THE RUPTURE OF SILENCE:

JUDITH WRIGHT'S REFIGURATION OF AUSTRALIAN COLONIAL SILENCE

NICHOLAS KANKAHAINEN

BA; Grad Dip; Post Grad Dip

A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts at

Monash University in 2015

School of Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Linguistics

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Notice 1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract

In this thesis I examine the ways in which Judith Wright refigures colonial representations of Australia as 'silent'. In place of a silence that implies the land's emptiness or lack of meaning, I argue that silence in Wright's poetry is essential to representing the other-than-human world. Wright employs silence in her poetry to signify the infinite and complex ecological and historical contexts all human and other-than-human beings both exist within, and are signifiers of.

In the first chapter I identify the basis to colonial perceptions, descriptions, and constructions of the land as silent. I argue that descriptions of the land as 'silent' were based less in a lack of sound, than the absence of sounds of European civilisation, and a lack of words to fully describe it. Insofar as this silence (as absence) represented an existential threat, I argue these lexical lacunae were obscured through the use of 'silence' as a trope. As a trope, 'silence' was used to deny that there were parts of the country that remained linguistically uncolonised. In addition, it provided an expedient means of suggesting that the land was lacking in meaning or agency before the arrival of Europeans.

In Chapter 2 I establish the terms of Wright's challenge to these colonial constructions of the land as silent. Wright's counter-claim is grounded in a particular approach to the concept of wilderness, closely resembling its etymological meaning, which pays attention to the presence of autonomous (or 'wild') other-than-human beings, rather than a place where human beings are absent. In Wright's work, other-than-human autonomy, or *wildēorness*, is evident in her observation of signs or 'voices' in the land produced and read by other-than-human beings, which I read in biosemiotic terms. However, inasmuch as such voices challenge the claim that the land is absent of meaning, they also signify broader (hidden) networks of meaning that Wright is unable to access or interpret, a fact she comes to increasingly accept, as her later poems demonstrate.

In the third chapter I account for how she arrived at this refigured view of wilderness. I argue that a contemplative approach forms the context through which Wright 'heard' the voice of the other-than-human. I also argue that such an approach does not see Wright return with more adequate descriptions of her subjects, but leads her to a deeper silence, as the apophatic element in many of her poems demonstrate. This apophatic silence is grounded, I argue, in a Heraclitean ontology of flux.

In the fourth and final chapter I provide an outline of the way silence is refigured by Wright as a means of poetically disclosing these biosemiotic networks and ontologies that her own verse could not adequately decipher or evoke. Wright locates silence in an 'aesthetic-contemplative' context, placing it in a dialectical relation with the poetic or visual image. Rather than treating silence as the opposite to speech or meaning, in its 'holy uselessness' silence suggests greater depths of meaning, or aspects of phenomena ungraspable in ordinary language. In this way Wright engages silence in the service of tacitly disclosing the whole of an ecosystem or a being that inhabits it.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution and affirms that to the best of the candidates's knowledge, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Name: Nicholas Kankahainen

Signature:

Date: 10/10/15

Publications during Enrolment

Portion of this thesis have been published in 'Refiguring the Silence of Australian Landscapes'. Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (JASAL). 15. 1 (2015) http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal/index

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors Kate Rigby and Andrew Johnson for sharing the breadth and depth of their knowledge, and for their advice and patience throughout this study. I would also like to thank Tom Caamano and Kaija Keys for their invaluable time, attention to detail and enthusiasm in proofreading the thesis. Thank you also to Helen Groth for her kind support and assistance in publishing my work in JASAL. My gratitude to Tom Caamano, Craig Christie and Liisi Pohjola who at different stages of this study have generously enabled me to explore the relationship between contemplative ecology and silence for myself. My appreciation finally to my family and friends, who have all made contributions to this study in many varied ways.

INTRODUCTION

15 years before her death, the Australian poet, essayist and activist Judith Wright published her last book of poetry, *Phantom Dwelling* (1985), after which she devoted the majority of her time to environmental activism and indigenous rights. This publication marked the end of a long and eminent poetic career that had surveyed the limits of poetic language in presenting her experiences or concerns. Wright seemed to suggest as much in an interview in the early 1990's:

> The fact of the matter…is that the world is in such a bloody awful state that I cannot find words for it. The whole situation that we've got ourselves into is too immense, too insane as it were for verse to encompass…I simply feel incapable with dealing poetically with what is happening now. (Glover qtd. in Strauss 23)

Wright's inability to 'encompass' her own feelings about the modern world represents the culmination of a tension between two elements long fundamental to her poetry: her own experiences, and the language she had to describe them.

This final falling-silent can be understood as part of Wright's own response to the colonial figuration of the Australian landscape as 'silent'. In this thesis I examine Wright's ecologically-sensitive approach to the silence of the colonial landscape, and establish why, paradoxically, silence played a significant role in her own ecopoetic representations of it. This thesis thus addresses the following two questions:

1. What is the nature of Wright's response to the colonial figuration of the land as silent?
2. Why did Wright continue to use a poetic silence as a means of conveying her own encounters with the Australian landscape and its inhabitants?

Wright's appreciation of the integral relationship between language and silence is present in her earliest poetry. 'Sonnet', for example, expresses a faith in the possibility of recovering 'the word that, when all words are said,/shall compass more than speech' (*Collected Poems*[1] 36). In her essay 'The Writer and the Crisis', Wright argued that modernity was witnessing a failure of the 'tool of language' to live up to the 'demands placed upon it' (167). Nonetheless, she believed that the 'metaphorical force behind the growth of language' could be recovered, thereby revitalising its capacity to convey individual experience and perception (176). In later

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[1] Hereafter abbreviated as *CP*.

poetic works Wright demonstrates the important role silence plays for any such all-encompassing 'word', insofar as the silence beyond (and between) speech is both prolific and unassailable:

> however close our touch
> or intimate our speech,
> silences, spaces reach
> most deep, and will not close. ('Space Between', *CP* 315)

'Space Between' is exemplary of Wright's 'late style' (Collett), where she rejects the possibility of overcoming the 'spaces' in the conceptual and linguistic mesh we cast over the world. Given that the 'silences' between language and experience 'will not close', Wright reformulates her poetic language in such a way as to give the silence that lays beyond and within it a more active role in her work. Instead of signifying an emptiness or absence, I argue that silence in Wright's poetry stands in dialectical relation to speech, contributing to the disclosure of a larger, more dynamic and non-dualistic ecological understanding. 'The Rupture of Silence' we find in Wright's poetry is thus twofold: an interruption of the silenced colonial landscape by voices and beings that Wright is in turn unable to convey.

This investigation of the role of silence in Wright's ecopoetics grew from an initial desire to clarify my own sense of the land as 'silent.' Several solitary, multi-day hiking trips in different parts of Australia were each defined by the impression of a certain silence in the land. Such impressions, I would later learn, are not unusual. In my investigations into Australian colonial representations of the land I learnt that this silence could be explained as being based both in my own lack of words, names, and narratives for the country I moved through, and an inability to read any number of phenomena (sounds, scents, the movements of animals and insects, their presence or absence in general, climate, or weather patterns) as 'signs': bearers of information about the ecosystems I briefly inhabited.

A number of recent and contemporary critical examinations of the construction of the colonial (and modern) Australian landscape have noted the role 'silence' plays in this process. Studies by William Stanner, Paul Carter, Deborah Bird Rose and Val Plumwood all suggest that my own impressions of a silent landscape were not only grounded in an inability to speak about the land, but the absence of many of the voices that were once present to articulate it, and ignorance of the presence of those that remain. In fact, these studies suggest

that an initial, perceived silence of the land in turn justified its material 'silencing', the consequences of which Wright recorded in several well-known poems.

In 'The Great Australian Silence' Stanner sought to bring to mainstream Australian consciousness the very absence of questions regarding relations between European and First Nations people. In a review of academic and non-academic publications (between the late 1930's and the early 1960's) purporting to represent the historical and cultural climate of Australia, Stanner finds that First Nations people are not accidentally but in fact systematically excluded from representation in these works, as if they did not (or should not) exist in the Euro-Australian cultural consciousness, amounting to a 'cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale' (189).

More recently, Carter and Rose have both referred to the colonisation of Australia as a process of 'silencing' or 'emptying' of the land of its original inhabitants and meanings. Carter's reading of Australia in terms of a 'palimpsest' has been highly influential in thinking about the Australian colonial and post-colonial relationship to land. A palimpsest is a parchment in which existing inscriptions are effaced (or literally scrubbed off) in order that new ones may be written. Before Europeans could inscribe their own signs and meanings upon the land, a process of 'cleaning up the country' needed to be undertaken (Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country* 64), whereby 'the left hand creates the *tabula rasa* upon which the right had will inscribe its civilisation' (Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country* 62). The material evidence of this silencing is evident across Australia, in 'fragmented Dreaming tracks, lost species, ruined places, and devastated ecosystems' (Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country* 65). In *The Lie of the Land* Carter argues that initial perceptions of the land as silent assisted in the construction of the land as a palimpsest (see also Jansen 48). Calling land 'silent' served to rhetorically efface an already-present 'noise' (9), and 'a kind of ontological trembling' (Brooks 56) such noise provoked. Implying the land was inarticulate in turn became a justification for a colonial effort to impel it to 'speak', via the clearing of incumbent 'bushes' (Carter, *The Lie of the Land* 9), the removal or destruction of indigenous human and other-than-human populations, the establishment of farms, towns, and cities and a general reshaping of the 'lie of the land'.

Euro- and anthropocentric ontologies have also been instrumental in the figuration of the Australia as 'silent'. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Plumwood argues that the distinction between human culture and 'nature' has been exaggerated within a Cartesian metaphysical dualism, with a promotion of insurmountable differences between the two

spheres, and an understating of characteristics they share. The power to manipulate and control, and to think rationally, is seen as the sole possession of the white, European, upper-class man, and the passive, irrational 'other' (non-white, female, lower-class, or nonhuman) the means or matter for his designs. As a consequence, the other has been 'silenced' through a narrowing of the positions from which communication between the two might take place. As Plumwood shows in 'Decolonising Relationships with Nature', such an approach defined the European colonial encounter with Australia. She argues that colonial Australia was constructed according to an assimilationist mind set, whereby anything that could not be conceivably appropriated as a resource to assist 'settlement' or contribute to self-enrichment was ignored and delegitimised: 'inferior, silent and empty' (20). Plumwood shares with Carter and Rose the view that the land's apparent 'silence' was a rhetorical justification for invasion and subsequent cultural and environmental destruction. However, her ecofeminist critique places emphasis on the refusal of the colonial conceptual framework to acknowledge the agency the other-than-human possesses, insisting instead that all were passive, biologically-determined entities free for manipulation and exploitation. Wright prefigures these theoretical accounts of the land's 'silencing' in both material and ontological terms. A number of poems record encounters with land that has been degraded as a consequence of deforestation, mining, pollution, and the introduction of foreign species. In a view that anticipates Plumwood's analysis, Wright observes the way modern western culture generally encounters the land as a reflection of its own ontological conception of it, and as a result is deaf to the plenum of voices that are present within it.

As this thesis will demonstrate however, Wright gives greater critical attention to the presence and experience of silence in the colonial landscape than the authors named above. I argue that the contemplative dimension in which she works leads her to define new ways in which this silence can be conceived. After identifying the various ways in which the land is silenced, Wright explores the way this silence is ruptured by various other-than-human 'voices'. As I will show, the ineffability of many of these ruptures lead her to advocate a more positive, refigured concept of silence, as an important element in modern settler-Australian encounters with, and depictions of, the land and its inhabitants.

Examining Wright's ecologically-informed approach to the Australian colonial landscape involves an identification of the cultural traditions and discourses she drew from to guide and convey her encounters, traditions which also employed silence in a fashion similar to what we see in Wright's work. As the theoretical context in which I am approaching Wright's

work suggests, this thesis engages with her poetry in a more eco-cultural, than literary-critical, manner. Methodologically, this implies that discussion of pertinent historical, biographical and philosophical contexts outweighs close-reading. Within the limits of this Masters project, moreover, it has not been possible to engage extensively with prior literary critical scholarship on Wright. Wherever appropriate, however, the thesis does respond to more recent ecocritical discussions of her work, along with some earlier scholarship pertinent to the topic at hand.

A significant focus of Wright's early work, as Paul Kane has shown, was to draw attention to the very presence of absence in the land; to recuperate the material consequences of Australia's colonial history from 'the oblivion of disregard' (159). In her poetry Wright noted, through references to lost and muted voices and the remnants of an earlier occupation, the absence of a non-European presence within the colonial landscape. The presence of absence is manifest in Wright's sense that much of the Australian countryside is now 'haunted' by the impact of colonial violence and environmental degradation (Brady, *South of My Days* 73; Kohn 116; King-Smith; Coralie 211-212). In 'Nigger's Leap: New England', 'silence' signals the tremendous loss all Australians must now live with:

> Here is the symbol, and the climbing dark
> a time for synthesis. Night buoys no warning
> over the rocks that wait our keels; no bells
> sound for her mariners. Now we must measure
> our days by nights, our tropics by their poles,
> love by its end and all our speech by silence.
> See in these gulfs, how small the light of home. (*CP* 15)

Kane's reading of 'Nigger's Leap' positions this silence of absence 'as the backdrop to white Australia's history', serving, in turn, 'as the final measure of speech' (159). He argues that Wright's engagement with a silence of absence is not undertaken with the intent of finding a presence within it, rather she seeks to draw attention to the presence of such negative space and define, poetically, the 'pattern that absence makes' (160). As such, Kane argues that, on one level, Wright's interest in silence is directed towards compiling a 'metaphysics of negativity' (160). Wright pursues and investigates what such silence means, and reflects on the experiences it generates.

