

Refiguring the Silence of Euro-Australian Landscapes

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Aside from the noisier adjectives used to characterise the Australian colonial soundscape, 'silence' features in several descriptions of the Australian environment by members of the First Fleet. The artist and emancipist Thomas Watling, in his *Letters From An Exile At Botany Bay*, wrote to his aunt in Dumfries how, '[o]ften amid these coveted solitudes do I wander by the silent moon, along the margin of some nameless stream, and pray for the most beloved of aunts, and for my dearest C—' (24). Judge Advocate David Collins, meanwhile, recalled in his *Account of the English Colony in New South Wales* that:

The spot chosen for this purpose was at the head of the Cove near a run of fresh water, which stole silently along through a very thick wood, the stillness of which had then, for the first time since the creation, been interrupted by the rude sound of the labourer's axe and the downfall of its ancient inhabitants; a stillness and tranquillity which from that day were to give place to the voice of labour, the confusion of camps and towns, and 'the busy hum of its new possessors'. (5)

Michael Cathcart argues that descriptions of the land as 'silent' often referred to the absence of sounds and signs of European civilisation (4). As Collins' juxtaposition between a 'stillness and tranquillity' and 'the voice of labour' shows, European civilisation was invariably associated with sound, while the character of regions beyond the cities, towns and stations evoked with silence. In Melbourne, squatter John Cotton admires the way 'silent primitive nature' is replaced with 'a large rectangularly built city with all the activity, hum and bustle of its 2500 inhabitants' (Brown-May, cited in Cathcart 65). William Westgarth, describing the 'immense wilderness' of the Yarra wetlands, noted that it was only the local birdlife that 'imparted life to a scene, otherwise hushed, in the presence of man, and the total absence hitherto, of his noisy but enlivening commerce' (Westgarth, cited in Cathcart 74). Even in 1972, at the opening of the Ord River dam, Prime Minister Billy McMahon reminded those present of the explorers and colonists who mapped the 'vastness and silence of the inland', and of the 'pioneers' who 'broke the silence of this land' (Arthur 62). Throughout Australia's European colonial history silence is often seen as something that needs to be overcome, filled with the echoes of European civilisation.

However the Australian colonial soundscape did not only consist of the clamour of European industry. European words and the sound of European speech was an intrinsic and reassuring part of this world. Given that the naming of a location often prefigured the actual inhabitation of it (Carter *The Road to Botany Bay*, 146-7), language was an important tool of colonisation. In its absence, in moments when Europeans were yet to name or find the means to describe a place of thing, 'silence' intervened.

This essay begins by identifying the linguistic disjunctions that underpinned descriptions of the country as ‘silent’, and explores the way ‘silence’ was used as a means of obscuring the uncertainties that emerged as a result. I argue, however, that this silence is not one that necessarily needs to be broken. Drawing on the work of the poet, essayist and activist Judith Wright, I show how more ecologically-sensitive approaches to the Australian landscape have led to a re-figuring of this silence as a signifier of meaning and complexity that lies beyond the grasp of language. Silence need not necessarily be broken in pursuit of a voice, meaning or translation; instead the perceived silence of some aspects of nature is an integral part of our experience of it.

Descriptions of the country as ‘silent’ have been taken to point intrinsically to a lack of words that might provide any detailed picture of it (Arthur, Cathcart). The relationship between language and land in the construction of landscapes is a principal focus of Jay Arthur’s ‘lexical cartography’ of Australia, *The Default County*. Arthur cites several examples pointing to a significant disjunction between a landform and the English word used to describe it, ‘that the original English imported from England could not speak adequately about this country’ (17). Cathcart examines this situation further in *The Water Dreamers*, identifying the ways in which the Euro-Australian soundscape consisted of silence as much as noise, with the boundary between the two often defined by the availability of water. Insofar as the British were ‘wet country people’, water, Cathcart argues, constitutes a significant base to the physical and cognitive occupation of the land by Europeans (8). Its absence in turn presented a boundary to both habitation and speech for the British. Cathcart finds the relative scarcity of water in Australia (particularly in its more arid parts) resulted in the representation of Australia in terms of a ‘geography of silence’, defined by the absence of the sounds of European civilisation, which included the names for things (50). Such a boundary suggests that the Euro-Australian landscape is constituted as much by lexical absences—words suggestive of geographical nothingness—as by words imperfectly describing landforms and its inhabitants. Thus the silence that we find in many colonial-era descriptions is based not so much in an absence of meaning than a failure of Europeans to speak about or make sense of the country and inhabitants they encountered.

