

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

ARNAUD BARRAS
University of Geneva

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*

interpretation, or the *study of interpretation*. In the course of the twentieth century, scholars such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur have argued that interpretation cannot be understood outside of its historical context (Ricoeur, 'The Task of Hermeneutics'; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*). In the same vein, poststructuralists such as Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva have shown that texts always draw from multiple cultural and semiotic systems (Barthes, 'The Death of the Author'; Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and the Novel'). Contemporary hermeneutics and poststructuralism respectively stress the importance for scholars of acknowledging the historicity of texts and readers and of conceiving texts as dynamically constituted by other texts and cultures. In this framework, interpretation cannot be understood outside of its context of reception and production.

Hans Robert Jauss captures this interplay between reception and production. Jauss is interested in the historicity of texts, particularly in the relationship between an individual literary work, the genre⁵ to which it belongs, and the tradition from which it emerges. In his 1970 essay 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,' Jauss addresses how the aesthetics of a literary work is relative to the context in which the work is received. He explains:

a process of continuous horizon setting and horizon changing . . . determines the relation of the individual text to the succession of texts which form the genre. The new text evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, changed or just reproduced. Variation and correction determine the scope, alteration and reproduction of the borders and structure of the genre. The interpretative reception of a text always presupposes the context of experience of aesthetic perception. (13)

According to Jauss, some texts trigger a 'horizon change' (14): a work that is so aesthetically unique and powerful that it 'negates familiar experience or articulates an experience for the first time' (14) may in turn alter the horizon of its readership. A corollary of Jauss's theory is that the aesthetic reception of a text cannot be disentangled from the field to which it belongs. More than a simple dialogue between text and reader, reading is also a dialogue between the individual text and the literary tradition from which it arises.

As both reader and text are enmeshed in relationships with each other but also with other entities, such as tradition, culture, genre, other texts, and so on, it follows that the process of interpreting will itself be caught up in these various relationships. This is where the notion of 'relationality' becomes important, for it helps to conceptualise the relations between reader, text and context in more precise ways. The notion of 'relationality' refers to the situation whereby several entities exist *in relation* to each other, and thus cannot be understood separately. This concept has emerged after the 1960s as ecofeminist and postmodernist counterdiscourses began challenging the principles of dualism, teleology and instrumentalism.

In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Val Plumwood for instance argues for a philosophical shift towards the 'relational self.' She explains that '[r]ecognising relationality of concerns and ends is clearly a necessary condition for a more adequate, less dualistic account of self and of its embedment in both social and ecological communities' (154). Thinking relationally is also relevant to the field of geography. In *For Space*, Doreen Massey argues that '[i]n place of an imagination of a world of bounded places we are now presented with a world of flows. Instead of isolated identities, [we are presented with] an understanding

of the spatial as relational through connection' (81). Finally, Deborah Rose, in her commemorative essay entitled 'Val Plumwood's Philosophical Animism: Attentive Interactions in the Sentient World,' comments on the Aboriginal concept of 'country' as it emerges from her conversation with Australian Aboriginal people in the Victoria River region of the Northern Territory:

One could say that country is all culture, but the more interesting point is that it is all sentient, communicative, relational and inter-active. In this sense, culture is not something you have, but rather is the way you live, and by implication, the way your knowledge arises and is worked with. . . . [C]ountry flourishes through looped and tangled relationships. . . . [K]nowledge is relational. (100)

Rose's account of Aboriginal culture, country and knowledge unveils the relationality inherent in Aboriginal ways of knowing and being. More importantly, she underscores that knowledge and culture emerge from the matrix of relationships that constitute country.

By characterising the self, the spatial, the epistemological, the cultural, and the material as relational, Plumwood, Massey, and Rose pave the way for an understanding of text as relational and performative. Indeed, in the light of their accounts, hermeneutics can be envisioned as the study of the relations between reader, work, world and storyworld.⁶ Note that in this relational hermeneutics, interpretation is not considered bounded by the work; on the contrary, world, work and reader are entangled in a web of relations. In this context, interpretation consists in unveiling some of the links that compose this relationality, while acknowledging the impossibility of absolute knowledge.

