I don't suppose you have ever heard of the Akashic Record?" (Herapath) asked, and she shook her head. He went on then to speak at some length. For some time past, he said, he had been studying the work of Rudolf Steiner. She had heard of him, of course, but knew little about him. He enlightened her with a brief description of the Anthroposophical Movement and its activities before coming back to the point at issue. 'So you see, the contention is,' he concluded, 'that just as, if you want to know about the physical world and its past, you have to investigate whatever your senses can find, if you want to investigate the mental and spiritual past, you have to investigate whatever your mind can find—find, not just fancy. And the difference is that whereas sense-perceptible objects decay and vanish with the passing of time, mental experiences and events do not. They persist in a kind of Cosmic Memory and are accessible for some who know how to explore it. . . . I want to assume for the moment that it is valid, that that alternative method of research is possible, and in particular that Steiner himself pursued it successfully.' (pp. 36–37)

As a result of this exchange, VI resolves 'of her own accord . . . to study Steiner, or some of him, for herself', so that her actions and thoughts are in a definite sense altered and reconstructed for the rest of the novella.

Jack Herbert


Writing a review of this short collection of poems during the week of Darwin's bicentennial, I am struck both by the beauty of this book and its relevance in pointing toward the essential role of poetry in shaping a saner twenty-first-century culture of science. The subject matter of Alfred Russel Wallace's life and work, so thoroughly and strikingly taken up by Anne Chuyssenaar in a condensed form that can only be described as eco-poetry, perfectly complements that imaginative project. A recent New York Times article on the two hundredth anniversary of Darwin's birthday condescendingly referred to Wallace as having independently thought of natural selection, only later to lose faith in it. The Cornell University historian William Provine is quoted as saying that 'poor Wallace couldn't bear it [the implications of the discovery], thus disparaging Wallace's turn to spiritual explanations for the origins of human intellect. The latter perhaps related both to Wallace's doubting of aspects of sexual selection as a driving force in evolutionary development, and his particular emphasis (as the 'father of biogeography') on the role of environmental community in natural selection, rather than the struggle against the environment by individual gene or organism. Yet it is Wallace's very lack of total faith in a materialistic science, and his complexity as a person approaching scientific discovery with wonder, which make him a very fitting focus for Chuyssenaar's effort to reflect not only on his life, but on the role of poetry in such reflection, as itself serving an environmental function.

Thus she quotes Wallace: 'I experienced the joy which every discovery of a new form of life gives to the lover of nature'; and 'so many of the laws which govern the universe and which influence our lives are, by us, unknown'. And she asks in her introduction, 'Can poetry and the other arts thus be seen to have any role to play in evolution, past or to come?' She answers by example, providing in the collection a model for what some environmental philosophers such as Evan Thompson call ecopoetics, a language-art of empathy that is essential for human development in the physical environment, and which ultimately is based in the imagination. As Michael Schellenberger and Ted Nordhaus write in The Death of Environmentalism, 'environmentalists need to tap into the creative worlds of myth-making, even religion, not to better sell narrow and technical policy proposals but rather to figure out who we are and who we need to be'. Poetry has a crucial role to play in such efforts.

The title of the collection exemplifies the relation between physicality and human language (and with the latter, culture, intellect and imagination) that informs the work as a whole. The idea of natural selection had come to Wallace as if intuitively on the volcanic island of Ternate, as Chuyssenaar relates, and there from the local language he coined the phrase that forms her book's title, batu-angas, which describes 'burnt rocks' or cool lava. She writes that the phrase 'could be said to symbolize the visible world at any one time', 'a seeming stasis only, amid the flowing lava of evolution'. This also could be said of poetic text and arts, which form their own cultural topographies that are reciprocally shaped by human imagination and physical environment.

Poetically reimagining Wallace's discovery of natural selection in relation to that title phrase, Chuyssenaar writes:

Hot and cold fits of fever keep Wallace on his bed with nothing to do but think. All round him, specimens waiting. Through gaps in the hut walls
winged life in flight, hunting, fighting, mating, laying eggs.
How is the planet, then, not overrun?
Disease.
Enemies.
Famine.
But: 'Why do some die and some live?'
Beyond sight, that active volcano.
Tracts of 'batu-angsa', burnt rocks, from peak to black-sand shore.
Such sudden terrors part of the huge slow changes. (p. 66)

On the facing page a line from Wallace's own writing: '...all living things were not made for man.' Chysenaar in a poem below that cites 'Pulses of living matter/pulsing forward always' (p. 67).
In an open pasture of Welsh high borderland, not so far from where Wallace began his life (the cradle of biogeography, as it were, amid the breathtaking microcosms of Welsh landscapes), the poet contemplates the speedwell, foxgloves, cow-wheat, mulein and magenta figwort around her, and then the lot of humans: 'One family, so many species./But we're on our own' (p. 53). She then works into verse the OED definition of 'homo', as the genus of which man is the only species, and adds:

In the mind's eye, a jumble of bones:
the robust, the gracile . . . some hips
adapted for walking . . . a skull
whose inner surface curves
to accommodate words.