There is also an ecological dimension to Wright's metaphysics of negativity. Wright's poetry portrays not only a sensitivity to the way landforms memorialise the absence of the human voices that once listened to, and spoke of (and with) these various inhabitants and features; she also records (and recuperates) the absence or ignorance of the 'voices' and 'songs' of the trees, rivers and animals themselves. 'Northern River' and 'South of My Days' refer to a silence that points to a palpable absence of nonhuman voices, which in turn has been forcibly ignored, denied or forgotten. In 'Northern River', the 'sweet Alcaic metre' Wright hears in the river as it travels its course has been 'checked' and 'altered' (*CP* 6); likewise the creek in 'South of My Days' is now 'leaf-silenced' and 'willow choked' (*CP* 20). Neither is heard beneath the presence of a foreign intruder.

'Lament for Passenger Pigeons' reflects on the ontological dimension of this silencing:

> The voice of water as it flows and falls
>
> the noise air makes against earth-surfaces
>
> have changed; are changing against the tunes we choose
>
> […]
>
> Trapped in the fouling nests of time and space,
>
> we turn the music on; but it is man,
>
> and it is man who leans a deafening ear. (*CP* 319)

In terms we find repeated in contemporary views of 'wilderness', the other-than-human is only permitted to speak to our existing dualistic concepts of it. Any variation in the 'tune' is based in variations in our own perceptions. The consequence is, as Wright shows, a world consisting of a veritable litany of silences, based on a refusal to acknowledge the presence autonomous other-than-human voices capable of meaningfully constructing and cohering the world we share with them.

Wright's poems present an ecologically-sensitive response to these various silences, with numerous poems witnessing the rupture of silenced and empty landscapes. Clare Jansen finds within various poetic works emerging from the Tasmanian conservation movement a 'post-colonial re-awakening to the sound and breath of organic Nature' (52). In poetry that pre-dated these works, Wright presents a similar view. 'Flame Tree in a Quarry', for example, celebrates the irrepressible wildness (Wright, 'Wilderness, Waste and History' 18) of Australia, despite significant, widespread (and often total) species loss, and the ontological ignorance that justified it.

6

> Out of the torn earth's mouth
>
> comes the old cry of praise.
>
> Still is the song made flesh
>
> though the singer dies –
>
> flesh of the world's delight,
>
> voice of the world's desire,
>
> I drink you with my sight
>
> and I am filled with fire. (*CP* 60)

In this thesis I argue that the capacity to acknowledge this 'old cry' stems from a silencing of one's self: a renunciation of one's own position as sovereign speaker, allowing for an attentiveness to the manifold layers of human and nonhuman semiosis that constitute any landscape. In 'Scribbly Gum' we can observe how this particular mode of silence forms the context in which to recognise the presence of various nonhuman ciphers in the colonial landscape:

> The cold spring falls from the stone.
>
> I 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. (*CP* 131)

'Scribbly Gum' establishes the way an ecological plenitude can emerge from a position of pure attentiveness. Silence engenders a depth of perception through which to hear the 'one strange word' of the spring, which speaks of the complex and dynamic being of the 'mountain, palm and fern'. However, no attempt is made to translate or interpret this 'word'. 'Scribbly Gum' demonstrates Wright's long-established familiarity with the presence of a silence of ineffability in her encounters with phenomena, and its importance in the context of her poetic representations, a view reiterated in 'Beside the Creek':

> I
>
> know the ungathered stone alone stays beautiful
>
> and the best poem is the poem I never wrote. (*CP* 226)

Wright takes a position of humility in relation to what is a tremendous body of work, presenting her poems as a series of ultimately inadequate attempts to grasp 'things' in poetic language. For this reason, the silence of the 'ungathered' is an intrinsic dimension of Wright's poetry. 'Scribbly Gum' references two aspects to such a silence in Wright's ecopoetics, which will be of central concern to this thesis.

Firstly, 'Scribbly Gum' declares an inability to 'read' the 'written track' found beneath the bark of the tree. I take a biosemiotic approach to the obscurity of this 'track', and argue that it reflects an epistemological modesty on Wright's part. Far from being meaningless, such a sign signifies to Wright the wide variety of other (inaccessible) biosemiotic networks it exists within, in which other beings have selected, read and located the 'track' within a complex and meaningful context that Wright cannot see. Secondly, Wright's poetic silence with regards to the various beings identified by the 'one strange word' of the spring can be attributed to an acknowledged inability to convey the inherent flux of all phenomena. An ontology founded on transience is one that, insofar as it cannot be contained within the static limits of language, is inherently ineffable. In response, Wright uses the silence that lies at the margins of her verse to allude to both these vast and manifold networks of biosemiosis, and the transient identities all beings inhabit. In place of a colonial silence that signifies absence and emptiness, Wright employs a silence that signifies a panoramic vision of ecological complexity and dynamism.

In Chapter One, as a background to understanding Judith Wright's work, I survey some of the historical documents of colonial-era interactions with the land that figured it as 'silent'. I undertake this review through the lens of contemporary critical readings by Jay Arthur and Michael Cathcart. They argue that a lack of names for landforms, features and locations, and a linguistic disjunction between the country (and its inhabitants) and the language they brought to talk about it, all combined to create an under-described – and thereby partially 'silent' – country. In this chapter I also undertake a semiotic analysis of 'silence', identifying the connotations the term carries, and its historic and cultural points of origin. For many writing about the country in the colonial era, the silence of the Australian landscape harbours a 'deathly' quality which, I argue, suggests that Europeans were taking a biblically-inspired view of their own speechlessness. However, such descriptions did not immediately carry a negative connotation, nor were they always read as such. Instead, drawing on Carter's argument for the way different modes of 'intentionality' defined different views of the land (ie 'explorer' or 'colonist'/'settler'), I argue that the ostensible silence of the land was also

evaluated according to particular intentions. For example, this silence was treated by many explorers as an element that animated their experiences of the country, rather than something that necessarily needed to be overcome. As later chapters will show, Wright shares this view of silence, and uses it as a context in which to hear the voice of the other-than-human.

Chapter One nonetheless examines particularly negative responses to this 'death-like silence'. Wright's and her partner, Jack McKinney's own 'cultural archaeology' (Mead 284) (a search for the philosophical foundations to the crisis they believed the modern world was facing) included an examination of Plato's works, including *Timaeus*, as Wright's poem 'The Moving Image' demonstrates (Mead 296). Also present within the cosmology defined by *Timaeus* is a response to the indescribable that was shared by European colonists in Australia. Plato's use of the *khôra* functioned (like Aristotle's *hyle*) as a trope, which Paul Ricoeur defines as a substitute term 'borrowed' to speak about phenomena for which an applicable word did not exist (51). In light of a view of a 'death-like silence' as an existential threat, I argue that 'silence' was used in the same way: to obscure various 'lexical lacunae' (Ricoeur 51), and thereby deny that there were parts of the country that remained linguistically uncolonised. Furthermore, as tropes, *khôra* and *hyle* functioned to construct ineffable, unformed matter in a specific way: as passive, neutral and nonthreatening. Plumwood argues that descriptions of Australia as silent similarly constructs it as pre-historic and formless, which Europeans were in turn charged with shaping into being, giving it a 'voice', the consequences of which are on display in poems such as 'South of My Days' and 'Northern River'.

In Chapter Two I go on to examine Wright's descriptions of the rupture of the silenced colonial landscape by the 'voices' of other-than-human beings. Wright's reflections on a silence heavy with the 'promise of sound' ('The Bones Speak', *CP* 54) – rather than empty of all meaning, presence or agency – are connected to a refiguration of western ideas of 'wilderness'. Within the dominant contemporary understanding of wilderness, the colonial idea that 'nature' is silent remains. The original etymological meaning of 'wilderness' (which emphasises the autonomy of nonhuman beings: what today we might call the 'wildness' of something) has given way to a wilderness that names a space without a human presence. Instead of a space where humans 'visit, but do not remain', a western 'cultural construct' – which preserves the notion of 'nature' as passive matter simply awaiting use or manipulation – Wright depicts a collection of agentic beings whose own subjectivity is principally manifest in the possession of a 'voice'.

I read these various 'words' and 'notes' through the lens of biosemiotic theory. Biosemiotics expands the criteria for what constitutes a 'sign' beyond that found in human speech, writing or symbolism: that all life is permeated and interconnected by the production and exchange of meaning through signs. It is in this realisation that the idea of a passive, silent landscape is challenged. The reticence Wright demonstrates with regards to these signs – an inability to establish the meaning of the 'written track' on the tree, for example – can also be explained from a biosemiotic perspective. I argue that this opacity can be attributed to Wright's acknowledged inability to read a sign from the perspective of another organism. Nonetheless, her sensitivity to the relevance of such phenomena in the lives of other creatures (as she states in 'Eyes') leads her to an awareness of manifold networks of biosemiosis that she cannot understand. Wright's late style is characterised by a growing acceptance of such opacity.

In Chapter Three I establish how attentiveness to nonhuman semiosis emerges and develops in Wright's work. Kane argues that references to silence also appear in her poetry in the form of a self-renunciation or *kenosis*, in which a self-abnegation is undertaken in the interests of the realisation of an 'absent (divine) presence' (161). In this chapter I offer an ecocritical counterpart to Kane's religious or spiritual reading, and argue that Wright demonstrates a contemplative approach to the land and its inhabitants. A willingness to be silent, to suspend the conventional conceptual construction of the other-than-human and simply listen (or 'look' ['Rock', *CP* 414]), reveals a world laden with nonhuman speech and dialogue.

Douglas Christie's principal project in *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind* is to demonstrate how early Christian contemplative theologies and practices can be employed within an ecological context, forming a 'contemplative ecology' as a means by which the natural world can be (re)spiritualised and returned to a culturally-sacred dimension, rather than one of instrumentalisation and exploitation (4). Many of Wright's poems suggest a perspective on other-than-human beings that draws from the contemplative orders of various religions for guiding principles and discourses to convey a perception of the world McKinney defined as 'primordial' (Hawke 165). I also explore some of Wright's poems from a perspective alternative to a Christian contemplative view, reading them in reference to the Australian 'bushman'. I argue that Wright found within the bushman a comparable (secular) asceticism that led one to a more intimate relationship with the land.

While many of Wright's poems can be viewed as 'nature poetry', her primary interest, as she stated, was not 'nature' as such, but the question of 'man in nature' (qtd. in Hawke 160): of humanity's relationship with nature ('The Writer and the Crisis' 175) . Her own interest in

the disjunction between language and the world ('the gap between the event as it happens to the individual, his immediate experience, and the words in which he must express that event' ['The Writer and the Crisis' 172]) puts language at the interface between 'man' and 'nature' in many of her works. It is not only the 'tree' that Wright is interested in, but the difference between the tree as a 'label' and as a 'momentous living event' ('The Writer and the Crisis' 168). Poems such as 'Boundaries' and 'River Bend' are given to the exploration of such a disjunction, and demonstrate the consequences a contemplative ecology has for poetic language.

The ontology Wright formed in contemplation was one that, in its dynamism and complex interconnectedness, could only be expressed in apophatic terms. In this way, true to the cycles of ascesis and apophasis that have traditionally defined the contemplative's path, Wright's relationship with other-than-human beings begins in silence and continues into an ever-deepening silence. As a consequence of this approach to language, silence itself is refigured in Wright's poetry.

In Chapter Four I outline the role silence plays in representing the ineffable in Wright's ecopoetics. Susan Sontag drew a comparison between the function of silence in modernist art and its employment in the earlier mystical discourses of various religious traditions, arguing that the modern artist, like the mystic, is engaged in a 'pursuit of silence' (182): highlighting the limitations of artistic representation and thereby making a silence of ineffability a significant element in the work. Wright's ecopoetics exemplify the modern artist's use of mystical silence in her framing of many of her ecopoetic images in 'aesthetic-contemplative' terms.

An aesthetic-contemplative image encourages the formation of a dialectical relation between speech and silence. As I will show, negative ecopoetics draws attention to the failure of art 'to adequately mediate the voice of nature' (Rigby 437). When employed in poetry, prose or the visual arts, the aesthetic-contemplative image similarly draws attention to its own inefficacy in adequately invoking its subject; however it also uses the image as a means of alluding to its location within larger dimensions that cannot be represented. While the 'strange word' of the spring is only heard by Wright in the event of her own stillness, this very word becomes an aesthetic-contemplative image through which to evoke the ineffable history and complex interconnectedness of the 'mountain, palm and fern'; a 'word', as Wright put it in 'Sonnet' that 'shall encompass more than speech' (*CP* 36). Silence is thus a significant element of the aesthetic-contemplative image, which appears in Wright's verse to

signify the broader dynamic biosemiotic and ontological contexts she observed. Silence in Wright's poetry is used, I will argue, to contribute to the disclosure of a wider, more complex, and dynamic vision of reality than is possible in linguistic representation.