In response to such lexical absences, a description of the land as ‘silent’ was used as a trope to speak about that which could not be spoken of, concealing the inability of Europeans to fully describe the landscape by making an implicit claim for the emptiness or meaninglessness of the land. This projection of silence complements what Paul Carter has identified as a *rhetorical* use of silence. Calling land ‘silent’ served to efface any trace of uncertainty with regards to what the land meant, and to deny the presence of any cultures with whom Europeans might be bound to negotiate terms of access to land (*The Lie of the Land*, 8-9).

There were, however, suggestions of an alternative approach to this conception of silence as an absence or emptiness in need of filling. Returning to Collins, we might note, amidst the grand rhetoric of landing, a hint of ambivalence regarding the European purpose and their ‘rude sound’ (5). Collins’ description of the landing site as an Edenic paradise, and his awareness that a prevailing quietude has been rudely interrupted, suggests the degree to which a Romantic sensibility towards the land emerged in moments of idle contemplation.

Ross Gibson identifies a similar ambivalence within Watling’s *Letters*, manifest in an acknowledgement of the subjectivity of his own observations, and a reluctance to ‘find within himself the overweening attitude necessary for co-opting a colony into an imperial worldview’ (26). On this basis, silence for Watling is a defining quality of his surroundings, not something that needs to be broken. Instead, it colours his very experience; it is the facilitator of his thoughts regarding his aunt. In spite of the obvious lack of sensitivity to the people for whom that stream *did* have a name, the rather Romantic frame in which Watling places the apparent silence of the landscape suggests how it might be something that contributes to, rather

than detracts from, one's experience of it. Watling is unwilling to accept that the perceived silence of the landscape points to an emptiness that needs to be filled. Instead he suggests an approach to silence as a space for the experience and expression of meanings that are beyond the grasp of language.

Re-reading Colonial Silence

Judith Wright also challenged the prevailing view of the silence of the Australian landscape. Less Romantic in her approach, Wright rereads this silence in more stridently political and eco-philosophical terms. Wright engages with the silence that emerged from her own lack of words for country in more ecologically sensitive terms, demonstrating that the silence of the land is not a signifier of emptiness or meaninglessness, but instead signifies the narrowness of the European (or indeed *human*) ability to read and speak about the elements that constitute the landscape that they move through.

Silence has long been a feature of Wright's life, something she encountered in many different ways. Aside from the progressive deafness Wright experienced from her twenties (memorialised by Rodney Hall in 'A conservationist'), Wright often (as Paul Kane shows) sought to recuperate silence: drawing attention to its existence, and demonstrating how silence itself could be viewed as a distinct presence.

Wright registers the death of her partner Jack McKinney (in 1966) in such terms. In 'Love Song in Absence', she observes how '[v]oices all round me witnessed your unknown absence' (261): the silence that replaces decades of impassioned intellectual exchange stands in dialectical relation to speech in Wright's poetry. Kane argues that Wright's engagement with a silence of absence amounts to a 'metaphysics of negativity' (160), of bringing attention to the presence of negative space and defining, poetically, the 'pattern that absence makes' (160). Insofar as silence is used to disclose negative space, Wright pursues and investigates what such silence means and what kinds of experiences emerge from it.

Such a view of silence also defines Wright's experience of the Australian landscape. In early poems such as 'Bora Ring' and 'Nigger's Leap: New England' (1946) silence articulates Wright's encounter with an absence of certain 'voices': names, languages or meanings that once spread across the land. Like the 'sightless shadow' (8) that vexes the rider in 'Bora Ring', in 'Nigger's Leap' silence signals the tremendous loss all Australians must now live with: '[n]ow must we measure'... 'all our speech by silence' (15). As Kane shows, Wright's early work signals an effort to not only acknowledge the activities that led to the silencing of the land (such as massacres, poisonings, cultural and environmental degradation), but to bring to attention the very absence of these voices, to recover the fact of the existence of 'these invisible presences' (Capp 41) from 'the oblivion of disregard' (Kane 159).