And a brow whose eyes, deep-set,
may have met our own.
We the last, or latest.
Our trust, the cost of 'sapiens'. (pp. 53-4)

Yet just as Wallace supposedly 'lost faith' in a totalizing science, so too Chysenaar as poet is in turn no blind believer in Wallace's work, a topic to which she had been turned in a sense environmentally, through her encounter with his birthplace in her own adopted habitat of Wales. She writes feelingly of the shipwreck in which he lost many of his specimens.

But, when at last a ship picks them up, and he crawls on deck, the hope of life overcomes him.
Almost; He feels his losses:
the notebooks, specimens, drawings.
'Unknown and beautiful species'
elude even memory now.
'Now everything was gone'.
To a friend he wrote that he knew he must focus his mind on 'the state of things which actually existed'. (p. 47)

Tracing a specimen of Wallace's at the Kew Herbarium, reflecting on his discussion of a flower seemingly flying above a high tropical tree canopy, she writes:

Now I see where the model fails.
Made for display on a table
it has to forgo the thing —
the very thing — which the plant lives by: that 'slender wire
a yard and a half long'.

Which Wallace measured. Which allowed the flower to fly. Which, remembered, made him see in the present tense. (pp. 33-4)

And re-imagining his collection of a tropical butterfly:

This is the living form
of the rainforest's age, an art
grown of its interactions,
which now he has gathered up
into a triangle, dying,
that knowledge folded away.
Our knowledge a little greater. (p. 34)

Hauntingly, Chysenaar develops in poetry an empathy for Wallace's project that includes a larger sense of ecosystem beyond his work:
What stays with me is this —
the feel of where we both were . . .
I find myself thinking of Wallace,
a hunter shouldering his gun
as the only means of touching. (p. 25)

And she implicitly contrasts this with the story of a shamanic initiation rite
among the Kogi Indians in considering the limits of knowing:

Knowledge is never enough.
We have to see — like seeing,
through a telescope, the rings
of Saturn, ordinary Earth
transformed under our feet. (p. 28)

It is Cluysenaar's poetry in tandem with Wallace's scientific career (repre-
sented also by illustrations woven among the poems) that effects such meta-
morphoses of place for her readers. The dreams Wallace has when young of
some huge creature with wings (pp. 22–3), dragon-like, in her poetic hands
becomes a kind of biological counterpoise to Klike's angels, leaving a question:
Are these the secrets of the world that would be released by science, the
butterflies and birds and natural selection emerging from his specimens and
experiences, or some kind of demonic presaging of power symbolized by the
atomic bomb, which for Heidegger came to figure the obliteration of all sense
of the 'thing' itself?

She engages us in an awareness of how, despite his sensitivity to mystery,
Wallace was in one sense participating through science in the colonialism of
his era, which would turn the world in effect into a museum of the human
mind. Yet she conveys how he himself seemed aware of this pitfall as well. In
Cluysenaar's chosen epigraph from him for the entire collection, Wallace
notes: ' . . . if we continue to devote our chief energies to the utilising of our
knowledge of the laws of nature with the view of still further extending our
commerce and our wealth, the evils which necessarily accompany these when
too eagerly pursued, may increase to such gigantic dimensions as to be
beyond our power to alleviate.'

With Wallace today shunted to the side, the exaggerated modern embrace
of Darwin's Tree of Life runs the risk of becoming a fixed world system of its
own, outlining a genealogy of life outside of human experiential tradition and
imagination. An appropriated and exaggerated version, Social Darwinism,
helped justify unprecedented horrors in the twentieth century. It never was
culturally as imaginatively dynamic as the Norse Yggdrasil or the biblical Tree
of Life, explicated by Maximus the Confessor as cosmic logoi or divine
energies forming branches of the Logos, engageable through ascetic contem-
plation and compassion. Such non-scientific traditions of the Tree of Life
articulated forgotten cosmic language that indirectly underlies the art of eco-
poesis and resonates partly in concerns of new species of scholarly thought
with exotic names such as ecosemiotics and ecophenomenology.