This is precisely what *The Swan Book* does; by dramatising the relationality of narratives and interpretation, the novel invites the reader to reflect on the production and reception of stories. Indeed, the novel enmeshes itself in a web of relations through a system of metonymic correspondences; if this system is based on Australian Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies, wherein journeys, stories, beings and ecologies are intertwined (Devlin-Glass; Ravenscroft), Alison Ravenscroft points out in *The Postcolonial Eye* that it would be wrong to assume that by reading *The Swan Book* one can access Aboriginal ontology and epistemology (77). On the contrary, like Wright's previous novel *Carpentaria*, *The Swan Book* 'puts into effect an aesthetics of uncertainty' (70) that prevents readers from accessing Australian Indigenous knowledge directly. The radicalism of Wright's style in her latest novel instead forces her readers to reflect on the very notion of literature by drawing attention to the production, circulation, and reception of stories. In this context, the novel's system of metonymic correspondences provides an allegorical matrix for reinterpreting Australian literature not as a self-contained, knowable, and easily delineated body of literary works—a literature bounded by the geographical limits of the continent, as its name seems at first seems to indicate—but as an undecidable and shimmering arrangement of bodies, countries, and stories. I will show below that *The Swan Book* has the ability to trigger a horizon change.

The allegorical system is first made manifest in the proper names chosen by Wright to characterise the protagonists of *The Swan Book*. It would be vain to attempt to 'discover' a definite meaning behind this complex allegorical system, for the latter resists any total semantic fixation by ascribing contradictory and paradoxical connotations to names; these connotations are indeed drawn from different fields of knowledge, from different time periods, from different genres. It is a paradox that by making this multilayered polysemy so visible—by making meaning in effect so profuse—Wright ultimately prevents any definite

interpretation. For instance, the name 'Bella Donna' alludes both to an Italian translation of 'fair lady' and to a poisonous plant, the deadly nightshade. The second connotation is interesting in the context of the novel, for the name 'Oblivia' may be a reference to Livia, a classical figure of the Roman empire, who was married to Augustus, the first Emperor of the Roman Empire, and who was rumoured to have poisoned him. Oblivia's full name, Oblivion Ethyl(ene), is given to her by Bella Donna. Given the plot of *The Swan Book*, where Oblivia is said to have a virus that is 'nostalgia for foreign things' (3), Bella Donna's stories about swans can be understood as a substance that alters the chemistry of the girl's brain and allows her to forget the trauma of her rape. Oblivia takes solace in this influence from outside, for it allows her to escape the internal politics of her Aboriginal community. Indeed, 'Oblivion' also refers to the fact that Oblivia is all too willingly forgotten by her community and family after her rape and her disappearance. Paradoxically, Oblivia's last name is also an allusion to the poisons imported into Aboriginal communities by colonialism: alcohol and petrol. Therefore, the fact that Oblivia's trauma is caused by petrol-sniffing youths complicates both the meanings of her first and last names. Indeed, if stories, like alcohol, can be poisonous, they also make one oblivious to the pain of trauma. All in all, the semantic complexity of names indicate that characters are more than they seem:⁷ Wright's use of names forms the basis of a multilayered, polysemous and sometimes paradoxical allegorical mode that resists resolution and synthesis (Ravenscroft 70). Ravenscroft's statement about *Carpentaria* is appropriate to describe *The Swan Book*: the 'specific qualities of unknowability, and undecidability' of the novel force us to 'examin[e] the limits of our own imagining' (77). In the case of *The Swan Book*, which dramatises the production, circulation and reception of stories, unknowability and undecidability are directed towards the nature of literature. With this claim in mind, the allegorical mode, combined with numerous self-reflexive⁸ episodes about reading and writing, can become an interpretive matrix for rethinking Australian literature.