In a number of Wright's poems, silence is also a means by which to signal particular encounters with nonhuman beings without relying on hierarchical dualisms that define the other-than-human as passive, subject only to human perception. Reading Wright's poetry through the lens of a Derridean cultural geography, we can observe how animals and plants (what I will refer to as the 'other-than-human') challenge the European ideological construction of the Australian landscape. Mary Louise Pratt and W.J.T. Mitchell have outlined the ways in which the meaning of the colonised landscape was often negotiated rather than imposed. In *Imperial Eyes* Pratt argues that while an imperial metropolis 'tends to understand itself as determining the periphery', it is often blind to the extent that these determinations are resisted and contested by those on the 'periphery' (6). In similar terms, Mitchell argues that the 'Imperial Landscape' is a 'hybrid' entity, not a 'one-way' phenomenon but a complicated process of exchange, mutual transformation, and ambivalence' (9).

From this perspective, landscapes become 'manifold surfaces' (Carter, *Lie of the Land* 15)

consisting of several layers of meaning, as the various landforms and features in a region are 'read' and perceived by different groups in different ways. Often, as both Pratt and Mitchell argue, dominant, ostensibly sovereign constructions of landscape bear the traces of those cultures or subcultures they have repressed. In poems such as 'For Precision' (1955), Wright expresses an appreciation of the way animal groups also construct their environments in meaningful ways, and hence contribute yet more layers of meaning to a collectively constructed landscape, an argument that has also been made by the Australian ecophilosopher, Val Plumwood, whose own thinking was influenced by Wright's and McKinney's work (Brady 500).

Wright and McKinney were well aware of the critical reappraisals of language, aesthetics and history being undertaken by the likes of Sartre, Heidegger, and Proust in the early post-war era (Mead 311). Along with a number of poems, not to mention the book length-studies produced by McKinney, Wright showed she was particularly focussed on the problem of language. In the essay 'The Writer and the Crisis' she observed that the 'tool of language' was failing to meet the 'modern demands placed upon it' (167). Inasmuch as Wright shares with Heidegger the view that poetry represents one field in which the depths of the human psyche and the external world might be better evoked (176; Heidegger 223-227), she does not share his faith that the poetic word is a means by which to express the 'the whole of modern experience' (Wright 'The Writer and the Crisis', 178). Wright's response, I will argue, is to employ language in a way that corresponds to what Kate Rigby calls a 'negative ecopoetics' (437). Wright's poetry represents an example of a conscious marking of the very limitations of language, of the degree to which we can only partially see, and describe, all the elements that contribute to a particular scene as we experience it. As a consequence, silence is refigured by Wright as a nuanced resonant dimension that is full of signs whose meanings are beyond understanding or articulation.

Wright was not the only one to take a Heideggerian critique of language to such a conclusion. In *The World of Silence*, Max Picard argued that silence and speech complement one another in the disclosure of the 'wholeness' of being, that our tacit, sensory experience of phenomena *accompanies* language in the disclosure of phenomena. To attempt to translate these experiences into words risks impoverishing the richness or depth of experience. Picard's argument, that silence should accompany speech, not as something that should be filled by it, but as the context for a disclosure of a perspective of phenomena outside of that constructed by language, provides a theoretical framework within which to read Wright's refigured view of silence. Like Picard, Wright realised the extent to which words impoverish or diminish its subject; as a consequence she approached language as something of a basis from which one might peer into the realm of things that extend outside of the grasp of language. As I will show, Wright's own poetic silence becomes a signifier of the complexity of landscapes co-constructed by humans and other-than-humans alike.