All of which is not to say that Darwin's work is responsible for making him
the hero of today's oddly out-of-date modernist crusade against God in 'geno-
centric' writings by figures such as Richard Dawkins (outlined by Jeremy
Naydler in 'The New Crusade Against God', Temenos Academy Review 11),
or that Wallace is some kind of scientific antihero for the humanities. But
Wallace's ambiguities, as translated poetically by Cluysenaar, engage better
not only with premodern or non-modern traditions but with edgy postmodern
scientific cosmological mysteries such as string theory and the so-called
anthropic principle. It is not impossible to find such wonder and empathy even
in a totalizing scientism. But in that milieu such qualities do not pass them-
selves along creatively to future generations as a culture deeply engaged with
nature in a personal way. Rather the culture lacks the self-reflection to realize
(as Heidegger put it) that the objective appearance it constructs is really an
idea, not the 'thing' itself in the hiddenness yet appearing of nature. But in a
non-modern multiplicity of interactive temporalities and non-temporalities,
interwoven by experience of imaginative memory, it is not a conflict even
today to live by, say, both the Hebrew or Julian calendars and the Gregorian at
the same time; nor to tally years from creation as do Jewish and Byzantine
traditions (annus mundi) in a sacred time of thousands rather than billions of
years, although actively engaged secularly in 'old earth' scientific culture in
geological 'deep time'.

Without an openness to its own ambiguities and to poetry, evolutionary
scientism parallels the religious fundamentalism that it understandably abhors.
Both intelligent design (as defined mainly by evangelical Protestantism) and
an absolutist culture of scientism emerged historically from similar cultural
backgrounds. Both have in common a certain kind of literal yet analogue view of reality as unfolding in effect like a computer program, ethically
removing earth from the heart of Creation. The elect mind knows the pro-
gram, the human heart becomes strangely distant and possessive of that
which it strives to observe and know by objectification, and nature seems to
become merely an allegory used up for theory. We end up with either the
Rapture and *Left Behind*, or with Stephen Hawking’s ‘disposable planet’ advocacy of apocalyptic space colonization. A double-bind of internalized objectification shapes our consuming idolatry, not iconography, of nature. It enables the instrumentalist black magic of a technological culture and a throw-away earth. The inward-looking cloister of late medieval Scholasticism is replicated superficially, in the academic quad, the corporate atrium, and the consumer shopping mall. The binarization of an internalized analogic is encoded in cyberspace. Biology only escapes this trap in the art of ecology: a narrative of relational experience and empathy that is ecopoiesis, the kind of ecopoetry that Cluysemaa practices here. In such ecopoetics we can find a truly *homologous* participatory sense of nature (of life related at deep levels) rather than an *analogous* code. Here we glimpse in ecological poetry what Gregory Bateson called a real participatory sense of the human organism within its environment, as opposed to an ethos without poetry of organism struggling against the world through an abstractly binarized reductionist and continuous loop, encoding and decoding an earth that is always to be used, in cyberspace as in real life.

*Alfred K. Siewers*


James Harpur is a poet who takes poetry seriously, not in the sense that he is humourless, but in that he understands its links with visionary states, with philosophy and with the mystical, as well as its capacity to convey the sensuous details of the world around us.

_The Dark Age_, the title of his latest collection, has several meanings, some more ironic than others. In the first section of the book, ‘On Reaching Buddhahood’, it refers to nighttime—the eerie expanses of a deserted military airbase at night, the strange, moonlike image of a child in the paper print of a pre-natal scan. The latter poem, ‘Alien’, takes a little time and several readings to interpret, surely to mimic the process by which one gradually manages to ‘read’ these enigmatic prints, where a cloudy light-and-dark image resolves, with some difficulty, into the form of the growing child floating at some odd angle in its pre-birth world. The most powerful poems in this group, however, are dark in another sense. ‘Stroke’ is a series of villanelles recording the illness and death of a woman—probably the poet’s mother—with bleak exactness and clarity. The villanelle form is painfully appropriate, with its obsessively repeated lines which come round and round—‘Afraid it looks as if she’s had a stroke’ … There was a replica of her in bed—which perfectly match the repetitious thoughts that go round and round in the mind of someone coping with a shocking and barely tolerable situation.

Harpur’s language is harmonious and economical yet poignant:

> everywhere you could smell
> Nothingness, an undistinguished vacancy

> In her wardrobe, slippers, bed and diary
> Whose space foretold a void none could foretell.
> The spirit of the house had been set free—

> We felt like squatters, pinched, temporary,

> … Drifting through kitchen, lounge, conservatory
> As if it were a boarded-up hotel.
> The spirit of the house had been set free,
> Had left an undistinguished vacancy.

The value of the human being is felt above all through her absence, a sensation many will recognize. There is comfort and compassion, as well as courage, in Harpur’s willingness to share the experience.

As the extract above perhaps shows, Harpur’s strength as a poet is in the skilfully natural-seeming use of well-chosen, plain words within resonant traditional form. The second and third sections of his book apply these skills to exploring a different kind of ‘dark age’: the early medieval period, so cruelly misnamed by Enlightenment historians who regarded the period between the decline of Rome and the Renaissance as an age of barbarism. Harpur’s poems on the Celtic saints—Brendan, Columba, Patrick and others—show how wrong this was. The poems, meditations on details from the semi-legendary biographies of the saints, enter their inner experience and meditations, revealing in powerful imagination and delicate detail. Brendan recalls, from his legendary voyage,

> The island of the saints emerging from
> Black fog as light, its shore of powdered gold