty-one selected from his first six books. It is the first book published after the publication of *Lives of the Animals* in 2003. Wrigley was given the Kingsley Tufts Award for this collection. *Earthly Meditations: New and Selected Poems* is a significant work from the angle of the stylistic change. There is a visible change from the formal verse to the free verse. Wrigley makes a pastiche of diversified images, which shows his development into artistic maturity and donning the modesty of thoughts. His sincere association with the unsentimental subsequently culminates into many surprising poetic deeds. The lines from the poem "Lull" - "Wind piled husks at the door / and made us sleepy" show a man's helplessness and his being a puppet in the hands of nature which sometimes become 'red in tooth and claws'. "News" reminds us the strains of English Metaphysical poetry through the lines- "I stroked it lightly as I could, as I might not my lover's breast." In this collection, we find that nature has become stronger against man although the chemical process in emotions for making poetry is quite similar as it is in the earlier collection through the attitude, and the scheduled catharsis takes a new turn of showmanship. The stylistic stake of this collection suggests that the poems are not made in the laboratory of the mind, but the thoughts have grown into maturity as the coming of the age.

*Beautiful Country* (2010) is a collection, in which the humanist and naturalist Wrigley looks at the position of the United States of America as a geographical, political and diplomatic player in the humdrum of today's world. Fine cartography of both human and natural landscape has been presented with strong skills. The poems in this collection share his war experience in the pretext of his working as a Commanding Officer during the Vietnam war. The poems like "Exxon", the title poem "Beautiful Country", "After a Rainstorm," "Hail Storm in the Mountains," "Letting Go" etc. expose the real-life picture of the modern world, as well as delineating the socio-political, and economic reputation of the United States of America. *Beautiful Country* perfectly blends Wrigley's making into a senior army officer and his views on the negativity of war. He finds war to be senseless and amoral activity. The poem "Miss June" shows an interface of a young Wrigley with his senior, who finds the peace sign to be an offense. He gets chiseled in his dog tags. The poem reads, "tapping with the heel / of a combat boot on the butt-end of a pocket knife." The collection also brings to light many hidden practices like the use of marijuana and heroin among soldiers. The poet shares his experience when he enjoyed with his fellow trainees- "lot used around / ...several resinous pounds of pot / ... / back from a day at 'Special Training Detachment.'" "Exxon" is a critique of America, and extends up to questioning our modern ways of civilization. The lines- "Behold the amazing artificial arm, a machine / eerily similar to the arm it replaced" is a critique of the war in the Middle East. The poet believes that oil is the cause of war in the Middle East. "American Fear" takes us to Victorian sensibility, and later brings forth the fears of a modern self. The lines "an actual firm, an employer, a company/selling 'clothing for the disaffected / youth culture,' ... / a marketing vision for the

new world" takes us to the skepticism prevailing in the world of today, and indicate the emergence of massive barophobia and vistiphobia ."County", "A rumor of Bears", "All Souls" etc. make the poet nostalgic for the life he has lived in the lap of nature. "A Lock of Her Hair" is a wonderful love poem, and "Sisyphus Bee" is the poet's agenda for freedom. Poems like "Fraternity," "Poor Priscilla," "Progress" reflect the fever and fret of modern life.

Thus Wrigley is a master of creating a symphony from diversified tunes and tenors. His wide experience and learning have endowed his poetry God's plenty in thematic stands but his handling of war experience and, and delineating the plight of animals makes him an authority.

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