The Silence of Euro-Australian Landscapes

Arriving in Australia with a language shaped by the English countryside, British colonists discovered a land that was difficult to describe. English words for water, for example, reflected a geographical distribution and behaviour that often did not occur in Australia, and suggested the uneasy relationship between the English language and Australian landforms, vegetation, animal life and climate in general. As Cathcart observes, '[t]he First Fleeters were wet-country people', they came from a world whose language was shaped by the dominant, varied and irrepressible presence of water (8):

This was water for which English men and women had a score of words: they spoke of rivulets and millstreams, millponds, ponds and pondages, of lakes, canals, cascades, and falls, of cataracts, reservoirs, bogs and brooks, of fens and marshes, of moats and rills and rivers. (8)

Water represented a significant base to the physical and cognitive occupation of the land by Europeans. It was a means through which non-European landscapes might be ‘read’. In the absence of water, or upon its refusal to behave in familiar ways, the British could find no common ground upon which to read the country; without a point of reference, they were left speechless. For this reason, the Euro-Australian landscape can be said to be constituted as much by lexical absences—words suggestive of geographical nothingness—as words imperfectly describing landforms.

Speechlessness was not always a barrier to description. Catherine Martin’s colonial-era novel *The Silent Sea* offers an exemplary depiction of a waterless Australian landscape as seen through European eyes:

A wilderness calls up a sombre uninhabited country; a desert, land that has never been tilled; while waterless country is in itself a description of parched-up barrenness. But a wilderness may have luxuriant herbage. A desert may consist of leafy scrub or shady forest. And a land in which rain is seldom seen, and rivers never, yet sometimes has great rocks whose shadow, falling on the thirsty ground, may serve as a symbol of man’s salvation. But in this eerie waste there is no grass, no trees, no water—hardly the semblance of a hill. In many parts the sole vegetation consists of the salt-bush, a sad-coloured, low-creeping bush, more grey than green, which breaks when trodden on, with a brittle snap like dry stubble. (111)

In *The Road to Botany Bay* Carter argues that the names Captain James Cook applied to his map of the east coast of Australia were more than ‘metaphors of the journey’ (9): they also served to ‘empty’ space (22). In producing a map that reflected a European encounter with the coast of the continent (23), Cook’s names erased centuries of European myth and conjecture that had accumulated over it, thereby ‘creating’ an ‘unknown’ space that encouraged further exploration (23-8). Martin’s linguistic encounter with the land is similar in the way it creates space while at the same time decluttering it. Without words to describe the arid South Australian interior, Martin resorts to an apophatic approach, offering a picture of the land in terms of what it is not, in effect emptying the landscape of many of the imaginary misconceptions we might have projected onto it. Her descriptions ‘unname’ the country: the landscape is not a wilderness, as it ‘lacks luxuriant herbage’ (111) nor is it a desert since a ‘desert may consist of leafy scrub or shady forest’ – ‘desert’ in this case probably referring to the Latin *desertum*, meaning ‘to abandon’, ‘to leave’, forsake’ (Harper). For Martin, it is not even the kind of desert where one might go to hear the voice of God (Foxton 125). She draws on these terms only to proclaim their inaccuracy in representing the landscape she is speaking of, bringing to mind Arthur’s observation that Australia was constituted as much by ‘absences’ as actual words for country (85). Yet generally, Europeans would not be content with perceiving their new landscape in such terms. These ‘lexical lacunae’ (Ricoeur 51) in what could be said of the Australian landscape represented a threat, a linguistic illusiveness that perpetuated a more general ‘ontological uncertainty’ or ‘trembling’ (Brooks 56) that in turn needed to be denied and erased.

The speechlessness of the British colonists created uncertainty around what the land ‘meant’. With a language unsuited for the country, the Euro-Australian landscape was characterised as much by its grammatical silences—or ‘lexical lacunae’ (Ricoeur 51)—as by its names.

This ‘silence’ was, however, not considered a consequence of a European inability to ‘read’ the land, but a failure of the land to ‘provide variegated signs which may be interpreted’ (Ryan 120). Such was the impetus behind ‘filling’ the landscape, with indicators of European presence – for example, place names, and other more material symbols such as cleared ground, roads and buildings – thereby making it ‘speak’ in familiar terms. Thus references to the land as ‘silent’ assisted in this process: as a name for a place, ‘silence’ obscured European speechlessness whilst impelling the land to articulate its own apparent emptiness.