In this essay, I highlight one set of relations present in the allegorical system constructed by *The Swan Book*: these relations revolve around the interplay of swan and swamp, and they arise from the dialogue between *swan* stories on the one hand and *swamp* country on the other. This set of relations is not to be understood as an ultimate account of the narrative, for it is one of many; it is subtended by the motif of interpretation, and thus it constitutes an interpretive matrix. In this interpretive matrix, swans logically occupy a pivotal role. White swans are not native to Australia; their appearance points to the bodily differences between Indigenous and European populations; white swans may thus be conceived as embodying foreign stories. The fact that white swan stories are told by Bella Donna, a European climate refugee, reinforces this allegorical meaning: these stories may be interpreted as metonym for European literature. In that context, Bella Donna may be understood as a metonym for European authorship. In contrast with white swans, the figure of the black swan embodies an ancient creative being who is native to Australia, but it is also Oblivia's friend and her guide. Because the cover page features a black swan, the latter can also be said to be a metonym for the material book itself. The metonymic correspondence is complicated by the syncretic quality of the novel, which combines foreign folk stories with an Aboriginal mode of storytelling. This in turn means that the black swan may denote the hybrid and dynamic nature of Australian literature, which is both foreign and indigenous.⁹ Finally, Oblivia's function in the plot shows that she is the embodiment both of the Law of the swamp and of the swamp country; in other words she may be considered as a metonym for Aboriginal people and storytelling.

It is important to bear in mind that Bella Donna, Oblivia, and white and black swans are not only polysemous metonyms; they are also dynamic beings who interact with each other and with other elements of the storyworld, thereby resisting any straightforward fixation of meaning. On the contrary, the continuous interaction of these beings constitutes the basis of the hermeneutics of relationality, for the multivalence of each metonym creates a fluid and subversive web of relations. It indeed participates in the creation of what Ravenscroft identifies in Alexis Wright's writing as 'a radical, irresolvable equivocality in language and form' (70). As a narrator, a character and a reader, Oblivia is the nexus of this web of equivocality and this is reinforced by the fact that the representation of her embodiment is based on an Australian Indigenous understanding of the relationship between body, story, and country. In this context, Ravenscroft's depiction of an Arrente boy in her essay 'Coming to Matter: the Grounds of our Embodied Difference' strongly resonates with the character of Oblivia in *The Swan Book*:

[he] is accompanied by stories of country, stories that have already been told to him many times. He is accompanied by these stories, or one might say that he is in these stories and they are in him, and it is in this double relation that he comes to know [country]. Through these stories, meanings are made. This is the way that things come to matter. These meanings are registered in the young boy's body, entered there. [T]hey make his body *in its very matter*, in ways that might never be given words as such but which make the nonetheless articulate body; . . . his body in turn make[s] the country in its matter. (Ravenscroft 31)

This form of embodiment, common to the four-year old boy in Ravenscroft's account and to Oblivia in *The Swan Book*, enables the reader to perceive the latter as more than a character. In interpreting her environment in the light of swan stories, Oblivia establishes an intertextual oscillation between the foreign and the local, between the reception and the production of texts, between the effable and the ineffable. This oscillation is the manifestation of an Aboriginal understanding of embodiment, wherein body, country, and story are intimately interconnected; the implications of this entanglement for the interpretation of the novel are significant: combined with Oblivia's polyvalence as narrative figure, the oscillation destabilises the boundaries of Australian literature and allows Wright to re-establish Aboriginal storytelling as an integral part of it.

The Interplay of Swan and Swamp

The relationality of *The Swan Book* is first visible in the paratext,¹⁰ where the voice of Alexis Wright is least aestheticised. In the acknowledgments of the book, it is made clear that the novel is primarily a hermeneutic undertaking: the narrative is born from the exchange of stories, from the creative conversation between a writer and textual representations of swans. In the paratextual section 'A Note on Sources,' Wright lists the sources where the '[q]uotations embedded in the text of *The Swan Book* are from' (336). She mentions 27 quotations; as the narrative is itself 334 pages long, this means that on average, there is a swan quotation every 12 pages. This paratextual section underlines the fact that *The Swan Book* is self-aware of its intertextuality.