CHAPTER ONE – AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF AUSTRALIAN COLONIAL SILENCE

Don Watson, in his concluding remarks to *The Bush*, argues that any 'progress' in our thinking about the continent – beyond the 'serial psychopathy' that has characterised much of settler Australia's response to the nonhuman world – might begin with an examination of 'all the received wisdom about the bush being melancholy, silent, perverse, a nursery of weird souls and sterling male associations' (371). This chapter undertakes such an examination in order to establish a foundation for the further discussion of Judith Wright's engagement with silence as a key trope for 'settler' encounters with Australia. In short, my aim is to present a view of silence through the lens of colonial experience, as well as through more recent scholar's responses to that tradition.

Through a reading of a selection of colonial-era documents I identify the historical and intellectual foundations to the British colonial figuration of the land as 'silent', and argue that it was based in an inability to read or describe various inhabitants and landforms. It is important to note however, that such silence could be perceived positively or negatively: as something that animates or defines one's experiences of the land, or as something that needs to be broken or overcome. In this chapter I focus on the negative response to this silence: why colonists sought to replace an 'old' silence with a 'new' one (Carter, *The Lie of the Land* 8). Carter argues that descriptions of the land as 'silent' were construed as justifications for various efforts to encourage the land to 'speak' in ways that were familiar and useful for Europeans, efforts that in fact involved a suppression of an already-present 'noise' (*The Lie of the Land* 8-9). Suggesting that the land was 'inarticulate' justified its 'improvement', the results of which Wright also observed in many of her poems.

> The song is gone; the dance
> is secret with the dancers in the earth.
> the ritual useless and the tribal story lost in an alien tale. ('Bora Ring', *CP* 2)

> Where your valley grows wide in the plains
> they have felled the trees, wild river.
> Your course they have checked, and altered
> your sweet Alcaic metre. ('Northern River', *CP* 6)

'Bora Ring' and 'Northern River' both register cultural and ecological destruction in terms of an absence of an indigenous 'song', and their replacement by a palpable silence. Several of Wright's poems also reflect Plumwood's argument that Australia has been ontologically

silenced, that references to the land as 'silent' were grounded in an imported Cartesian dualism that denies agency and voice to the human and nonhuman 'other'. 'Lament for Passenger Pigeons', for example, observes the way 'Blank surfaces reverb a human voice' (*CP* 320). In this case, the silence of the land and its inhabitants is based on a view that humans alone are capable of rendering phenomena meaningful, with no acknowledgment that these 'surfaces' have the capacity to answer back in ways that we may not understand.

Nonetheless, as Wright illustrates in other poems, this silence was not absolute or total. In identifying the underlying intellectual factors that led to Australia's material and ontological silencing, the review in this chapter thus provides important background to Wright's own view of the land, which is examined in Chapters Two and Three. Establishing the terms by which the land was figured as silent assists us in understanding the precise nature of its rupture by a litany of nonhuman 'songs' and 'voices', and the way in which Wright refigured the silence of the colonial landscape.

Why was Australia described as silent? I draw from studies by Arthur and Cathcart to show that this silence was based less in a lack of sound, than a series of absences that Europeans often described in terms of 'silence'. A lack of names for landforms, features and locations, and the linguistic disjunction between the country (and its inhabitants) and the language they brought to talk about it, often left the country undescribed and hence 'silent'.

In the Christian Old Testament, silence is often equated with death (MacCulloch 13). For many writing about the country in the colonial era, the silence of the Australian landscape harboured a 'deathly' quality which, I argue, suggests that colonists were taking a partially biblical-inspired view of their own speechlessness. In light of a view of a 'death-like silence' as an existential threat (and it was not, as I will show, always perceived as such), when one described the land as 'silent' the word became a trope, overcoming or obscuring 'lexical lacunae' (Ricoeur 51) in descriptions and narratives of the country. As a trope it also served to transfer one's own speechlessness onto the land itself, and thereby denied that there were parts of the country that remain linguistically uncolonised. Wright's and McKinney's examination of the history of western thought, to 'account for the nihilist, scientist episteme of the 1940s and war-torn modernity more generally' (Mead 299), included Plato's *Timaeus*, as Wright's poem 'The Moving Image' demonstrates (Mead 296). In the spirit of such a 'cultural archaeology' (Mead 284), an examination of the concept of the *khôra* in *Timaeus* further contributes to our understanding of why Australia was figured as 'silent', and how Wright's ecopoetics contested this figuration.

Plato's use of the *khôra* functioned (like Aristotle's *hyle*) as a term with which to speak about 'matter', a space or substance that cannot be spoken about insofar as it lacks any form. *Khôra* and *hyle* were substitute tropes 'borrowed' to speak about phenomena for which an applicable word did not exist, to 'fill' this gap in one's cosmological elucidations. Furthermore, *khôra* also suggests how this preformal (non)being ought to be perceived: a 'receptacle' in need of an agent to shape its contents; passive and (according to Plato) feminine. Plumwood argues that silence was employed in colonial discourse in a similar fashion. Describing the country as silent defined it as formless, something outside or prior to history; a morally neutral void (in contrast to the moral bankruptcy a 'death-like silence' conveyed) which Europeans were in turn charged with shaping into being, of giving an identity and 'voice'. As I will show at the end of this chapter, however, the neutral and passive landscapes that colonial silence creates are challenged once more by (what I will call, following Wright) the 'wildness' of the country: confounding rhizome-like ruptures (Ashcroft and Salter 16) of 'presence' and agency that emerge from within it.

THE RHETORIC OF COLONIAL SILENCE

In *Ceremonies of Possession* Patricia Seed showed how British colonial practices were unique in the way that they did not make formal declarations stating the appropriation of territory on behalf of the Crown (16). Instead occupation and the establishment of permanent dwellings were seen as proof enough: 'The ordinary object – house, fence, or other boundary marker – signified ownership' (19). In *The Road to Botany Bay* Carter argues that the establishment of such boundaries (which began with the naming of a 'place') also became symbolic markers or 'rhetorical boundaries' that asserted both a new 'centre' and an adjoining periphery (13). Sites of occupation created the 'boundary conditions' that allowed one to differentiate between a specified 'place' and nondescript 'space' (148). The ability to speak about a place became an assertion of its existence, and its difference from the surrounding country. This is not to suggest however that what lay 'beyond the bounds' was undefined. Rather in defining a 'place', the 'space' that lay beyond these new boundaries was a specific kind of country: empty and unknown, which explorers and settlers could proceed to 'discover' and 'know' anew (Arthur 54-55). Such culturally invisible space was labelled – in burgeoning settler Australian nomenclature – as 'outback', 'scrub', or 'the bush'; terms whose generality expressed the British inability to perceive difference in the land, or discern distinct places within it, in contrast to the plethora of names and stories that Australia's First Nations people already saw within it.

The Road to Botany Bay concludes with something of a conundrum: while European names redefined the centre and the periphery of the Australian landscape, 'other voices' persistently echoed out from the other side of the boundary, an embarrassing exposure of British epistemological limitations for a country they claimed as a possession of the British Crown. Derridean theories of landscapes focus on the role played by 'other voices' – other modes of perception (Pratt, Mitchell) – in the construction of colonial landscapes. Though not exclusively Derridean in his approach, Carter presents a similar picture, arguing that counter-discourses and counter-narratives of marginalised populations (such as convicts or indigenous groups), along with their own oral histories or names for places, are often found within the discourses and narratives of the sovereign (Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* 301-2).

The Australian continent as of 1788 was not simply 'chaotic nature, map-like in its uniformity' (Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* 337), but already entirely 'landscaped' by networks of tracks and pathways whose origin, passage and destination were determined by a complex system of Dreaming stories, intertribal relationships and trading routes. The Australian continent was not blank space or a *tabula rasa*, but 'a cultural space whose views, horizons, scale, and gradients already answered to a cultural history' (Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* 339). In drawing attention to the presence of other perceptions of the land, Carter establishes the point to which the British colony at Sydney Cove was in many ways 'a rhetorical rationalisation, designed to neutralise the reality of a space that was turbulent, unpredictable, rebellious' (*The Road to Botany Bay* 305).

As Carter showed in the introduction to *The Lie of the Land*, descriptions of the land as 'silent' were part of this neutralisation. For evidence, he draws on remarks made by Judge Advocate David Collins in his *Account of the English Colony in New South Wales,* that upon the landing of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove, 'the spot which had so lately been the abode of silence and tranquillity was now changed to that of noise, clamour and confusion'; a momentary disruption that, Collins assures his readers, would itself eventually give way to the establishment of a new and prevailing order, and a 'new eloquence of "regularity"' (Collins qtd. in Carter, *The Lie of the Land* 8). Carter reads Collins observations in terms of a desire to replace an 'old' silence – based on the supposition that 'the land was formerly inarticulate' – with a 'new' silence that pointed to the land's 'settlement' into order and regularity, 'speaking' eloquently of the virtues of British civilisation (8). In a reiteration of the idea that Australia was treated like a palimpsest, Carter argues that Collins' reference to the silence of the country was also 'an important rhetorical weapon in the silencing process':

suggesting that the land was silent served to 'quieten down the voices of the old ground' (8), and was in turn a justification for the colonist's own 'articulation of it' (8), through the reshaping of the land, the introduction of stock animals and the expulsion of the 'natives': a range of activities that rendered the country more useful and productive to colonists and thereby increasingly drew it into a network (and discourse) of market capitalism.

However, descriptions of the land as silent do not immediately amount to a call for its interruption. In Collins' journals we can also find, amidst the grand rhetoric of landing, a hint of remorse over the British 'purpose':

> 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)

Collins' description of the landing site as an Edenic paradise, where a prevailing quietude has been rudely disrupted by more pressing modern matters such as clearing ground, suggests that a more Romantic sensibility towards the perceived silence of land emerged in moments of idle contemplation. The artist and emancipist Thomas Watling recorded a similar impression in his *Letters From An Exile At Botany Bay*, where he 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).

Ross Gibson detects in Watling's *Letters* a reluctance to 'find within himself the overweening attitude necessary for co-opting a colony into an imperial worldview' (26). Silence for Watling is a defining quality of his surroundings, not something that needs to be broken. Instead, it colours his experience and frames his thoughts of his loved ones. In spite of his disregard for the people in his vicinity for whom that stream did have a name, the rather Romantic frame in which Watling places his experience of this silence suggests how it might be something that contributes to, rather than detracts from, one's experience of the landscape.

Collins' and Watling's quotes both demonstrate that the 'old' silence of the land met a range of different responses: it was not a fundamentally negative experience. Reiterating the process by which 'land' becomes a 'landscape', Carter argues that the British did not

17

encounter the land itself, but their own projections upon it: 'the colonizer produces the country he will inhabit out of his own imagining' (*The Lie of the Land* 10). Views of the land as silent were part of this 'imagining'. Yet silence too, as I will further argue, was subject to different perspectives. In light of these varied views of silence, I begin by investigating why it was described as such.

THE 'OLD SILENCE' OF COLONIAL LANDSCAPES

Why was 'silence' used to describe the country Europeans encountered? Coastal forests can be quite noisy with the trickling and rushing of water, or the rustling of leaves in a stiff wind. Dryer tracts of country still echo with avian calls, the passage of wind and the response of insects to the heat. Only the interior might be said to be palpably 'silent' (devoid of sound).

Carter's argument that colonial descriptions of Australia as 'silent' are grounded in its inarticulacy has been further unpacked by recent scholarship. Arthur and Cathcart show how descriptions of the land as 'silent' often referred to the absence of sounds and signs of European civilisation (Arthur 62; Cathcart 13-16). Prior to 'buildings' or 'roads' (etc.), there was 'nothingness', 'emptiness', 'blankness', and 'silence'. In *The Water Dreamers* Cathcart finds references to silence in numerous colonial-era journals that point to a lack of familiar sound. He notes that Collins observed the echo of axe-blows and the downfall of the county's 'ancient inhabitants' (trees) as an audible interruption to the 'stillness' of the land (14). Cathcart also cites Edward Eyre, who on his first night after departing Adelaide, reflected on the difference between the clamour of 'the crowded drawing-roof of civilised life' and 'the solitude and silence of the wilds' (127). Melbourne squatter John Cotton marvelled at how 'silent primitive nature' was replaced by 'a large rectangularly built city with all the activity, hum and bustle of its 2500 inhabitants' (65). As Cathcart shows, William Westgarth similarly observed the 'immense wilderness' of the Yarra wetlands and 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' (74). However, aside from the absence of audible signs of colonial civilisation, these references to the land as 'silent' were also based in an inability to describe or interpret it otherwise.

In *The Default Country*, Arthur investigates the integral relation between physical space and language through the assembling of word or 'lexical maps' of Australia. These maps are constructed by collecting English words or phrases used 'to describe the physical place and environment of the place named "Australia"', representing 'some of the ways Australians

have read the landscape, have engaged with it, have imagined, remembered and understood it – or thought they have' (2). Arthur's emphasis on the relationship between language and land in the construction of landscapes reveals that there was often (and in many cases, remains) a significant separation between a landform and the English the word used to describe it; a 'misconvergence of language and landscape' (24). In the absence of more relevant terms to describe some parts of the country, they are often left unidentified altogether, appearing in colonial-era narratives as little more than a silence of absent detail.