References to the land as ‘silent’ also served to establish Europeans as privileged speakers, in contrast to other (human and other-than-human) populations on a (silenced) periphery. Within theories of cultural landscapes, the threat of other voices has been identified in the form of counter-discourses or counter-narratives originating among marginalised populations (such as convicts or Indigenous groups), or in oral histories or named places, surreptitiously appearing within the discourses and narratives sanctioned by the sovereign (Carter *The Road to Botany Bay*, 301-2). Drawing upon Derridean-influenced postcolonial theory, Pratt and Mitchell have identified the way in which the meanings of landscapes are established in a climate of resistance and negotiation between different viewpoints, a situation that is often ignored by the imperial power (Pratt 6, Mitchell 9, 10). In recovering the presence of other perceptions of space, Carter established the point to which the British colony in Australia was but ‘a rhetorical rationalisation, designed to neutralise the reality of a space that was turbulent, unpredictable, rebellious’ (*The Road to Botany Bay*, 304). Suggesting that the landscape was ‘silent’ implied an absence or lack of meaning, denying other voices already present in the landscape. ‘Silence’ thus acquired a function in obscuring the linguistic illusiveness of the country for the British, as well as a rhetorical device to suppress ‘that other ‘noise’ arising from the natural lie of the land, its weather, hydrology, vegetation, and population, which never lay on an axis between hearing and silence but was an analogue of environmental time, another kind of history’ (Carter *The Lie of the Land*, 9). Speaking about these other noises as ‘silence’ was a way of locating them within a timeless primordiality that Europeans were divinely ordained to break.

Wright’s Deconstructed Silences

In colonial Australia, landforms that could not be described and signs that could not be read were buried under a rhetorical signifier of silence, effacing the uncertainty over what the land ‘meant’. However a poststructuralist approach to such uncertainty shows that the continent was not devoid of meaning(s), only that it was meaningful in terms completely foreign to Europeans. When this rhetorical silence is deconstructed, these human and nonhuman ‘noises’ make challenges to the assumed sovereignty of human (or strictly European) landscapes.

In ‘The Critique of Cultural Geography’, Val Plumwood argued that the structures of contestation and negotiation occurring between human groups in the construction of cultural landscapes could be expanded to acknowledge the contribution of other-than-human entities in the production of those same landscapes (121). Plumwood’s reconfiguration of ‘wilderness’ outlines such a vision of the other-than-human. In ‘Wilderness Scepticism and Wilderness Dualism’ she presents a reconceived picture of wilderness that redirects attention away from the absence of the human and towards ‘the presence of the other’ (682): ‘The presence of long-evolving biotic communities and animal species which reside there, the presence of ancient biospheric forces and of the unique combination of that which has shaped that particular, unique place’ (682). In contrast to the centrist picture of a passive, backgrounded and assimilated other, Plumwood argues that wilderness can be viewed as a site of multiple centres of meaning, containing the combined interactions and histories of animals, plants, and landforms.

Plumwood and Wright shared this view of animals, plants, and landforms. Plumwood's criticism of the dualism that continues to beleaguer western thought, particularly the division between the human and the nonhuman – *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* takes up this discussion – has its roots in the work of Wright's partner, Jack McKinney (Brady 500). Many of Wright's poems were vehicles for the ontology shared by Wright and McKinney. In her poetry we can observe an attentiveness to the presence of signs in the land that have a nonhuman origin, and the way these in turn decentre her own position as a sovereign source of meaning.

The deconstruction of Euro-Australian landscapes unfolds in Wright's poetry as she comes upon signs that 'speak' of the land from altogether different positions. In 'Scribbly Gum' (1955) Wright observes how 'The cold spring falls from the stone' (131). As a consequence of that encounter, Wright recounts how she,

passed and heard
the mountain, palm, and fern
spoken in one strange word.
The gum-tree stands by the spring.
I peeled its splitting bark
and found the written track
of a life I could not read. (131)

'Scribbly Gum' represents a challenge to the idea that silence necessarily implies an 'absence' or 'emptiness' of meaning. Through sentences broken seemingly mid-way ('I passed and heard'), the ambient silence of the Euro-Australian landscape—the silence that Wright 'heard'—is brought close. Yet a 'strange word' also emerges from this silence; as Wright listens to the 'cold spring' falling from the stone, she hears within it the very being and history of the 'mountain, palm, and fern'. The spring, the palm, the fern, indeed the whole mountain all exist in virtue of the presence of the other; this relationship, and the history they share is 'spoken' in the audible trickle of the spring over rock.