If *The Swan Book* draws on intertextuality, it also draws on embodiment. This is demonstrated by the looming presence of the majestic 'Black Swan' illustration¹¹ on the cover of the novel. This image contrasts with the pervading textuality of swan stories, but most of all it reasserts

the material quality of the book, as well as the experientiality and intersubjectivity that subtends it. Wright explains this in the acknowledgements:

I have watched swans in many places, and learnt the best place to see swans on the Liffey in Dublin from a truly amused interviewer at RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta. I learnt from Seamus Heaney's poem 'Postscript,' displayed in Dublin airport, that if I wanted to see swans, I should look on the Flaggy shore in County Clare. Many friends, colleagues, and family members very kindly and thoughtfully told stories, sent information, and swan presents, including music inspired by swans, or poetry, photos, pictures, objects, books, and life size statues of swans. (338–39)

Ironically, despite its title pointing to the contrary, *The Swan Book* cannot and should not be reduced to a singular material book. In that context, the epigraph 'A wild black swan in a cage/Puts all of heaven in a rage' takes on its full significance. This quotation, drawn from Robert Adamson's poem 'After William Blake,' suggests that conceiving of *The Swan Book* as a closed entity would result in an interpretive catastrophe, for the epigraph is polysemous and opens up an allegorical space: not only does the 'black swan' of Adamson's quotation refer to the cover illustration and to the book itself, but it also denotes the Aboriginal people and their struggle for freedom and emancipation in the aftermaths of colonialism. Seeing the book as a discrete entity whose 'meaning' can be determined once and for all would be problematic and would be as much a hermeneutic mistake as a political one. Paradoxically, because it draws so heavily and self-consciously on external texts and experiences, *The Swan Book* deliberately transcends the very borders its title sets out to create.

Through the paratext, Wright interrogates the concepts of 'text' and 'book,' and by doing it so visibly, she invites the reader to do the same. Seen from the perspective of the acknowledgements, the novel seems to exist as a relational meshwork woven out of the Waanyi Nation, County Clare, the Liffey River, Dublin Airport, the Northern Territory, Lake Wendoree in Ballarat (VIC), the Melbourne Zoo, the Torrens River and the region of Coorong in South Australia, and so on. From the moment one first holds *The Swan Book*, the art of interpretation becomes unavoidable. As one begins to read, the relationality of the narrative becomes as manifest as the black swan of the cover.

The relationality present in the paratext is complicated in the main text of *The Swan Book*, where the manifestations of the interpretive matrix become more salient. Beginning in the preface, where the narrator is none other than Oblivia the mute protagonist recounting the story of her life, Wright establishes the foundations of the dialogism of swan and swamp that is to pervade the subsequent narrative. The first line reads: 'Upstairs in my brain, there lives this kind of cut snake virus in its doll's house' (1). The virus is an allusion to the serpent, the ancestral being whose continuous presence subtends Oblivia's world.¹² The doll's house is located in Oblivia's brain; it is also the serpent's home, its dwelling. In the speculative future of Australia, the girl's brain is said to be the only remnant of traditional life. In effect, the body of the girl is the ultimate territory of the ancestral being, its last resting place. This establishes Oblivia as an important embodiment of the Law, but it also shows that traditional life has been traumatised by colonialism.

In Oblivia's brain, the snake is forced to cohabit with other stories, other countries and other laws. The preface describes Oblivia's consciousness as polyvocal and transcultural, which is central to the establishment of the hermeneutics of relationality. As the narrator says:

Having learnt how to escape the reality about this place, I have created illusionary ancient homelands to encroach on and destroy the wide-open vista of the virus's real-estate. . . . I have become a gypsy, addicted to journeys into these distant illusionary homelands. . . . I tell the virus that I have felt more at home with the cool air flowing on my face from a wild Whistling Swan's easy wings sweeping over snow-capped mountains in its grand migration across continents, than in those vast ghostly terrains of indescribable beauty that have given me no joy. I must continue on, to reach that one last place in a tinder-dry nimbus where I once felt a sense of belonging. (4–5)