The greater descriptive attention given to water is a case-in-point. In Ludwig Leichardt's journal, for instance, the most florid descriptions often emerge in the discovery or company of a waterway, while the stolid march through arid country was often given over to dry reportage of geography and geology (Rothwell 3-5). This distinction between land and water was often registered in terms of a boundary between sound and silence. Charles Sturt juxtaposes the 'melody' of the stream at Depot Glen against the 'death-like silence' that encircles it (*Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia* 213-214); for Collins, aside from the 'run of fresh water', the forest is pervaded by 'stillness' (5). Even Watling's 'stream', despite its namelessness, still forms the centre of his attention, the bank upon which he walks forming the 'margin' (24). For each, water animates a landscape that is otherwise minimally described.

The greater linguistic accessibility (not to mention the practical necessity) of water for the British suggests why it received more attention than the land surrounding it. As Cathcart observes, '[t]he First Fleeters were wet-country people' (8), their language took shape in a country where water was abundant, and occurred in a variety of forms:

> 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)

For all its local unfamiliarity, water was a means by which Europeans might enter into a dialogue with a country (Arthur 18-24); they were familiar with its presence, and the variety of its habits and forms. It was both a linguistic and literal pathway through the land; a means through which non-European landscapes might be 'read', and thereby cognitively and physically occupied. After arriving via its oceans, the 'settlements' on Australia's coasts remained the cultural and social centre of colonial (and contemporary) life, while the

geographical centre or 'interior' paradoxically became the cultural and linguistic periphery, the 'outback' (Arthur 32). Many explorers, such as Oxley and Sturt, navigated their way through it via its watercourses; they formed the most ideal pathways into the country and out of it. John McDouall Stuart admitted that 'I must go where the water leads me' (30). The presence, absence and general behaviour of waterways forms a central feature and concern of many narratives of exploration. Country beyond the margins of water courses took forms that Europeans were often unable to describe in the language they brought with them. This point finds especial clarity with the idea of 'the bush'.

While there were numerous words to denote the forms water could take, Watson shows how 'the bush' has become a convenient label for country so varied and diverse the term is 'nine-tenths nonsense': 'the looseness of the term speaks not only for the difficulty of defining something so various and changeable, but for the way the landscape often overwhelmed both our ability and our desire to understand' (72). With an appreciation of the diversity of the country 'the bush' referred to, the word illustrates the difficulties many Europeans had in finding words to describe it.

Commerce, industry and European inhabitation all created landscapes more familiar than those found in 'the bush'. Their growth would also see it recede or even disappear from settler view. Alongside 'the bush', one can read the 'primeval' or 'old' silence we find evoked in many colonial-era journals as a response to a lack of more precise words to describe the land, and an absence of signs of European civilisation that would break its perceived monotony. However as many of the examples provided also suggest, reference to the land as silent is simply a way of interpreting experience: silent country is country that does not 'speak' in ways that Europeans can understand. Such silence is not intrinsically negative.

SILENCE AND ITS PORTENTS (SILENCE AND DEATH I)

The ostensible silence of Australia was often contextualised with references to death. First Lieutenant James Tuckey, part of the first (and aborted) British colony in Victoria's Port Phillip Bay (near present-day Sorrento) also used 'silence' to describe the country, though now with an additional significance attached to it:

> The last hymn of the feathered choiristers to the setting sun, and the soft murmurs of the breeze, faintly broke the death-like silence that reigned around. (Tuckey 86)

The Scottish Presbyterian minister John Dunmore Lang described the country along the D'Entrecasteaux Channel in Van Diemen's Land in similar terms:

> Yet all is still as death! Wild solitude
>
> Reigns undisturbed along that voiceless shore. (388)

Thwarted in his hope to follow the Lachlan River west out of the Blue Mountains by its expansion into unnavigable wetlands, John Oxley described the country in terms of 'silence, death and desolation' (Johnson 76). Sturt likewise repeatedly reflected on the country as a place 'over which the silence of the grave seemed to reign' (*Two Expeditions into the Interior of Southeastern Australia* 59).

These references to the deathly character of silence bear a biblical allusion. Diarmaid MacCulloch argues in *Silence: A Christian History* that references to silence in the Bible do not merely imply 'an ordinary silence or refraining from speaking' (12), but a portent or sign of death or desolation. While the Revised Standard Edition would use a variety of terms to refer to instances of calamity, the King James Bible (the edition in print at the time of Australia's colonisation by Britain) preferred 'silence' as a general signifier for any such occurrence (12). By way of example, MacCulloch compares iterations of Jeremiah 8.14:

> Why do we sit still? Gather together, let us go forth into the fortified cities and perish [KJB 'let us be silent'] there; for the Lord our God has doomed us to perish [KJB 'hath put us to silence'], and has given us poisoned water to drink, because we have sinned against the Lord. (qtd. in MacCulloch 12)

In other books, the idea that silence is a portent of death is more emphatically grounded in one's inability to speak. Psalm 31, for example, proclaims 'let [the wicked] go dumbfounded to Sheol [ie the silent pit of death or underworld] (qtd. in MacCulloch 13). Psalm 115 cautions those who worship before the mute idols of dead (or false) religions, that they will receive no guidance from them, and will find themselves as blind and mute as the idols they valorise: 'Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes but do not see…those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them' (qtd. in MacCulloch 13). Unlike other connotations attached to the word (such as quietude, a sabbatical, or an ineffability stemming from profundity), in these books references to a person's silence or muteness are employed to signify death. For a religion whose story of creation sees speech as its source, speechlessness was frequently, MacCulloch argues, 'equated with powerlessness, so neither friend nor foe would prosper if they were

21

dumb' (13). In a view that still resonates today in Western secular culture, it is the speaker who will create a world, and maintain power over it.

The biblical foundations to the 'deathly silence' of the Australian colonial landscape are reinforced by the Christian medieval preoccupation with an *exegesis* of the 'Book of Nature'. In 'Nature and Silence' Christopher Manes argues that Medieval hermeneutics included an approach to 'nature' whose influence, he observes, remains today. Medieval exegesis 'established God as a transcendental subject speaking through natural entities, which, like words on a page, had a symbolic meaning, but no autonomous voice' (20). Although the 'celestial' content of such a view has increasingly fallen away with the scientific revolution, the general principle remains: nature is but a collection of so many components in a greater order of (knowable) 'nature'. If Europeans could not interpret or speak about many of the signs in this new country, what did this imply? In this dimension, the 'deathly silence' of the landscape emerged (in part) from the colonists own 'dumbness', their inability to read and translate the signs within it. The silence of the land augured the colonist's annihilation.

A silence grounded in the absence of European civilisation, or of signs colonists could read, might itself be construed as a sign that God had revoked his benevolent hand, and, having forsaken the land, left its inhabitants to their fate. As Cathcart shows, in the works of Oxley (91), Sturt (110), Boyd (153), Clarke (158), and Favenc (160), references to the 'silence' of the land in colonial Australia are often accompanied by observations of its 'loneliness' or 'solitude'. Given that these authors were typically writing in the company of large exploration parties, one suspects that this loneliness stemmed from a lack of divine guidance, rather than human company.

The idea that God had forsaken the lands that Europeans explored, especially in the 'Antipodes', is one commonly attached to the idea of 'wilderness'. As the 'antipode to Eden' (Nash 15) 'wilderness' was used to designate landscapes inhospitable to human populations, especially deserts. 'Treeless wastelands' are an affront to anybody who seeks easy sustenance from the earth. Nash observes that since the fall, such conditions were thought bestowed as divine retribution for moral transgression: 'The identification of the arid wasteland with God's curse led to the conviction that wilderness was the environment of evil, a kind of hell' (14-15). Hayden White reiterates Nash's view, observing that wilderness is represented as a peculiarly moral condition (13). Hence the inhospitability of a place to human purposes might serve as an adequate gauge or indicator for the degree of divine retribution a place was subject to.

Yet a 'death-like silence' was not always perceived in negative terms. One's attitude towards a region where signs of colonial civilisation or God's benevolence are few seems to have depended greatly on temperament and its relationship to one's broader goals. Many Christian monasteries were established in the wild solitudes of the Northern European forests, or the arid expanses of North Africa's deserts expressly to test and (ultimately) strengthen faith. Lieutenant Tuckey's reference to a 'death-like silence' are couched in the same terms as David Collins' (Tuckey's commander at Port Phillip), whose impressions of the land at Sydney Cove Tuckey quotes repeatedly. For all its silence, Tuckey sees Port Phillip as a refuge from the 'hum' of the burgeoning colonies, a place for brooding; where '[c]ontemplation, with her musing sister Melancholy, might find an undisturbed retreat' (85). Clare Jansen argues that the silence in Lang's poem (not to mention its conjunction with 'death') writes 'life out of colonial poetry' (49). Yet the poem may not be a rhetorical gesture, as much as an inability to hear, see, or describe the signs or patterns of life within it. As his poem concludes, he similarly notes the attractiveness of such a place to certain temperaments, which suggests that Lang is not using references to the silence of the land negatively, to justify its filling with sounds of colonial civilisation:

> The wise and good
> That wont of old, as hermits, to adore
> The God of Nature in the desert drear,
> Might sure have found a fit sojourning here. (389)

These descriptions of the land as silent are not a rhetorical demand for its 'breaking'. If anything, silence animates Tuckey's and Lang's experience of the country, as it did for Collins and Watling.

The inability to describe a landscape – to surmount its 'death-like silence' – was not a barrier to its exploration. Drawing on Ricoeur's hermeneutics, Carter's phenomenological reading of the colonisation of Australia identifies the way specific intentions defined how land would be read and constructed. Whether the land's resistance to description would be viewed negatively or not depends on the particular intent of the viewer.

Strangeness and obscurity, the failure to describe or 'discover' anything at all, was not a failure if one's goal was simply to explore a region. 'Monotony', 'blankness' and 'silence' may have been recorded with anxiety and disappointment, but insofar as the explorer's goal was to produce a narrative of their experiences, such encounters were a contribution to it. As

Carter argues, journeys of exploration were funded by governments and investors keen on seeing a return in the form of commercially-valuable land (*The Road to Botany* Bay 56), and explorers departed with the weight of their own and others' expectations. Yet contrary to the assumption that since 1770 the energies of one and all have been directed towards the establishment of British imperial rule over Australia, while Captain Cook might have 'found a country, [he] did not aim to found a colony' (*The Road to Botany Bay* 33). Carter observes that many other explorers shared this view. The 'charm of exploring' did not lie in discovery, but in 'the act of exploring' (81); whether expectations were dashed or fulfilled was often secondary to the actual journey undertaken.

Where one's intent is to allow the landscape to 'speak' through the narrative of the journey, the blank spaces or silences in any 'outline of names' are as informative as the names themselves. The names Cook applied to his map of the east coast of Australia largely reflected his experiences of it. Names for places were 'metaphors of the journey', rather than an application of titles to 'discovered' landforms. So too was its 'death-like silence'. The explorer is not threatened by the disjunction between language and landscape, Carter argues, because they did not carry 'the illusion of knowing under the guise of naming' (29). As we shall see in following chapters, Judith Wright shared this view.

SPEAKING OVER SILENCE

The explorer's approach to names, and the silences that interspersed them, can be contrasted with the naming undertaken by the 'settler', whose intent was the invention of a place one could inhabit (Carter, *The Road to Botany* Bay 47). Prime Minister Billy McMahon's celebration of the explorers who mapped the 'vastness and silence of the inland', and of the 'pioneers' who 'broke the silence of this land' (qtd. in Arthur 62), demonstrates the parallel views taken to silence, and the role played by maps (and the names they cited) in both creating and breaking it. McMahon's commemoration reads Australia's colonial narrative in terms of the Christian story of creation. For the Hebrews, Yahweh was more than anything, 'a communicator, who in normal and desirable circumstances expresses himself in noise, usually emphatic noise' (MacCulloch 17); whose very speech brought light to the darkness and silence of the void and heralded six days of creation.

The ability to talk about Australia was crucial to its colonisation. In the context of creating and distinguishing 'place' from 'space', Carter makes an important observation regarding the uses to which place names were put. Linguistic disjunction, he argues, was not a barrier to

exploration or inhabitation, insofar as the basic 'desire to differentiate' (*The Road to Botany Bay* 48) prevailed over a perceived lack of any distinguishable landmarks:

> Why, if the newcomers were bound by the laws of analogy, by what they had formerly seen and read, did they not leave the nameless extensions, these culturally invisible intervals, unnamed and silent? (46)

In fact, they did leave these intervals 'silent', but that does not immediately imply that they were unnamed. In the colonial context 'silence' was a word enlisted as a means of speaking about country as yet uncolonised linguistically. It was yet another term, alongside 'blank' or 'empty' that could be used to fill 'lexical lacunae' (Ricoeur 51): the gaps in what colonists could say of the land.