As the poem continues, we learn that the discovery of an other-than-human voice is no guarantee of understanding. Wright's removal of the 'splitting bark' of the gum-tree reveals a 'written track' that she cannot decipher; rhetorical silence is replaced by a deeper mystery grounded in a sign that is beyond interpretation. A walk in the rainforest reveals to Wright an articulate world laced with signs and meanings she did not create, a network of communicative noise that she is not a part of, and that in turn problematise the notion that only humans are capable of constructing meaning.

The birds that appear throughout Wright's poetry are another example of the way the European colonial landscape is both deconstructed and co-constructed by other-than-human beings. In 'For Precision' (1955) Wright watches as a gull's call, like the 'word' of the spring, unifies the disparate components of a coastal environment. Wright marvels at the way,

the gull's sole note like a steel nail
that driven through cloud, sky, and irrelevant seas,
joins all, gives all a meaning, makes all whole. (129)

In contrast to her own 'confusions of foggy talk' (129), her inability to speak with breadth, economy and accuracy, the 'gull's sole note' is singular and succinct, 'like a steel nail'. Wright momentarily hears the coherence and wholeness of her surroundings in the call of the gull. She suddenly discovers that the seemingly haphazard collection of disconnected, meaningless and irrelevant phenomena (sand, sea, wind, bird) exist in a meaningful and coherent form for other beings.

Wright's own attentiveness to the calls and behaviour of birds initiates her into a sense of land, animals and plants that challenges Euro-Australian descriptions of the landscape. The markings on the tree and the call of the gull problematise the notion of land as a textual plain that is written and read by a single human group. It brings into question the idea of land as consisting of a single textual surface, adding another dimension to Carter's view of the land as manifold, consisting of several layers of meaning (*Lie of the Land*, 15). While the bird might be viewed as a part of our 'text', it in turn has constructed its own, of which we are but a part. The picture Wright presents is suggestive of a Derridean text consisting of a multiplicity of textual folds and layers that interweave with and contain one another, 'whose roots sink into a dense context which we have only limited success in unravelling' (Caputo 91).

Refiguring Silence

Wright's experience with the other-than-human world insists that the silence of the Australian landscape points less to the absence of meaning than to a problem of European perception. However, Wright also believes there are limitations in the ability for words to describe what is experienced with the senses (Coralie 158). A poetic silence is used by Wright to represent these boundaries, and what lies beyond them, disclosing a sense of phenomena that words cannot manage alone.

In her early work Wright was rather ambivalent with regards to the possibility of learning the 'voice' buried in the silence of ignorance, perceived absence, and linguistic disjunction. When the poetic persona of 'The Blind Man' (1949) claims 'I have made silence speak; I found/for the night a sound' (68) we can detect an optimism regarding the ability to (one day) read and translate the signs she could see around her. Other poems are less optimistic. In 'The World and the Child' (1949) Wright charts a Blakean shift from innocence to experience in terms of a loss of unity with one's surroundings. The child's intimacy with his world (where 'the moon swings from his ceiling' [36]), and a life lived in a perpetual present ('Nothing is named;/nothing is ago, nothing not yet' [36]), is interrupted by an emerging consciousness of separation. Wright uses the image of 'the net' to explore and reflect upon the way in which words, as part of larger structures of meaning, are thrown over the world in order to 'catch' or 'hold' it. Out of a desire to recover what has been lost, the child 'makes a net to catch the unknown world'; yet all it returns, Wright shows us, are more words, 'heavy as fish, and tears' (37), mere resemblances of the world, and intrepid tales of efforts to capture 'that secret no man knows' (37). As Wright observes, our interrogations of the thing-in-itself produce only reflections of individual collective cultural experience, for '[n]o net is strong enough to hold the world,/nor man of such sinew ever was made' (37). Wright thus brings attention to the frailty of connections between two or more concepts that combine to form the 'net', and between the net and the world it seeks to catch.