This passage makes it clear that the story of *The Swan Book* is about both the serpent *and* the swans, about indigenous Country *and* foreign landscapes. By invoking swan stories, Oblivia is able to reshape the swamp country. Thanks to the performativity of interpretation, she is able to fashion her environment so as to make it a better home for her. Oblivia is able to reclaim some agency by overcoming the trauma of her rape and the trauma of the detention camp so as to again feel 'a sense of belonging.' In order to escape the grim reality of the swamp, she makes use of the beautiful fantasy that surrounds the swans in the stories. It is manifest that the foreign influence of the Whistling Swan, the symbol of European colonisation, has deeply transformed the Aboriginal girl's consciousness. In this case, it is for the best, for wielded by Oblivia, swan stories acquire a performative, healing and creative power.

In this preface, Wright shows that by appropriating foreign narratives, the young traumatised Aboriginal girl can reclaim her identity. Stories help Oblivia to go beyond the status of victim; through the creation of imaginary worlds, she asserts her presence and becomes an agent of her own trajectory of life. Through interpretation, she is reintegrated in the matrix of emergence of Country. The fact that Oblivia is the narrator in the preface is significant. In the metonymic system, Oblivia-the-narrator symbolises Wright's attempt at overcoming the long-lasting effects of colonisation. Using Oblivia as a model, Wright seems to whisper to us that through the interpretation of *stories* and through an allegorical mode, one can rewrite *history*.

In the preface, Oblivia self-consciously combines two literary modes: Aboriginal storytelling and worldly folklore. As a narrator, she also blends two levels of existence, that of the stories and that of her experience. This to-and-fro resonates throughout the main narrative, where Oblivia is no longer the narrator of her state of mind, but a character in the story of her life. Oblivia is the protagonist of *The Swan Book*. Her life and thoughts constitute the substance of the main strand of the plot. However Oblivia is more than a character: she is a storyteller, as well as a living embodiment of the creativity inherent in the swamp country. More importantly, Oblivia functions as a metonym for Aboriginal storytelling, Country and Law.

The status of Oblivia as metonym is made clear in an episode that takes place at the beginning of the narrative. After her rape, Oblivia is lost to her family and her community; she has 'fallen into the deep underground bowel of a giant eucalyptus tree' (7). She is forgotten by everyone but Bella Donna. While she remains in the eucalyptus tree, Oblivia dreams the storyworld into existence:

Locked in a world of sleep, only the little girl's fingers were constantly moving, in slow swirls like music. She was writing stanzas in ancient symbols wherever she could touch—on the palms of her hands, and all over the tree root's dust-covered surfaces. . . .

Her fingers traced the movements of the ghost language to write about the dead trees scattered through the swamp, where *dikili* ghost gums old as the hills once grew next to a deepwater lake fed by an old spring-spirit relative, until they had slowly died. This happened during the massive sand storms that cursed the place after the arrival of the strangers from the sea. (8)

In this very important passage of the first chapter, Oblivia is established as the source of the story of *The Swan Book*. If she is the writer of the story of the swamp country, she is also the protagonist of that story. It is important to note that this story of the swamp is literally written in, on and from Country itself. Moreover, the swamp story is described as a performance that is musical, bodily, ecological and literary. Establishing Oblivia as the medium through which the voice of Country emerges contributes to blending the levels of narrator, character and writer. The fact that Oblivia is mute reinforces this strange dissolving of boundaries, while at the same time drawing attention to the performativity of storytelling, and to the entanglement of body, story and country in Australian Indigenous ways of knowing. This transgression means that Oblivia, the embodiment of Aboriginal storytelling, takes over the creation of the storyworld; in so doing, she reinserts Aboriginal storytelling into Australian literature and participates in what Jauss would call a 'horizon change' (14). The storyworld is here subtended by Oblivia's performance of 'ancient language'; the young Aboriginal girl is thus empowered by her abilities to interpret the Law and translate it into writing. Writing becomes a hermeneutic activity, and storytelling becomes a reenactment of the traditional Law.