In terms echoing Carter, David Brooks has argued for the intellectual prescience of the European colonial experience in Australia, on the basis of an encounter with ontological aporia that would not be theorised until the latter part of the 20th century (51-53). However, efforts to control this 'ontological uncertainty' (57) also involved a reaching back to earlier intellectual frameworks. Plato's account of the origins and organisation of the cosmos in *Timaeus* includes an explanation of the design and pattern of its elements. Fundamental to this cosmology is his well-known distinction between the 'intelligible' and the 'sensible', whereby the character of a physical thing is based in an ideal form. In the course of defining these two fields, Plato is forced to identify a 'third thing' (40): a place from which, and out of which, these sensible things emerge. *Khôra* is employed by Plato as a trope to speak about what cannot be logically expressed, and to 'fill' the lexical lacunae that emerge at the centre of his cosmology. *Khôra* is a name for that which cannot be named, insofar as it is not actually a 'thing', but the 'receptacle' and 'stuff' from which things emerge (42).

Inasmuch as 'silence' emerged out of European muteness, it also became a means of overcoming a lack of words for country. Descriptions of the land as 'silent' sit in opposition to saying nothing at all: to being overcome by its 'deathly silence'. In this way, 'silence' became a trope used to fill the gaps in what can be said of country, rather than using it to suggest that such gaps exist. However the similarities between *khôra* and 'silence' extend beyond their role in overcoming ineffability.

KHÔRA, *HYLE* AND SILENCE

Drawing influence from Jack McKinney's work (Brady, *South of My Days* 500), Plumwood also examined Plato's *Timaeus*, finding within it the foundations of modern hierarchical

dualism. As she points out in 'The Concept of a Cultural Landscape', *Timaeus* defines the most basic of mind/body dualisms, with 'Being' divided into 'an uncreative, featureless material part and a hyper-separated, externalised, and often dematerialised "director" or "driver" usually identified as intelligence, mind or reason' (118). 'Silence' was employed in colonial discourse as a trope to support the same dualist ontology that we see in *Timaeus*. In 'Decolonising Relationships with Nature' Plumwood finds dualist thinking repeated in references to Australia as 'silent and empty'. She argues that silence refers not simply to emptiness but implies that the land or an inhabitant of it is 'speaking neither on its own account nor that of any owner' (19). As we have seen, Carter shares with Plumwood the view that the land has been rendered inarticulate. However her contextualising of colonial descriptions of the land as silent within an ecophilosophical critique of Platonic cosmology places emphasis on the idea of the land as lacking agency of its own; of being a passive object in need of an external agent to shape it. Plumwood thus identifies an ontological view of the country that is defined according to a separation between an agent and the inert matter that would be manipulated and exploited by it. From this perspective we can also see how a 'death-like silence', suggestive of moral retribution, is neutralised: the silence of the land no longer signifies a cursed wilderness, but a passive void awaiting creation.

Thus in addition to using 'silence' and *khôra* as tropes to fill lexical lacunae they also disclose important information about how these spaces are encountered and ought to be understood. In *The Rule of Metaphor* Paul Ricoeur observes that 'the shared characteristic' between the two ideas ('tenor' and 'vehicle') that comprise a metaphor does not necessarily lie in a 'direct resemblance' between the two: 'it can result from a common attitude taken to both' (94). Carter argues that such an 'attitude' justifies Sturt's and Eyre's descriptions of the deserts of inland Australia as a 'sea'. Describing the desert as a sea enabled both explorers to cohere otherwise disparate experiences 'into a single, swelling symphonic theme' (*The Road to Botany Bay* 92). Importantly, they were able to assist the reader in understanding how the interior was encountered: its vast distance, with few landmarks, and a receding horizon. The parallels Plumwood finds between *Timaeus* and colonial discourse suggests that the land was described as silent on the basis of this mode of analogy. Just as 'receptacle' is seen by Plato as the most relevant term with which to define the 'third thing' in his cosmology, so Australia is seen as comparable to silence, in accordance with an 'attitude' that sees them both as a nondescript space containing preformal 'stuff'. Both terms reflect a view that their subjects are inert, passive, and requiring of an external influencing force or agent.

British colonists in Australia were not the first to construct a landscape as a passive hyper-separated other. When Aristotle came to speak about this same unformed matter (in *Physics*), he used the Greek word *hyle*[2]. 'He is', argues Robert Harrison, 'the first to give the word its philosophical meaning of "matter"'. However, when Harrison proceeded to identify the meaning of *hyle* in Ancient Greek, he made a surprising discovery: '*hyle* in Greek does not originally mean matter, it means forest' (28). Aristotle employs 'forest' when referring to unformed matter because, just as Plato believed, it cannot be otherwise spoken of: 'There are neither words, images nor categories for undifferentiated matter, since form is the condition of our logical access to reality' (28). Aristotle's use of *hyle* for undifferentiated matter is also justified by a shared attitude taken to both. As Harrison shows, this shared characteristic is evident in Ovid's representation of Artemis, the Ancient Greek goddess of the forest.

Actaeon, passing through the forest following a successful hunt, mistakenly stumbles into a grove where Artemis is bathing in 'her secret pool' (Ovid 106). The 'truth' of the realm that Artemis inhabits, protects, and embodies is usually hidden from those who would explore it unbidden, or exploit it. The shadows of the forest ensure that its secrets remain unseen. Actaeon however, comes upon the goddess at high noon, in the fullness of the sun's light, 'When the shadows were shortest and the sun's heat/hardest' (105). It is in this enlightened state that Actaeon is able to observe Artemis in her totality, unobstructed by the 'shades' of perspective, prejudice, or language. Incensed by this incursion, and unable reach her weapons, Artemis splashes water into Actaeon's 'astonished eyes', transforming him into a stag, and in so doing, taking away his powers of (human) speech: 'Now, if you can, tell how you saw me naked' (108). Artemis regains her chastity in Actaeon's muteness.

Like Plato's *khôra*, Artemis embodies a world the Ancients perceived as preformal and chaotic. As Actaeon's metamorphosis demonstrates, she oversees a space where hierarchies established by the Greek *logos* collapse, are inverted, or disappear altogether. Words similarly have no purchase insofar as the forms to which they are anchored are unstable. As 'the huntress and protectress of wild animals, but also the goddess of childbirth' (Harrison 29), Artemis embodies, like *khôra*, the realm and material from which all beings come and that to which they return. It is for this reason that Aristotle employs *hyle* to speak about unformed matter.

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[2] With respect to the view that Plato's *khôra* and Aristotle's *hyle* both refer to the same (non)thing, see Caputo (94), and el Bizri (482).

However, Aristotle's idea of the forest is ontologically different from that of Ovid's, for Aristotle's *hyle* has no agency of its own. It is, like Plato's *khôra*, in need of an external actor to draw or shape definitive forms from it. As Harrison shows, the idea of the forest as a parallel world of *logos* and agency was delegitimised in the Ancient world when its value increased as a resource for both the Athenian navy and a burgeoning Greek sea-faring culture, and the agrarian demands of the Roman Empire (Harrison 55). Yet appearing in the midst of this fervour of exploitation, Ovid's translation of the Greek legend is an ever-timely reminder that the construction of the 'other' as passive will be challenged by the very beings subject to such a representation. Ovid's view of the forest is shared by Wright.

THE RUPTURE OF PRESENCE

In '"Australia": A Rhizomic Text', Bill Ashcroft and David Salter observe that one of the virtues of literature is its imagination of an unknown (or forgotten) relationship between self and place (19). It is in literature that we can find challenges to the colonial designations of the other-than-human as silent and passive.

Ovid's 'Actaeon' is exemplary in this case. Upon his metamorphosis Actaeon realises that it is not he who dominates the denizens of the forest; instead, upon entering it, he becomes likewise subject to it. While Artemis might represent the context from which all beings emerge, these beings do not emerge following the intervention or manipulation of an external agent or 'god' (Plato 17-19) of some kind. Actaeon only learns of this fact through his unsanctioned encounter with Artemis. Yet Ovid himself is unable to directly convey Actaeon's vision, insofar as such a language no longer exists (Harrison 28). In Australia a similarly ineffable encounter is also a feature of several literary works: an indistinct 'presence' that emerges to counter the view that the land is silent.

In *Kangaroo* DH Lawrence also uses 'death' to describe the stillness and silence of the 'bush' (9), however he discerns 'something' else within it:

> And not a sign of life – not a vestige.
>
> Yet something. Something big and aware and hidden! He walked on, had walked a mile or so into the bush, and had just come to a clump of tall, nude, dead trees, shining almost phosphorescent with the moon, when the terror of the bush overcame him. He had looked so long at the vivid moon, without thinking. And now, there was something among the trees, and his hair began to stir with terror on his head. There was a presence. (9)

This scene receives no further elaboration. Instead it is used to suggest a dimension of reality in Australia that its new inhabitants are barely aware of, which would remain so as long as their society is 'sprinkled on the surface of a darkness into which it never penetrated' (Lawrence 8). The consequences of the ontological construction of the colonial landscape as 'silent' are evident in Lawrence's description, insofar as the emergence of 'a presence' from beneath this 'surface' is imbibed with an alien or uncanny bearing, inhabiting the fringes of credible belief.

In Randolph Stow's *To the Islands* the confrontation of the European mind with country dense in meanings unseen or unknown forms the main theme in the novel. Stow accords a similarly palpable presence to the land, an alien logic dominating and overwhelming the townships within it:

> Behind the uneasy trees rose the hills, and beyond them again the country of the lost, huge wilderness between this last haunt of civilisation and the unpeopled sea. (89)

Mission-priest Heriot undertakes a journey of self-imposed exile into this country. In pursuit of some measure of divine retribution, he is instead confronted with the realisation of an ecological reality defined by networks of predation and cycles of life and death; processes that resound for Heriot with the echo of God's absence ('"Why is the earth so hungry?" Heriot protested weakly. "Where is God?"' [126]). Like Blaise Pascal, 'le silence eternel' of these unknown, unvoiced spaces fills Heriot with dread (110). Heriot's enlightenment (if we can borrow such a word) is the realisation of his own membership to this silent presence, and what it asks of him: to live in authentic accordance with his namesake.

To draw on one final example, Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* once more sees the confrontation of naiveté (coupled with dogged curiosity and some degree of self-renunciation) with a vague presence of unseen dimensions, which challenges all concerned to make an awkward ontological leap in order to account for it:

> The immediate impact of its soaring peaks induced a silence so impregnated with its powerful presence that even Edith was struck dumb. (29)

The disappearance of the schoolgirls is somehow related to the hypnotic presence of the rock, yet how and why we do not know. Once more the mystery that obscures clear explanation is supplied by the unfamiliarity European colonial society has with the country they now inhabit and the mythologies it already holds. Coupled with an inherited 'cultural' trope that implied that the land was empty and silent, and the only active agents were the colonists themselves,

the sudden 'presence' of a landform exposes an unnerving maw of autonomous agency and undisclosed meaning.

Gayatri Spivak argued that portents of a subterranean post-colonial cultural landscape typically emerge through 'breaches' in the dominant colonial landscape, signifying a much larger concealed network of significations (cited in Ashcroft and Salter 21). Ashcroft and Salter draw from Spivak in their augmentation of Carter's reading of Australia in terms of a 'palimpsest'. They argue that the colonial repression of counter-discourses is in turn challenged by the rupture of these repressed cultural histories from 'below'. Ashcroft and Salter employ the botanical concept of the 'rhizome' to imagine colonial space in such terms. A rhizome refers to a root system which spreads across or just under the ground, such as that of bamboo or the potato. Typically, there is no single shoot, rather several growing from the ground simultaneously (16). The rhizome assists in the representation of Ashcroft and Salter's idea of colonial space as decentralised and heterogeneous, with the land consisting of layers of European and First Nations' perceptions of it. They observe that while some perceptual points will meet and conflict with each other, others will rupture the 'surface' of the other unopposed.

Judith Wright recorded such a rupture of the European colonial landscape in numerous ways. A range of human and nonhuman presences and voices are encountered in Wright's poetry, breaching the silence of these apparently empty spaces:

> Only the grass stands up
> to mark the dancing-ring: the apple-gums
> posture and mime a past corroboree,
> murmur a broken chant. ('Bora Ring', *CP* 8)

Returning to 'Bora Ring', we can note that in spite of the death or forced removal of so many people from their ancestral lands, indicators of their presence remain. The 'broken chant' is a breach in colonial time and space, signifying a history that counters the colonial narrative of Europeans arriving to redeem a quiet and empty land. The unused Bora ring is a reminder that the land was taken with force, and that the absence of the people that once inhabited it (and the networks of meaning that it supported) remains palpable: a 'sightless shadow' that vexes the rider passing by ('Bora Ring', *CP* 8).

Similar to the examples we find in Lawrence, Stow, and Lindsay, Wright records the rupture of an other-than-human presence through the colonial landscape. In 'Northern River', the

'sweet Alcaic metre' Wright hears in the river, as it travels its course, has been 'checked' and 'altered' (*CP* 6); likewise the creek in 'South of My Days', is now 'leaf-silenced' and 'willow choked' (*CP* 20). Neither is heard beneath the presence of a foreign intruder. Nonetheless, noting that the 'Northern River' still 'speaks in the silence' (*CP* 6), Wright records the irrepressibility of the land, its ability to remain articulate despite significant degradation. The 'Flame Tree in a Quarry' is a powerful embodiment of this irrepressibility, where '[o]ut of the torn earth's mouth/comes the old cry of praise' (*CP* 60).