In later works (*Alive* [1973], *Phantom Dwelling* [1985]) Wright strengthens her view that no language can be found that will adequately 'hold the world'. In 'Space Between' (1973) Wright draws our attention to the pervasive and unassailable presence of 'silences', and 'spaces' in 'every mesh':

however close our touch or intimate our speech, silences, spaces reach most deep,
and will not close. (315)

As we learnt in 'Scribbly Gum', the 'silences' we find in the linguistic fabric constituting the Euro-Australian landscape harbour a variety of significances originating from (and for) human and other-than-human beings alike. However, as 'Space Between' suggests, we cannot necessarily assume that such meanings can or should be translated into more familiar terms. Wright's disillusionment with language parallels that of Heidegger: both find the original experiential ground, the poetic ground of the word, to have been lost. This loss is based in the inability of language to express individual, subjective experience, the failure of the universal to express the particular (Wright 'The Writer and the Crisis', 173).

As Heidegger argued in ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, modern discourses of science and technology define the conceptual framework in which to consider an ‘event in nature’, predetermining ‘the conditions under which nature can be forced to show itself within that framework’ (Foltz 12). At the end of ‘Writer and the Crisis’ Wright wondered whether language itself is inadequate, or if we deploy it ineffectively or incorrectly through a failure to respond to the implications that it carries within it (173). She concludes the essay by finding in poetry the means by which language can be reinvented to more closely reflect present experience. Through a poetic recovery of ‘the metaphorical force behind the growth of language’ (176), what might be ‘otherwise incommunicable’ can be expressed by means of a poetic image. Like Heidegger, Wright’s solution involves a reframing or recovery of the capacity of words to evoke the being of things; however in contrast to him, rather than looking to language as the *only* site within which the being of things can be revealed (Rigby 433), Wright recognised the intrinsic limitations of language to express experience, poetic or otherwise (‘The Writer and the Crisis’, 178). In ‘Scribbly Gum’ and ‘For Precision’ the markings on the tree and the call of the gull become signs of a world beyond Wright’s grasp, indicators of another point of perception, which she does not attempt to translate. Instead she draws instruction from Japanese haiku – ‘for its honed brevities/its inclusive silences’ (413)—and the very beings she observes, discovering in both the virtues of succinct verse:

Few words and with no rhetoric.
Enclosed by silence
as is the thrush’s call (‘Brevity’, 413).

‘River Bend’ (1985) offers a broader survey of the ‘silences’ that ‘will not close’ (‘Space Between’, 315) to the one we see in ‘Scribbly Gum’. Like ‘Scribbly Gum’, Wright is preoccupied with signs that are apparent but cannot be read, whose details remain unknown.

What killed that kangaroo-doe, slender skeleton
tumbled above water with her long shanks
cleaned as white as moonlight?
Pad-tracks in sand where something drank fresh blood.

Last night a dog howled somewhere,
a hungry ghost in need of sacrifice.

Down by that bend, they say, the last old woman,
thin, black and muttering grief,
foraged for mussels, all her people gone.

The swollen winter river
curves over stone, a wild perpetual voice (‘River Bend’, 416).

Wright offers a series of images that create a meditative balance between the spoken and the unspoken, the known and unknown. Kate Rigby coins the term ‘negative ecopoetics’ (437) to refer to ecopoetry that is intrinsically ‘self-cancelling’: ‘acknowledging in some ways its inevitable failure to adequately mediate the voice of nature’ (437). The layered histories and meanings found on the banks of the river are staged in just such terms. Wright shows the reader how the presence of a particular object is in fact a sign pointing to a world or a history whose details cannot be grasped linguistically.

By critiquing the capacities of language to present the ‘voice’ of the other, a reconfigured silence also emerges within Wright’s poetry: as an element which completes the disclosure of being, rather than suggesting an absence that needs necessarily to be broken. The proper experience of all phenomena includes a degree of silence of inexplicability. Wright draws our attention to this, and demonstrates how, like for Watling, silence can animate our experience of

In *The World of Silence* Max Picard brings Wright's idea of silence into sharper relief. Picard's phenomenological investigation of silence shares with Heidegger the project of realising the full phenomenological presence of being. However, instead of the disclosure of presence through poesis, Picard argues that it is in and through silence that we might approximate the wholeness of being (19). In the all-embracing, unlimited space that silence evokes, 'the autonomous being in things is strengthened in silence' (19).

