

The Law of Storytelling: The Hermeneutics of Relationality in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*

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Introduction: The Law of Storytelling¹

I think I just grew up with stories. Then I heard stories in all the work I've done over the years—you know, around home and in central Australia, and all over the place. We use stories all the time. Telling stories is a very big thing about who we are, and it is often the way that we do business with each other. (Wright and Zable 28)

In an interview with Arnold Zable on the occasion of the 2013 Melbourne Writers Festival, about a month after *The Swan Book* came out, Alexis Wright reminded us that stories are more than sequences of events. In contemporary societies and especially in Australia, stories play an important role: they are everywhere; they pervade everything; they circulate widely; they shape our way of learning, our way of knowing, of thinking and of being. The world is storied, and being able to identify, interpret and understand its stories is a skill that matters.

The Swan Book was published in August 2013 and is Alexis Wright's third novel. It is concerned with the importance of narratives in shaping identity and providing agency. The story takes place in a near future, where anthropogenic climate change has destabilised contemporary societies all over the world, forcing thousands of climate refugees to take to the sea. In Australia, the situation is complicated by the fact that the Intervention² is still in place. The Army runs a detention camp for Aboriginal people; it is in this camp that the narrative begins. *The Swan Book* follows the life of Oblivion Ethyl(ene), or Oblivia, a young Aboriginal girl who was rendered mute by her traumatic experience of rape by a gang of petrol-sniffing youths. The plot follows her childhood alongside the European climate refugee Bella Donna. It recounts the education Oblivia was given through stories about swans, her forced marriage to the new President of Australia Warren Finch, her life as First Lady in Melbourne, and her journey home with other refugees after Warren's assassination.

The Swan Book is constructed so as to invite the reader to reflect on the nature of Australian literature, and the ways it necessarily transgresses national, cultural and spatial boundaries. In this essay, I suggest that an allegorical reading of *The Swan Book* sheds light on the nature of Australian literature, and more particularly on its relations both with the outside and with the indigenous worlds. Wright's novel makes clear that the field of Australian literature cannot be located precisely within the borders of the continent, but has to be understood transculturally³ and intertextually⁴ *in relation to the world*. This essay is structured in two parts. In the first part, I will explain the mechanisms of what I term the 'hermeneutics of relationality.' In the second part I will analyse its manifestation in the narrative system.

The Hermeneutics of Relationality

The phrase 'hermeneutics of relationality' combines two complex notions that need to be clarified individually before proceeding. Generally, hermeneutics is referred to as the *art of*

Aboriginal Literature 1929–1988 (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2004. Web. Accessed 21 Oct. 2014) which studies how Aboriginal forms of storytelling appropriate the Western media of writing.

¹⁰ In *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge UP, 1997), Gérard Genette explains that paratexts are ‘those liminal devices and conventions, both within the book (*peritext*) and outside it (*epitext*), that mediate the book to the reader: titles and subtitles, pseudonyms, forewords, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, intertitles, notes, epilogues, and afterwords’ (xviii).

¹¹ The cover image ‘Black Swan’ (2012, Ink on Illustration Board), was realised by Darren Gilbert.

¹² The fact that the virus refers to itself as ‘the only pure full-blood virus left in the land’ (Wright 1) points to the ancestral serpent and to Aboriginal Law. Juxtaposing the Australianism ‘cut snake’ with the figure of the ancestral serpent is here understood as a counterdiscursive strategy of linguistic appropriation. Note that this beginning echoes the opening chapter of *Carpentaria*, where the ancestral serpent creates the ecosystem of the Gulf of Carpentaria (Wright. *Carpentaria*. London: Constable, 2008. 1–3).

¹³ During the presentation of this paper at the ASAL conference *Worlds Within* in 2014, the onomatopoeia ‘plop’ inserted itself into my speech, forcing me to deviate from the original script, which made me pause and reflect on this strange meta-episode and on the rhetorical power of Alexis Wright’s writing. The repetition of the onomatopoeic ‘plop’ in this essay attempts to reproduce this event, and should be understood as a direct consequence of the metalepsis wrought by Wright.

¹⁴ This quotation from Douglas Stewart appears on page 226 of *Images from Monaro: For David Campbell*, in *Letters Lifted into Poetry—Selected correspondence between David Campbell and Douglas Stewart 1946–1979*. Ed. Jonathan Persse. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2006.

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