



READING ROBERT WRIGLEY'S *LIVES OF THE ANIMALS AND REIGN OF SNAKES*

DR. RAVINDRA PRATAP SINGH

Professor

Department of English and MEL
University of Lucknow (UP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Robert Wrigley is a significant poet in contemporary American poetry. His writings echo the romantic and postmodern resonations side by side. Wrigley is a keen observer and has a close watch on nature, life and politics around. Besides his note on US politics, culture, society and landscape, he has many keen observations on man, nature and psyche. The present paper offers an analytical note on the major issues in his poetry with a close reading of, Lives of the Animals and Reign of Snakes.

Key Words: Robert Wrigley, American Poetry, Culture, Nature, Animals.

INTRODUCTION

Born in 1951, in East St. Louis, Illinois, and brought up not far away in Collinsville, a coal mining town, Robert Wrigley is a significant poet in contemporary American poetry. His writings echo the romantic and postmodern resonations side by side. Wrigley is a keen observer and has a close watch on nature, life and politics around. Besides his note on US politics, culture, society and landscape, he has many keen observations on man, nature and psyche. He 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).

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The present paper offers an analytical note on the major issues in his poetry with a close reading of *Lives of the Animals* and *Reign of Snakes*.

Lives of the Animals(2003) is one of the most significant works in world literature recording the talks of animals. The delineation and presentation of animals has a rooted metaphor, and presents many a connotation that inspires us to look at mother earth and nature from a fresh perspective. In the contemporary scenario, literature is in search of new metaphors and trajectories to cope with the newer encroachment of disciplines into each other and the prospective collision of them into a bigger bang. The end of the grand tradition has given way to multi layered questioning of the established knowledge .The significance of the *Lives of the Animals*, therefore, becomes manifold. The collection reminds us a close reading of Canadian poet Earle Birney, who has used animals to convey his message to humanity .It equally relates with the motif of Vishnu Sharma's *Panchatantra* ,a significant text of Sanskrit literature which ruminates human wisdom ,and nature through their manifestation of the lives of animals. *Lives of the Animals* explores Wrigley's interest in sharing an acumen what animals feel when they interface with someone whom he calls "the biped, / broad-nailed, featherless master race." Wrigley seems to be an observer who is ,most of the times, helpless to act, being stuck in the decorum of the so called civilization, and sometimes like a hunter ,but standing on the margin ,and unable to shot at them being enamoured by their sweetness and charm. In the poem "Explanatory," he stakes out an owl's nest, as "a Joseph's coat of hide and hair." In the poem "Agency," he monitors the movement of an injured doe who manages to move somehow in great pain. The poet portrays his plight of moving on one leg as, "dangling, a slender dead weight. 'In "Elk Dreams, 'he echoes a little uncommon imagery, which we can brand biological. Here a lone walker watches the process of delivering a calf by a cow. The imagery of the poem is clear and vivid which portrays the calf coming out of the back of the cow-"backside like a meaty rose unfold / and the calf come leapingly squeezed." It is the rarest of the rare portrayal of animal maternity across the literatures of the world. "Northern Lights" presents an extremely pathetic condition of animals when they are subjected to prey .A slaughtered deer's "slack, leaden anus" , "pearly, diminishing ropes" of its intestines and its "sleek decreeing pancreas" simply show the barbaric attitude of the civilized race when it meets with the fellow creatures in our ecology. "The Other World" and "Sad Moose" are the poems that take the reader into a trance by establishing powerful conceits and devising an apt connotation. *Lives of the Animals* is a record of the poet's journey through the jerky murky ways of life through a stretch of twenty three years , which most of the times manifests his roots in the Great Plains or his residence among the woods of northern Idaho which was a quite favourite residence for a number of years. The lines- "the body's one life, constant, expansive, simultaneous" speak volumes on his perception of life and the set art of living. The style of narrating these experiences is lucid which bears close observation and experience sharing. Blending irony in lucidity is the unique feature of Robert

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Wrigley. He puts the canvas of *Lives of the Animals* so wide that easily accommodates the traces of the non-human nature of human life. It may be taken as an allegory showing a debate between the animal instinct of the man vs. the innocence and vulnerability of the animal. The lines "Each day for a week I've watched him, / the ribs defined into claws" from the "Sad Moose" are quite figurative with deep meanings. John Burnside opines on this collection as, "*Lives of the Animals*" is, in my opinion, a living, breathing, honest-to-goodness contemporary masterpiece" (*The Poetry House*). To Judith Kitchen, it is "one of the most satisfying books of poetry I've read in recent years... This is a tough, unflinching book; that its toughness is at the same time elaborately musical is part of its potent message" (*The Georgia Review*).

Reign of Snakes (1999) has turned more symbolic, tough and virile, reflecting upon the discussion of three layered wilderness-natural, psychological and social. Symbols overpower the plain meaning and find a skilled arrangement under different literary devices like assonance, consonance, alliteration, internal rhymes. *Reign of Snakes* comprises five sections, marked one to four in numeral order. "Envoy" makes the last section. The sections start with an isolated long poem. As a device it indicates the pervasive themes of the ensuing section. The first, second and fourth sections are followed by a number of shorter poems interlinked in a chain as far as the thought corollary is concerned. The third section comprises poems in italics, with long poem –"Reign of Snakes", which is further divided into parts. Section "Envoy" spreads into a long poem—"The Name." The division and management of the collection is thought provoking and symbolic. It keeps traces of modern life, expressing different hues and shades in it. The collection, many a times, seems to be portraying the experiences of his personal life by the instances like his wife smelling the "testosterone" by watching heavy equipment floating down river after a flood. The influence of Walt Whitman is clear. Biblical impression is also discernible. "The Afterlife," "Amazing Grace," "Meditation at Bedrock Canyon" and "The Name," are the outstanding poems in this collection. Mythmaking and dramatising the situation make the collection more interesting. The pervasive themes of love, relationship; fear, suspicion; death and nature make it a balanced study of man and nature. On the overall effect of *Reign of Snakes*, Judith Kitchen observes that, "Robert Wrigley's *Reign of Snakes* is rhetorically charged, especially so in the five longer poems that are italicized, as though they were giving voice to an inner sensibility expressing itself in its love of language and vocabulary." (p770).

Further she finds that, "the opening lines are a good example:

*"Spring, and the first full crop of dandelions gone
to smoke, the lawn lumpish with goldfinches,
hunched in their fluffs, fattened by seed,*

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alight in the wind-bared peduncular forest".(P770).

Thus we find that *The Reign of Snakes* is a significant volume in the poetic oeuvre of Robert Wrigley .The verses in these collections sensitise us on land, environment and humanity.

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