In another episode of the first part of the novel, Oblivia stays with Bella Donna on the hull of a rusting boat stuck in the swamp that used to be a lake. There she listens to the folk stories about swans that Bella Donna tells. These stories are formative and they will remain with Oblivia all her life; they will shape her thoughts and experiences, and they will be used as a means to escape the harsh reality of near-future Australia. There are numerous instances where swan stories intrude on the reality of Oblivia and the swamp. A particular episode vividly performs the entanglement of reception and production. This episode is the first time that a black swan is mentioned in one of Bella Donna's stories. The European woman tells Oblivia: '*A black swan flies slowly across the country, holding a small slither of bone in its beak*' (44). As she continues, a strange thing happens:

When the girl whispered, the old woman interpreted . . . and spoke for her, why *can't I see that swan with a bone if you can see it?* Something dropped into the water. Plop! Was this a fact that had slipped from her hypothetical love stories? The girl thought that she could hear ghost music. . . . Far into the night, the swamp music continued telling the old woman's love story through the girl's dreams where, in the underwater shadows, she looked like a cygnet transformed into two people entwining and unwinding back and forth in the bubbling swamp, in waves scattered by a relic dropped from the beak of the black swan imagined by the old woman.

Black swans kept arriving from nowhere, more and more of them . . . (46–47)

If Oblivia is the storyteller of the swamp country, she is also the recipient of swan stories. Oblivia thus occupies a double function as teller of the local country and listener of otherworldly landscapes. This double function dramatises Oblivia's allegorical meaning: she is both an embodiment of Aboriginal communities that absorb foreign stories while reinventing local ones *and* an embodiment of the reader. The episode above is particularly

crucial in the establishment of the hermeneutics of relationality, for it is the moment where the stories of Bella Donna encounter the country of the swamp. Swan stories literally merge with swamp music; swan stories become part of the swamp in an explicit way. All this happens through Oblivia's interpretation and dreaming, the latter term being a reference to Aboriginal ways of knowing. The interweaving of swan story and swamp country triggers a pervasive metalepsis. This transgression of ontological levels is made tangible by the onomatopoeic word 'Plop.' Suddenly, there seems to be a complete breakdown of the separation between world-of-the-story and world-of-the-audience. Plop!¹³ Swan stories, swamp country, and reader's world merge. Plop! The reader is made aware of this—Plop!—has to pause—Plop!—and rethink the nature of Australian literature. Seen in this light, Australian literature seems to break away from its mere linguistic labelling as a 'field.' Australian literature transgresses its conceptualisation and overcomes its immateriality; it enters the material world. In this passage, Australian literature stops residing only in its literary works and starts encompassing the interpretive practices of embodied and embedded readers. In this sense, Ravenscroft's claim that 'reading is a practice of meaning-making, [that] reading is poiesis [and that] reading is writing' (47) is given flesh. It is a horizon change in the literary Australian landscape, and it is echoed intradiegetically by the arrival of the black swans in the swamp: story resonates with Country. In a sense, this passage is a dramatisation of the hybridisation that Oblivia has undergone; because of the metalepsis, her cultural transformation is made tangible. The black swan here becomes the nexus where the interweaving of Aboriginal storytelling and European literature takes place.

By making the protagonist a reader, *The Swan Book* dramatises the function of reading, and through empathy it invites empirical readers to experience what it means to be interpreting the world using literary narratives. Wright's novel constructs its own hermeneutics that allows the empirical reader to reflect, through the figure of the inscribed reader, on the process of interpretation and meaning-making. In a sense, *The Swan Book* becomes an allegory of reading. This allegory is not a universalistic statement about reading, but a metafictional and counterdiscursive move that stages a reinterpretation of the nature of Australian literature. This grounding of the allegory of reading into an Australian context is realised because the inscribed reader in the novel is embedded in the fabric of Country as a creative agent of meaning-production. In her novel, Wright takes to extremes Paul De Man's interrogation in *Allegories of Reading* where he states that a 'passage on reading [may] make paradigmatic claims for itself' (58): because of the allegorical mode of *The Swan Book*, the empirical reader is invited to analogise Oblivia's performative and relational reception of swan stories to a re-reading and re-interpreting of Australian literature as a whole. This self-reflexivity is so powerful in the novel, and Wright reproduces, varies, corrects and changes the rules and scope of Australian literature to such an extent and with such an aesthetic impact that the story of Oblivion Ethyl(ene) may in effect be the first brush of a horizon change (Jauss 13).