Like Picard, Wright observed how silence can preserve the autonomy of phenomena, how it serves as a prism through which to view things outside of the structures of language: 'the ungathered stone alone stays beautiful/and the best poem is the poem I never wrote' ('Beside the Creek' 226). In 'River Bend' the autonomy of the river's 'wild perpetual voice' (416) is made apparent precisely in Wright's refusal to neither translate it, nor ignore it, thereby creating a space for silent, noninterventionist, contemplation.

On this basis, silence is used by Wright to disclose the profound ecological complexity that emerges with the other-than-human 'presence' that both she and Plumwood acknowledge. The image of the 'blue sapphire' was invoked by the Christian contemplative Evagrius in 'aesthetic-contemplative' terms, to encourage 'a certain way of seeing and to signal the limits of images and the imagination in helping us to apprehend the divine' (Christie 171). Wright trains a similarly expansive focus upon an individual entity, using a single, individual object as a means of suggesting the much larger spatial and temporal context it is located within, whilst also avoiding an attempted disclosure of it. As a consequence of recognising the way other-than-human beings are engaged in the meaningful construction of landscapes humans inhabit, a new appreciation of the semiotic complexity of those landscapes begins to emerge. As we saw in 'Scribbly Gum', Wright can only use the sound of the spring flowing over rock to signal the relationship between the spring, palm, fern, and mountain, a relationship too complex to express, and a history beyond imagining. And yet, as Wright shows, the 'strange word' of the spring manages to capture all of this. The 'wild perpetual voice' of the river at the bend is a similarly 'aesthetic-contemplative' image, presented in such a way as to point beyond itself and evoke the 'whole fabric of reality' (Christie 172). Whilst unable to specify exactly how each of the presences of the river bend are related, their shared location suggests that they are connected in intimate and profound ways.

Inga Clendinnen suggests that if members of the First Fleet and the Gadigal had managed to continue their respective dance with strangeness, Australian history might have been altogether different (285-7). Such a view can be found in Wright's poetry. In place of the silence of emptiness, Wright describes a complexity beyond conceptualisation. For this reason, in some cases at least, the search for the elusive word may be redundant, even obscuring. Instead, through a Picardian silence, we can encounter a fullness of being, 'outside the word/in the earlier answer of the eyes' ('Gum Tree's Stripping' 133).

Conclusion

Colonial descriptions of the Australian landscape as silent implied an absence of meaning, which in turn was used to justify a filling of the land with the sounds of European civilisation. They also served as a means of denying that there was anything that escaped the British gaze, or defied the English lexicon. The perceived silence of the Australian landscape has since been argued to reflect the gulf that lay between the European experience of the landscape and the English words which sought to evoke them: the silence of speechless Europeans before a landscape they often could not describe to their own satisfaction.

The Derridean-influenced cultural geographies of Mitchell and Pratt identified the degree to which colonial landscapes are constructed in the negotiation between different 'readings' of the land by coloniser and colonised, or between two or more groups within the colonising or

colonised populations. Rarely did the colonial creation of landscape unfold unopposed. An ecophilosophical reading of the poetry of Judith Wright argues that this notion of the co-constructed landscape can be expanded to acknowledge how the 'manifold surfaces' (Carter *Lie of the Land*, 15) that constitute the landscape should also recognise those created by the other-than-human. However, instead of looking to lift this veil of silence by seeking ways to speak about what we perceive, Wright shows how silence can complete our experience of landscapes. In similar terms to Picard's Heideggerian reading of silence, Wright approaches the silence of the Euro-Australian landscape as a field for viewing other-than-human beings outside of our linguistic constructions of them. Using language as a means of invoking that which lies beyond the capacity of words to grasp, Wright petitions us to explore nature with our senses, rather than our words, using the silence of our suspended sentences as a starting point for tacit exploration.

Dedicated to my grandfather, Donald Watson. 18 November 1925—9 May 2015.

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