The passage of water beneath and over stone is a symbol Wright returns to repeatedly as a means of conveying her sense of an emerging presence from beneath a heavy silence imposed on the country. In 'The Bones Speak' the narrator, having found themselves in a 'universe of vacancy' finds they can hear 'voices' beneath a surface so pervaded by death:

> Yet from this universe of vacancy
> always I hear the river underground,
> the ceaseless liquid voices of the river
> run through these bones that here lie loose together,
> a quiver, a whispering, a promise of sound. (*CP* 54)

In 'a whispering, a promise of sound' the passive, silent façade that a rhetorical silence helped produce is breached by the 'liquid voices of the river'. Wright uses the presences of these voices to draw attention to the fact that the land we walk on today is indeed manifold: that the same country continues to be spoken by obscured sources. The significance of these nonhuman breaches lie in their challenge to the view that the land is 'silent and empty' on either a material or ontological level. Yet it is also significant that the human voices in 'Bora Ring' and the nonhuman voices in 'Northern River', and 'The Bones Speak' all 'speak in silence' ('Northern River', *CP* 6). The hidden surfaces that these various voices signify remain so for good reason.

In the following chapters I seek to establish why this is so, examining the variety of ways in which this rupture is approached and explored by Wright, considering the conditions for its emergence, the ontological consequences for the idea of 'Australia' and the beings that inhabit it, and the consequences for Wright's own view of language and silence and the relationship between the two. In Wright's later work, she would describe further, more elaborate encounters with various nonhuman 'voices'.

CHAPTER TWO – REFIGURING WILDERNESS

In an argument that resonates with Plumwood's ecophilosophical critique of hierarchical dualism, in 'Nature and Silence' Manes locates 'nature' among the number of 'others' whose own 'voice' (or subjectivity) has been delegitimised, repressed, and in turn reproduced in the channels of various modern institutional discourses. Drawing on the 'archaeology of silence' Michel Foucault undertakes with regards to madness, Manes presents 'a brief genealogy of a discourse, including reason, that has submerged nature into the depths of silence and instrumentality' (17). Animist societies, Manes argues 'see the natural world as inspirited, not just people, but also animals, plants, and even inert entities such as stones and rivers are perceived as being articulate and at times intelligible subjects, able to communicate and interact with humans for good or ill' (15). Manes reminds us, drawing on the work of comparative anthropologist and philosopher Hans Peter Duerr, that for European cultures too 'nature' was until relatively recently also perceived in animist terms. The forests were full of beings with whom we could communicate, or at least whose *logos* we could acknowledge as paralleling or 'shadowing' (Harrison) our own. The modern Western view, however, generally refuses to accord nonhuman beings the status of 'speaking subject' (Manes 15), a view which may also, Manes suggests, be a matter of ethical convenience: '"people do not exploit a nature that speaks to them"' (Duerr qtd. in Manes 15). As we saw in Chapter One, such was the situation in colonial Australia, with justification for colonial exploitation grounded in an absence of that which 'spoke' to Europeans.

In 'Teaching a Stone to Talk' Annie Dillard encourages her readers to accept that for modern western societies, '[n]ature's silence is its one remark' (87). Such silence is the consequence, Dillard argues, of a culture that has 'doused the burning bush' (88). Upon denying the voices of animals, plants and landforms it is very difficult to recover the ability to hear them once more:

> Did the wind use to cry, and the hills shout forth praise? Now speech has perished among the lifeless things of the earth, and the living things say very little to very few. Birds may crank out sweet gibberish, monkeys howl; horses neigh and pigs say, as you recall, oink oink. But so do cobbles rumble when a wave recedes and thunders break the air in lightning storms. I call these noises silence. (88)

As we saw in the prior chapter, colonists and explorers also called such noises 'silence', and employed a host of ontological justifications for doing so. Further echoing the colonial

mindset, Dillard assumes that humans themselves retain the capacity to grant other-than-beings the powers of speech; that without human presence, 'nature' is silent: 'If we were not here, material events like the passage of seasons would lack even the meagre meanings we are able to muster for them. The show would play to an empty house' (91). As Rose points out, such a view is profoundly anthropocentric. Drawing on the example set by her indigenous teachers from the Northern Territory's Victoria River District, Rose demonstrates how, for these people, country is rarely silent: 'The world is always talking about itself' ('Taking Notice' 97) whether humans are present to hear it or not:

> Jessie's country is full of sentience – animals, many plants. Dreamings, the ancestors, and other things like hills or stones take notice, as people say. Jesse took notice too, and she knew that all these other beings were taking notice of her. ('Taking Notice' 99)

Jesse Wirrpa demonstrates that any suggestion that a region is silent is a far from objective claim: it may point rather to an inability to hear.

As I showed at the end of Chapter One, Wright finds the silence of the colonial landscape challenged by a plenum of other-than-human 'voices'. In this chapter I argue that Wright's reflections on a silence heavy with the 'promise of sound' ('The Bones Speak', *CP* 54) – rather than empty of all meaning or presence – are encapsulated in an ecophilosophical refiguration of contemporary western ideas of 'wilderness', ideas which still perpetuate Euro- and anthropocentric perceptions of the other-than-human. As we shall see, Wright's critique of the implicit claims 'wilderness' carries also challenges colonial ontologies that view the land as 'silent'. Wright saw wilderness as a collection of actors whose own subjectivity was principally manifest in the possession of a 'voice'. In 'Scribbly Gum' and 'For Precision' she becomes aware that the markings on a tree, or the call of a gull can be seen as signs which 'speak' the land in different ways, existing parallel to her own words. Yet she is limited in her ability to read or understand the meaning of these signs. A rupture of colonial silence only reveals a deeper mystery. This experience is also intrinsic to her idea of a 'wild encounter' ('Encounter', *CP* 368). In this chapter I draw upon biosemiotic theory in order to offer an account of such 'voices' and the obscurity their meanings remain buried within.

Questions of Concealment: Heidegger's *phusis* and Von Uexkull's *umwelt*.

Biosemiotics expands the criteria for what constitutes a 'sign' beyond that found in human speech, writing or symbolism, demonstrating how all life is permeated and interconnected by

the production and exchange of meaning through signs. As Wendy Wheeler argues, the 'biosphere' can thus also be viewed as a 'semiosphere' ('Postscript on Biosemiotics' 145), consisting of multitudes of organisms engaged in the creation of signs, and the selection, interpretation and response to the myriad signs produced by their cohabitants and the material environment (landforms, water, weather etc.). As a consequence of different organisms reading the same ecosystem according to their own 'species needs' (the particular way a species reads the 'flows of information' within any bio/semiosphere, as necessary for its survival), we see how an infinite number of *umwelten* (a concept developed by Jakob von Uexküll, referring to the sum and character of a particular creature's readings of an ecosystem) overlay any given region. The existence of a multitude of *umwelten* presents a picture of land suffused with layer-upon-layer of particular views or assemblages of it, thereby expanding Carter's 'manifold surfaces' (*The Lie of the Land* 15) to include other-than-human perspectives as well.

Von Uexküll's *umwelt* challenges the assumption that only humans are capable of meaningfully constructing their surroundings, a realisation fully registered in Wright's work. The 'words', 'voices', 'calls', and 'tracks' one finds on a sojourn into 'the bush' challenge colonial descriptions of the land as silent and point to a world of signs that was neither created by, nor for, humans. A recurring theme in Wright's work is the recognition of a simultaneous identity and separation between human and other-than-human beings. On this basis Coralie and Brady both find a resemblance between Wright's view regarding the question of nonindigenous 'belonging' in Australia and Martin Heidegger's concept of 'dwelling' (Brady, 'How to Reinvent the World?' 107; Coralie 148-158). An important element in Heidegger's dwelling is *phusis*, an acknowledgement and acceptance of a thing's capacity for self-revealing or 'presencing' ('Building, Dwelling, Thinking' 150) and self-concealing. As Coralie shows, Wright presents a view of nature that resonates with a Heideggerian dwelling, insofar as she believed that the 'profound significance of nonhuman living things lies in the fact of their "wildness" and secrecy' (Coralie 157).

Although a Heideggerian reading of this aspect of Wright's poetry is indeed fruitful, Wright's references to obscurity are explicit in the precise point of their emergence. As poems such as 'Scribbly Gum' and 'For Precision' demonstrate, Wright believed language to be the primary basis for difference between human and other-than-human. She is not suggesting that other organisms do not construct, select and read signs of their own, rather that humans (or any other organism) are limited in the extent to which they can interpret them from the

perspective of another organism. Like the rhizomic emergence of an ungraspable post-colonial sub-text theorised by Ashcroft and Salter, Wright is unable, given the biosemiotic *umwelt* she inhabits, to understand the meaning of many of the signs she finds.

Nonetheless, while Wright cannot read the 'written track' of the Scribbly Gum, she is aware of its meaningful presence in the biosemiotic matrices of dozens of other beings (what I referred to at the end of Chapter One as 'surfaces'). Her 'late style' (Collett) can be characterised as a growing acceptance of the opacity of these other-than-human voices, and a willingness to retain their mute presence in her work.

CREATING 'WILDERNESS'

In Chapter One I noted that often 'wilderness' referred to a place 'cursed' by a vengeful God, who rendered it a 'wasteland' inhospitable to human life (Nash 14). Wilderness was both land that was 'wasted' (unused) and land laid to waste (degraded). Describing the country surrounding the New England colonies in 1662, the American Puritan poet Michael Wigglesworth set the tone for the colonial vision of wilderness around the world:

> A waste and howling wilderness,
> Where none inhabited
> But hellish fiends, and brutish men
> That Devils worshiped. (1/25)

The 'wilderness' Wigglesworth describes is one of tumultuous clamour apparently devoid of the reassuring sound of a civilised human voice. In colonial Australia the term was enlisted to describe the vast arid stretches of country in the interior, with 'wilderness' used to refer to 'a bleak and lifeless emptiness' (Cathcart 64). Although many Australian writers would borrow Wigglesworth's conjunction, 'howling wilderness' did not, argues Cathcart, refer to external noise, but a 'howling in the soul' (64). Nonetheless, the question of who might inhabit such regions was not disputed. Insofar as the First Nations people that inhabited such 'wastes' were often not even viewed as people, the designation of such regions as 'wilderness' (with its connotations of a place devoid of human civilisation) was not seen as problematic. Its usage in these contexts had similar effects – intended or unintended – to descriptions of the land as 'silent': ignoring or delegitimising any pre-existing claims to the land.

Despite a ready acknowledgment that indigenous people do have a legitimate claim to the land, the use of 'wilderness' by contemporary conservationists has been fraught with this colonial baggage. With her advocacy for both indigenous people and the 'environment',

Wright was keenly aware of the negative impact the declaration of a region as a 'wilderness area' could have on the rights of the still-living indigenous custodians of that place. In 'Australian Wilderness and Wasteland' Wright condemned The Wilderness Society's (then) policy on wilderness areas as a 'confirmation and endorsement of the *terra nullius* judgement':

> That judgment has resulted, over the last two hundred years, in dispossession, destruction and the denial of all human rights to Aborigines, has turned all Aboriginal land in Australia over to destructive interests, and is the chief stumbling block to justice and reconciliation. (149)

In 'What Do We Mean By Wilderness?', Indigenous lawyer and academic Marcia Langton interrogates the contemporary view of wilderness in similar terms. As Langton points out, as national parks in Australia are traditionally established in the interests of preserving biological diversity, the presence of people within such areas is problematic. Insofar as wilderness is a place, according to definitions established by the US Wilderness Act of 1964, 'untrammelled by man', a place where 'man himself is a visitor but does not remain' (Section 2[C]), it can only conceivably exist with the absence of all people, including those that have lived there for thousands of years (Langton 20). For this reason Langton also equates 'wilderness' with *terra nullius* and hence yet another iteration of European colonisation.

In fact, as Langton points out (citing Eric Rolls), conservationists who advocate protection on the basis of the preservation of 'pristine' ecosystems forget that the wilderness they seek to protect is often the product of European inhabitation: country that was cleared of vegetation or degraded by the presence of introduced species that has since regrown. The numerous examples Bill Gammage cites reinforces Langton's argument: that Australia in 1788 was significantly different from the 'wilderness' we so often now seek to preserve (Langton 27). Gammage demonstrates that the ecological systems that we now so fervently try to protect do not always represent a 'remnant' of some kind of earlier ecological stability, but the consequence of the absence of the very people that created and maintained that stability, and the intervening two centuries of European inhabitation (Gammage 320).