As noted above, in *The Swan Book*, the main inscribed reader is Oblivia. She is the recipient of swan stories, and she uses those stories to fashion a better world for herself. The following episode takes place after Oblivia has been removed from the swamp, transported to Melbourne and married to Warren Finch. In the solitude of her apartment, as she is alone in an unfamiliar environment, she escapes through reading:

Somehow, the books became good company. Pages were flicked over, and lines recited, and reflected upon: *The wild swan's death-hymn took the soul of that waste place with joy.* Was this wasteland the swamp? She left the books on the table, and touched them frequently as though they were her friends. She sang

over and over, a chant, her lonely incantation to the swans flying over Country, *All the black swans sail together*. She moves on, finds another thought—*He who becomes a swan, instructs the world!* . . . But her mind turns away from [the] vision, and returns to anticipate how her own black swans from the swamp were moving over the country she had travelled, and listens to them singing their ceremonies in flight, and she holds this thought in her mind because it soothes her, instructs her in endurance and perseverance. (240)

This episode is one of many where fictional swan stories trigger Oblivia's imagination. What is interesting about this episode is that it stages reading not as a passive transfer of information, but as an active and performative process. This process not only triggers the imagination, but has consequences in Oblivia's surrounding world. Indeed Oblivia's 'incantation' convokes the flock of black swans, and five pages later, they join her in the city. The arrival of the 'black cloud' (245) of swans to Melbourne encourages her to frequently leave the building where she is kept by Warren Finch. This in turn allows the girl to discover the city of Melbourne at night and emancipates her from her forced marriage. Even more interestingly, in the passage above Oblivia combines the foreign written swan stories with her singing of the actual journeys of the black swans. In this hermeneutic activity, Oblivia is communicating both by writing and orally; she is both reader and narrator, as well as audience and storyteller. Therefore in this passage she is dissolving the boundaries between production and reception. At the same time, she is subverting the borders of the nation, for the foreignness of the swan quotations are echoed by the indigeneity of the black swans' bodies.

By staging the fictional act of reading as transcultural and intertextual, Wright shows us that Australian literature is located in a fluid dimension of emergence. In a sense, the nature of Australian literature is shifting. It is not located in one place; it is not received in one way only. Australian literature arises in the myriad interpretive practices of its readers. Among these practices is Aboriginal storytelling. Among these practices are the journeys of creative beings. Among these interpretive practices are the tracks of the black swan. Ultimately, even readers who are reading this paper proactively participate in this emergence of Australian literature. Indeed, a metafictional and self-reflexive touch of genius resides in the polysemous sentence '*He who becomes a swan, instructs the world!*'¹⁴: not only does this quotation mean that Oblivia's readings are transforming her and her world, but it also means that the material *Swan Book* is to instruct its 'world'—here referring both to its readership and to the body of works to which it belongs, in this case Australian literature. Indeed, by empathising with the fictional reader Oblivia, the empirical reader participates in the literal and metaphorical change of horizon that the swans bring about. The multilayeredness of the passage and the transgression of epistemological and ontological borders it produces thus become an impetus to rethink Australian literature. *The Swan Book* reminds us that stories are performative!