In response to such criticisms, The Wilderness Society has sought to reframe its definition of wilderness and the role it plays in designating areas deserving of protection. Vica Bayley, a representative of The Wilderness Society in Australia, was challenged on ABC Radio by Emma Lee, a spokesperson for the melythina tiakana warrana Aboriginal Corporation of

Northeast Tasmania, with the argument that 'wilderness' erases the indigenous Australian presence in the land. He replied that his group's present definition of wilderness does not put it at odds with indigenous interests, defining 'wilderness' (in accord with the definition established by International Union for Conservation of Nature [IUCN]) as something that is 'remote' from colonial and industrial impact, and 'isolated' from industrial or mechanised access. Under this definition wilderness need not necessarily imply the erasure of indigenous presence and history. Indeed efforts in the late 1970s and early 1980s to have Tasmania's Franklin river valley protected from a proposed dam and declared a wilderness area were consolidated by the (re)discovery of caves in 1981 bearing evidence of successive generations of inhabitation, thus establishing it as a site of cultural, historical, and archaeological significance (Brady, *South of My Days* 418). However the problem with such a definition of wilderness is that it only admits a 'traditional' First Nations presence. If indigenous people frequent a wilderness area 'wearing shoes, driving a Toyota and hunting with guns' (Langton 20), is it still 'wilderness'? As this question suggests, the definition of wilderness in relation to First Nations people is far from settled, the full examination of which is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Wright, like many contemporary activists for indigenous rights, was critical of the concept of 'wilderness' for its tendency to erase or ignore evidence of previous occupants (indigenous or non-indigenous). While more recent redefinitions of the term have sought to address this, the idea of wilderness they support still perpetuates a fundamentally anthropocentric viewpoint. On this point too, Wright offers a way forward.

A CULTURAL CONSTRUCT?

The panel discussion on ABC Local Radio Hobart on what wilderness 'means' is emblematic of a broad debate among conservationists and academics that has been underway for decades. The most significant point of disagreement lies over the question of the materiality of wilderness. On the one hand, many conservationists believe that 'wilderness' remains a term that best represents the entity they are working to protect. They find questions of what we think about it to be (at best) an unnecessary distraction. So-called academic 'social constructivists' meanwhile (such as William Cronon and J. Baird Callicott), who insist on the benefits of identifying the underlying cultural connotations that the word carries, believe that questions of what wilderness 'means' are vitally important ones for the conservation movement. The claim that 'wilderness' is but a cultural construct, more reflective of contemporary western culture's view of itself – and its ideas of what 'nature' should be

(Cronon 472) – than any existing thing, has been criticised as indicative of its proponents lack of contact with the actual thing called 'wilderness'. Such detachment has led them, argues Gary Snyder, to claim that wilderness is but a culturally-derived illusion (351-2). Nonetheless, as David Wood argues – defending a deconstructive approach to environmental ethics (or what he calls 'Econstruction') – simply looking to the 'irrepressible reality' of places (or creatures) we call 'wilderness' does not immediately foretell what we will or should do with them, or how we might think about them (282). How we encounter and think about wilderness is no more fixed than the beings that inhabit it. Even though Dave Foreman (founding member of Earth First!) demonstrates his familiarity with the etymology of wilderness, he does not appreciate the way the word has changed in meaning since its inception, failing to see how his own Darwinian interpretation of the etymology ('The land whose evolution can occur is self-willed land' [383]) represents yet another approach to 'wilderness', this one drawing on establishment science for legitimacy. Furthermore, according to this definition, insofar as all organisms are known to evolve, 'wilderness' can indeed be found in the most artificial and humanly-populated of places, thereby undermining Foreman's advocacy for the preservation of a 'Big Outside' on the basis of evolution.

Criticisms by conservationists seem largely to be based on a misreading of the arguments made by Cronon and Callicott. Both remind readers that they do not dispute the fact that a thing called wilderness actually exists (Cronon 485; Callicott 373), and that efforts to protect it are justified. What they wish to point out, however, is that the term nonetheless has a significant impact on the way certain places are perceived and treated. The 'wilderness' label has significantly defined and continues to define the character of modern western interactions with the nonhuman, and what is held to be worthy of preservation, and what is not. 'Wilderness' is indeed a collection of plants and animals, but how we think about them continues to change (as Foreman himself demonstrates), a passage that Cronon and Callicott have sought to map. Observing the changes in meaning 'wilderness' has undergone throughout western history has led Cronon to argue that we can purposely rethink or reimagine our relationship with nature in significant ways (494-495).

Yet any way in which we do choose to 'think wilderness' will be supported or challenged by the beings that constitute it. Even though constructivist critiques have made a valuable contribution to the debate by identifying the cultural viewpoints underpinning the contemporary idea of wilderness, they do not reflect on their own ontologies comprehensively enough. When Cronon locates the primary 'trouble' with wilderness in the

way it is imagined and constructed by humans, the ontologies underpinning his arguments are exposed. Plumwood and Cronon agree that the 'autonomy' of wilderness needs to be recognised, and that it is found not only in specific regions that have been demarcated so, but is present in the most artificial of environments. They both share the view that 'wilderness' among many environmentalists remains a construct whose value and meaning remains defined (and limited) by western cultural parameters (for example as a place for spiritual or aesthetic experience, or recreation). Yet, the theoretical foundations of Cronon's arguments harbour an implicitly Cartesian ontology that does little to disrupt the hierarchical dualisms that underpin the idea of nature as something inert, passive, and subject to the will of humans. Although he does indeed recognise that other-than-human beings are a part of a 'world we did not create, a world with its own independent nonhuman reasons for being as it is' (492), Cronon perpetuates a cultural bias of his own by ignoring the way other-than-humans are equally responsible for the cognitive assemblage of elements of their own worlds. Putting it more plainly, the idea that wilderness is a space solely subject to human minds, Plumwood argues, is anthropocentric, insofar as it prioritises the human, cultural contribution to the construction of landscapes and understates, denies or ignores the contribution of the nonhuman ('Wilderness Scepticism and Wilderness Dualism' 673).

This argument has been key to more recent ecofeminist rethinking of materiality (Alaimo & Hekman 7), which (as Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman point out) offers a new approach to environmental politics. Recognition of the material agency that all beings share (human and other-than-human alike) restructures the terms by which humans see themselves in relation to 'nature'. Rather than conceiving of human consciousness as an actor manipulating passive matter, material ecofeminism presents a picture of two (or more) actors in a state of negotiation (or often conflict) with each other in the construction of the world they inhabit. Such an approach steps outside of many of the dualisms the conservation movement implicitly perpetuates and is impeded by, and places the question of human/nonhuman relations in the theoretical territory of the 'cultural landscape' Carter, Rose and Ashcroft and Salter have contributed to.

The implicit anthropocentrism of contemporary approaches to wilderness make them in many ways similar to the ones that defined earlier colonial attitudes to the 'silence' of the land, that Plumwood critiqued in 'Decolonising Relationships with Nature' (see Chapter One). Both groups 'construct' the other-than-human according to the same hierarchical dualisms. While Cronon is conscious of this fact, by reducing wilderness wholly to a category of culture that

can be defined and redefined at will, he perpetuates the idea of the nonhuman as a passive receptacle we first saw in Aristotle's use of *hyle* to refer to unformed matter, as something that only reflects the particular human culture perceiving it: 'having no role or agency in confirming or constraining our meanings, and has no stories of its own to tell' (Plumwood, 'Wilderness Scepticism and Wilderness Dualism' 673). At the conclusion of the prior chapter I showed how Ovid's translation of 'Actaeon' represented Artemis, goddess of the wild, as master of the domain she inhabits and embodies, far from the passive *tabula rasa* that could be manipulated however one chooses. An investigation of the etymology of wilderness recovers a similar picture, countering the contemporary concept of wilderness, and leading us also to Wright's own definition of it.

WILDĒORNESS

The etymological roots of 'wilderness' stretch deep into European history. The Old English word *wilde*, meaning 'in the natural state, uncultivated, undomesticated' (Harper), has a broad parentage, including the Old Saxon *wildi*, the Old Norse *villr*, the proto-Germanic *wilthijaz*, and the pre-Teutonic *ghweltijos* (McFarlane 30). The 'will' that appears in each instance is suggestive of the original intentions behind the use of 'wild' as an adjective ('Wild land is self-willed land' [McFarlane 30]). Nash argues that 'wild' was originally a word used to describe people who were unruly, disordered, or confused. Only later was *wildēor* coined to refer to animals who behaved in such a manner (1). He identifies one of the earliest literary references to wilderness in the 8th century epic *Beowulf*, with *wildēor* the name for 'savage and fantastic beasts inhabiting a dismal region of forests, crags and cliffs' (1). As Nash demonstrates, when framed etymologically, wilderness becomes *wil-dēor-ness*, the Old English word for animal – *dēor* – prefixed with 'wild', thus referring to 'creatures not under the control of man' (1). *Wildēorness* is the place inhabited by such unruly or autonomous creatures.

Nash observes that later versions of 'wilderness' 'obscured the word's original precision' as a reference to 'a forest primeval' (2). In contemporary uses of the term there is a tendency to forget the quality of 'wildness' intrinsic to it, and to focus, as we have already seen, on the absence of humans. Yet as we saw in Lawrence's, Stow's, and Lindsay's disturbed literary depictions of 'the bush' (at the end of Chapter One), human absence is often accompanied by a palpable though indistinct sense of 'presence'. In an effort to recover something of its original etymological grounding, Plumwood similarly advocates an idea of wilderness that recognises its reference to an agentic other-than-human 'presence':

[T]he presence of the Other, 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.

('Wilderness Scepticism and Wilderness Dualism' 682)

Such a view of wilderness can also be found in Wright's poetry and essays. In 'Wilderness, Waste and History', she produces what we might call a 'genealogy' of wilderness, arguing that at least since it's appearance in the Bible, 'wilderness' has generated images of 'hostile' country; 'untamed, unpleasant and unproductive country', and as such is something feared and condemned (18). Wright points out that the ability for country to act according its own interests can be found both within the uncultivated 'wilderness' that Europeans believed they had discovered when they landed on Australia's shores and explored its interior (18), and in the 'wilderness' much of the land has since reverted to, 'having been laid waste – this time by the effects of agricultural methods and the clearing of forests' (19-20). 'Wilderness' is for Wright, in other words, country that is 'self-willing', a definition that draws on its etymology. The agency evident within 'wilderness' signifies its capacity to remain autonomous in spite of any efforts to turn it into 'property'. 'Australia 1970' appears as something of a prayer to 'wild country' in these terms:

> Die, wild country, like the eaglehawk,
>
> Dangerous till the last breath's gone,
>
> clawing and striking. Die
>
> cursing your captor through a raging eye. (*CP* 287)

Wright hopes that even in a degraded state 'wild country' and its various inhabitants will remain 'dangerous' for we 'conquerors and self-poisoners' (*CP* 288). Laurie Kutchins finds 'several oppositional energies' brought into play by Wright in 'Australia 1970', including 'poison and praise, danger and endangerment, predator and prey, toughness and vulnerability' (44). To this phenomenological view of *wildēorness* we could add 'seer' and 'seen', as Wright's own point of perspective is decentred by the tacit accusations of that 'raging eye'. This eye contradicts the idea that land without a human presence is necessarily unseen, unknown, and unspoken for. More importantly, Wright's notion of *wildēorness* implies the notion of an autonomous and agentic nonhuman being constructing the world from its own perspective.

41

A SINGLE SUCCINCT NOTE

In *The Central Australian Expedition*, Sturt recalls stopping on his trek through the desert to observe a large black kite-hawk drifting silently on unseen winds, surveying his party trudging through the hot, dry country below. Sturt momentarily sees himself through the eyes of the kite, 'in evident astonishment at such an apparition in his lonely and silent domain' (92). The 'evident astonishment' of the bird is significant, for it flags a moment in which Sturt becomes aware that he is moving through country, however unknown to him, that is the 'domain' of others, not only the indigenous people that Sturt encounters, but a variety of sentient animals and plants as well.

Sturt's ethno- and anthropocentric view of the land produces a curious double vision of it. While he is aware of his own strangeness in the land, he insists that his portrait of the desert as 'lonely and silent' is an accurate one, even for those that inhabit it. Nonetheless, his observations are an example of an explorer's openness to acknowledging the presence of other perspectives to the land. Wright also viewed the country through rather different eyes. Unlike Sturt however, her vision is rather more biocentric; one that, with a recognition that the land is also subject to the perception of other-than-human beings, challenged the very characterisation of the land as 'silent'.

Plumwood's argument that there is 'no necessary incompatibility' between acknowledging indigenous (cultural) agency and nonhuman (natural) agency in the construction of landscapes ('The Concept of a Cultural Landscape' 120) is reinforced by a recognition of the presence of semiosis (the interpretation and communication of signs) among nonhuman beings. Biosemiotic theory has made criticisms similar to Plumwood's regarding the narrow frame poststructuralism brings to ecological thinking, and offers one means by which to conceive of the 'presence' of other-than-human beings in the colonial landscape. Drawing on the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce, rather than Ferdinand de Saussure, the biosemiotic argument that 'there are very good reasons for believing that language, for all its formative powers, cannot be the whole story about how the world is' (Wheeler, *The Whole Creature* 23) enables a redefinition of the poststructuralist thesis that underpins constructivist concepts of wilderness. The poststructuralist concept of reality – that it is 'entirely constructed in language' – is, Wheeler reminds us, but a metaphysical interpretation (*The Whole Creature* 17) and has 'inhibited the range of its own insights' (*The Whole Creature* 16); a justified observation when we recall Cronon's efforts to acknowledge the 'autonomy' of the other-than-human. Drawing on scholarship from both the humanities and the natural

sciences, biosemiotic theory argues that all spaces are indeed permeated and interconnected by semiosis, by the exchange of 'information': sounds, tastes, odours, colours, chemical signals, electric fields, waves (of any kind), movements, gestures or migrations (*The Whole Creature* 126). Biosemiotics identifies the extent to which the communication and interpretation of signs occurs in a variety of ways other than speech, such that articulate language, Wheeler argues, is but an evolutionary accomplishment, a more complex mode of communication that is part of the semiosis that is apparent in all nature (*The Whole Creature* 19).