Towards a Change of Horizon in the Australian Literary Landscape

The storyworld of *The Swan Book* can be read as a metonym for the hybrid nature of Australian literature, where the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, the local and the foreign, the oral and the written weave themselves into coherence and unity. Australian literature is characterised by a twofold reflection on the effects of migration and colonisation on indigenous populations and ecologies. In other words, Australian history and literature are always, in one way or another, a linguistic echo of the relationship between migrant, settler and indigenous communities. Interpreting Australian works of fiction, we cannot escape this relationality where fictive and real, oral and written, story, body and Country intermingle

constantly to form the text. The metonymic system of correspondences of *The Swan Book* demonstrates this: as the novel crystallises the transcultural and global intersubjectivity of Australian literature, it also illustrates its dynamism. The hermeneutics of relationality attracts our attention to the double movement whereby foreign stories are received by Oblivia, and then refracted onto her world, which is then apprehended by the reader through the highly aestheticised materiality of the book. The storyworld of *The Swan Book* is thus a transnational collage of allusions, a transcultural tissue of quotations, and an intertextual assemblage of experiences, whose pieces and processes are in constant interaction. This multiplicity is evident in the various roles that Oblivia performs: she is at the same time the storyteller, the character and the audience of *The Swan Book*. But she is no homogeneous subject; she is an embodiment of the dialogue between foreignness and indigeneity. She is also the manifestation of an Australian Indigenous conception of embodiment. Through empathy, the reader is made to experience Oblivia's relational complexity, without being able to grasp it. In this context, Oblivia's friend, guide and ancestral being, the figure of the black swan functions as a cohesive entity, as a metonym for the material book itself.

As we hold *The Swan Book*, we hold more than simply a story: we hold swan and swamp music; we hold their interplay. As we understand and interpret the narrative meticulously spun by Alexis Wright, as we talk and write about it, we resonate with the oscillating ambivalence and equivocality of Australian literature. We contribute to the emergence of Country, which in turn initiates a horizon change in the literary landscape of Australian literature. Thanks to Wright's hermeneutics of relationality, we are able to understand this. The Law of Storytelling is a gift we must cherish.

NOTES

¹ I would like to warmly thank the School of History and the Centre for Environmental History, ANU, for enabling me to conduct research in their wonderful institution. This research was supported by a grant (*Doc.Mobility Fellowship*) from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

² Information about the Northern Territory Intervention available here:
http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous/special_topics/the_intervention/

³ The term 'transcultural' is here understood in a dynamic way; it refers to the confluence of various cultural streams.

⁴ The term 'intertextual' is drawn from Julia Kristeva's 'Word, Dialogue and the Novel'; it denotes the fact that texts are always dynamic transpositions of other texts.

⁵ In German, Jauss uses 'Gattung' for 'genre'; the latter can thus be understood more broadly as 'field.'

⁶ In her essay 'Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality' (*Poetics Today* 34.3 (2013): 361–388), Marie-Laure Ryan explains that a storyworld is a 'mental representation built during the reading . . . of a narrative text' (364). She continues and explains that storyworlds are not 'static containers for the objects mentioned in a story but rather dynamic models of evolving situations. We could say that they are simulations of the development of the story' (364).

⁷ In this allegorical matrix, Warren Finch, Oblivia's husband, is also Livia's husband Augustus. Like Augustus who was the first emperor of the Roman Empire, Warren Finch is the first President of Australia. However Warren Finch sounds strangely similar to Watkin Tench, a Captain of the First Fleet who was one of the first explorers of the region of Sydney. This analogy between Finch and Tench would then open up a space for interpreting Finch, thanks to a reference to Darwin's study of finches in the nineteenth century, as a possible Aboriginal model of social evolution and adaptation to a colonial state. Given the relatively negative depiction of Warren Finch in the novel, the character's allegorical meaning is to be taken ironically.

⁸ In *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (UMI Research Press, 1985), Robert Stam explains that a reflexive work 'points to its own mask and invites the public to examine its design and texture. Reflexive works . . . call attention to their own factitiousness as textual constructs' (1).

⁹ This play of contrast between white swans representing European literature and black swans embodying Aboriginal literature sounds like an intertextual echo of Adam Shoemaker's *Black Words, White Page*:

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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