Wright's emphasis on the 'self-willing' character of *wildēorness* is guided by an acknowledgment of other-than-human voices (or semiosis) in the land. Her portentous remark at the beginning of 'Scribbly Gum', that '[t]he cold spring falls from the stone' marks a return to the site visited earlier in 'The Bones Speak', where our narrator heard beneath 'great rocks of silence', 'liquid voices'…'a quiver, a whispering, a promise of sound' (*CP* 54). What was anticipated in that earlier poem is revealed in 'Scribbly Gum':

> I passed and heard
> the mountain, palm and fern
> spoken in one strange word. (*CP* 131)

The ecophilosophical prescience Coralie finds in a number of Wright's poems and essays (13-15) is reinforced by the biosemiotic vision of wilderness 'Scribbly Gum' presents. Through sentences fragmented seemingly mid-way ('I passed and heard'), the ambient silence of the colonial landscape is brought close, only to be broken by a 'strange word'. In this word we hear the presence of 'ancient biospheric forces and of the unique combination of that which has shaped that particular, unique place' that Plumwood referred to ('Wilderness Scepticism and Wilderness Dualism' 682). The sound of the spring is in fact a form of speech, conveying vast amounts of information regarding its surroundings for those able to hear. As one listens to the cold spring falling from the stone, they hear within it the deep and interconnected histories of the 'mountain, palm and fern', and their very reasons for being. In the spring one can hear the emergence of mountains from their earthen bindings, and eons of gradual erosion of stone by water: the shaping of country now walked through. Meanwhile, the endless cycles of germination, growth and decay of the palm and fern are facilitated and witnessed by the spring. Beyond this most basic and general of observations, the spring articulates the individual history of a location and the individual inhabitants that populate the

region surrounding the spring. All of these details are heard in the 'one strange word', much of which lie beyond linguistic expression.

In 'For Precision' Wright offers us an encounter with biosemiosis that resonates with Sturt's encounter with the black kite in the stony desert. While Sturt contemplates his own strangeness in the eyes of the bird, Wright watches as a gull's 'sole note', like the succinct word of the spring, evokes and 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. (*CP* 129)

This passage comes following Wright's lamentation over her own 'confusions of foggy talk' (*CP* 129) to speak with breadth, economy and accuracy. The momentary appearance of that call draws the attention not only to the source of that sound, but the space in which it reverberates. The gull's cry in the air above us brings that space to notice, out of reach, yet inhabited and negotiated by other beings. As with the spring in 'Scribbly Gum', in the call of the gull Wright momentarily hears her surroundings succinctly disclosed in the unity of a 'sole note'. Wright suddenly discovers that cloud, sky, sea (and bird) exist in a meaningful and coherent form for beings other than herself.

Both the word of the spring and the call of the gull present a biocentric perspective to Ashcroft and Salter's reading of the Australia colonial landscape as a rhizomic text. In each we hear the rupture of both the passive silence of the colonial landscape and the 'absence' within the contemporary 'wilderness'. For Wright these signs are an initiation into a sense of land that is not only read and conveyed by her own culture, or the many First Nations people whose connection to their lands and cultures remains strong, but individual members of what we amorphously refer to as 'wilderness'. While the spring and bird appear in our own reading of the land, they in turn present a vision of their own, of which we are but a part.

Reading these signs in biosemiotic terms also highlights the mystery many of them bear. Phillip Mead notes Wright's use of the (Romantic) poetic 'fragment' in 'The Moving Image' (296), a motif that is also present in her ecopoetics. As Edward Hirsch shows, the poetic fragment has been a recurring feature of several literary epochs. The 18th and 19th century European encounter with the fragmented works of Ancient Greek writers and philosophers led to a Romantic literary fashion for omitting parts of one's work so as to suggest its

antiquity, as though it has been recovered from the ruins of an earlier civilisation. Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan: or a Vision in a Dream: A Fragment' and Keats's 'Hyperion: A Fragment' each appear as the mere remnants of a larger (even infinite) lost work (Hirsch).

Popular also among modern writers (see Pound's *The Cantos* and Eliot's *The Wasteland* [Hirsch]), the poetic fragment is also employed by Wright to great effect in 'Scribbly Gum' and 'For Precision', with these various signs suggesting larger (unseen) biosemiotic networks beneath the silent surface of the colonial landscape. Yet the obscurity of these networks, I will show, are often not easy to overcome.

WHAT LIES BENEATH?

Wright encountered a country abundant in signs:

> Near the woolshed on Wallamumbi was an old tree – now gone – with diamond shapes carved into its bark by the Aborigines who once lived there. She also knew of a bora ring – a ceremonial earthen circle – on her grandmother's property, Wongwibinda. There was the nearby goldmining ghost town of Uralla which boasted the grave of the bushranger Thunderbolt, who was famous in this region. Everywhere you looked, if you had eyes to see them, there were traces of the past in the landscape. (Capp 42)

Yet these 'traces' could only be partially decoded. Visiting various locations in Eastern Australia that Wright lived, Fiona Capp identifies the way the landscape itself furnished Wright with a series of visual metaphors that assisted her in thinking about her own relationship to the land. The insight that Wright drew from reading Rudyard Kipling in her childhood, that there is a law, and a language, that exists outside of that used and followed by humans (35-36), found visual resonance in the partially exposed granite boulders common in the New England (New South Wales) countryside of her childhood. These boulders, appearing as if slowly emerging from their earthen binding, suggest that much of their bulk remained 'hidden below', and out of sight (34).

The influence Wright drew from Kipling and the country of her childhood framed her own thinking about the colonial cultural landscape, and the poetry she wrote about it. In 'Nigger's Leap: New England', a rocky spur is a prompt for the story attached to it. Upon a visit to a popular New England lookout with her father, she learnt of the terrible significance of a cliffhead opposite (*Half a Lifetime* 164). Wright's poem allegorises the downward trajectory of the cliff face, opening with a description of the site itself, how '[t]he eastward spur tips

45

backward from the sun'. Beginning at the top of the spur (at the 'point', or the 'leap'), Wright follows the line of descent, into the 'dark' that has served to obscure the events of the past, a 'cold quilt', 'across the bone and skull/that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff/and then went silent, waiting for the flies' (*CP* 15). Wright identifies multiple levels of obscurity as a result of that massacre, and others like it: of lost languages and knowledge, and a wilful forgetting of what brought this silence into being:

> Now we must measure
>
> our days by nights, our tropics by their poles,
>
> love by its end and all our speech by silence. (*CP* 15)

'Nigger's Leap' represents an encounter with country that, when the presence of signs and stories become apparent, do not lead to a better understanding of it, but confusion and bewilderment, not only with regards to the massacres, but to the mute signs that signify only the absence of knowledge of the country. Wright observed the whole colonial landscape in such terms, becoming aware that the country she moved through was layered in significance:

> These hills and plains, these rivers and plants and animals were what I had to work
>
> with as a writer, and they themselves contained the hidden depths of a past beyond
>
> anything that cities and the history of British invasion had to offer. ('Patrick White
>
> and the Story of Australia' 51)

Wright recorded a similar experience in the encounter with other-than-human signs. Returning to 'Scribbly Gum', when Wright notes the gum tree that 'stands by the spring', a similar sense of 'hidden depths' emerges:

> I peeled its splitting bark
>
> and found the written track
>
> of a life I could not read. (*CP* 131)

The second aspect of Wright's refigured view of wilderness involves recognition that while literally everything in an ecosystem can be conceived of as a 'sign' – as a piece of information – the meaning(s) of many such signifiers remains obscure. The removal of a veil ('its splitting bark') exposes a 'written track' that cannot be read: peeling away the bark reveals only deeper mysteries. Similarly an 'Encounter' is fundamentally one of unknowing. After starting out '[k]nowing altogether too much about beetles', an introduction to one on an experiential (or 'primordial', as McKinney would have it [Hawke 165]) rather than taxonomic level leads to the conclusion that 'I've no idea what beetle is' (368). For Wright, a

'wild encounter' (368) is one grounded in the confrontation of an autonomous signifier whose meaning or reasons for being often remain obscure. In the next section I will establish why this is the case.

THE IN-PRINCIPLE OCCLUSION OF BIOSEMIOSIS

Considering Wright's encounter with such obscurity, Shirley Walker argues that her 1962 collection, *Birds*, at times 'suggests the impossibility of any significant interaction between the world of man and the world of nature'. This is indicative, she argues, of Wright's growing 'detachment from nature' (*The Poetry of Judith Wright* 123, 126). In response, Coralie suggests that the 'ambivalence' Wright seems to show towards other-than-human beings is part of an effort to present an image of them that balances 'sympathetic identification and the recognition of difference' (225). Wright's poetic representations of the other-than-human as harmonious with some popular or received ideas about them, and disruptive to others, was part of an effort to demonstrate the degree to which modern epistemological arrogance, the assumption that these beings can be known in their entirety, 'is the main barrier to forming relationships with earth others' (226).

Wright's own ecological ethic was brought into sharp relief by her response to the philosophies advanced by the Deep Ecology movement of the 1970s, 80s and 90s (see Coralie 227-235). Deep Ecology argued that the solution to the general indifference of many societies to environmental degradation lay in recognition of the profound identity humans shared with 'nature', such that all humans should see themselves and their surroundings as a part of a 'Big Self'. Arne Naess, whose philosophy inspired the Deep Ecology movement, emphasises the degree to which one's environment is intrinsic to their sense of self (89). Any sense of boundary between humans and the rest of nature is the consequence of an egotism that insists on a separation that doesn't actually exist. Thus, for Naess, 'self-realisation' represents the principal means by which to recover an awareness that all humans are in and of 'nature' (Naess 82). The imperative becomes one of realising one's membership to a Big Self through what Patrick Curry describes as an ongoing 'psycho-spiritual process' (102-103).

Wright argued that the ecocentric view promoted by Deep Ecologists, while more favourable than the anthropocentrism it sought to replace (particularly with regards to addressing the problems stemming from human egotism), was still fraught with problems. Deep Ecology's avocation of an idea of 'nature as self' has been criticised from a variety of perspectives (see Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 173-182; Mathews; Curry 105-108). Ted

Toadvine's ecophenomenological response dovetails with Wrights own views. Toadvine argues that anticipating a recovered identity with other-than-human beings fails to consider human ontology deeply enough. He argues that the ontological origin of the 'resistance between self and other, life and thought', suggests that any notion of 'unity' must acknowledge an 'in-principle occlusion', that recognises that 'any situated expression accurately described will call for and be limited by the indefinite number of perspectives it occludes' ('The Limits of the Flesh' 169). In other words, the idea of a recovered 'unity' with the world is itself entirely subjective, and remains subject to alternative and contradictory viewpoints. Attention to an 'in-principle occlusion' leads Toadvine to posit a 'phenomenology of the impossible'. In 'The Primacy of Desire and Its Ecological Consequences' Toadvine undermines the 'popular environmentalism of nature-as-self', by advocating an 'attentiveness to the resistance of what cannot be thought or perceived, to the opacity of a wild being that circumscribes our concepts and precepts' (150). For all the arguments that can be made for the identification of humans with the other-than-human, equally compelling claims can be made for their difference and separation, leading to an ontology that acknowledges points of unity and insurmountable difference. Wright identifies one such basis for separation.

Although the phenomenological elements of Wright's own encounters with the other-than-human are apparent (see Brady, 'How to Reinvent the World?' 107; Coralie 148-158), Wright's sense of the opacity of wild beings is principally located in issues of semiosis. Her primary critique of Deep Ecology is for its presumption that humans can step outside of their own linguistically-defined view of the world and read various signs from the perspective of another being. As she stated in an interview with Robert Gray in 1983, we need to remember that 'a great deal of our world is created for us by language which is human' (qtd. in Coralie 228). For this reason Wright had little optimism in finding the capacity to think like another animal, plant, or landform (Coralie 228). Biosemiotic theory supports this view. While the 'semiosphere' consists of the mutual production, selection, and interpretation of a variety of signs, the idea of the *umwelt* (the context in which this construction and reading takes place) also suggests the existence of communicative worlds that may be disclosed to our senses but beyond our understanding.

Appearing initially in the work of biologist Jakob von Uexküll, the *umwelt* provides biosemiotic theory with an outline of how any environment or set of signs is read differently by different organisms. A creature's *umwelt* refers to the 'signifying environments' (Wheeler,

48

'The Biosemiotic Turn' 272) it inhabits, which are defined by its 'species needs' (Wheeler, *The Whole Creature* 28). 'Species needs' suggests how an organism's *umwelt* is constructed according to a particular selection and reading of the 'signs' or 'flows of information' within a space that are most relevant to a particular species' requirements for survival:

> What a creature (as instance of a species) recognises, or knows (and compares), are the signs in its environment which are necessary to its survival (and, thus, to its species survival). And, of course, this applies to humans too. (Wheeler, 'The Biosemiotic Turn' 272)

In a biosemiotic approach to the post-structural linguistic turn, the identification and interpretation of a particular sign is dependent on the context of species-defined needs. Thus each species assembles a semiotic world that other species may (at best) only partially understand or even see. Wright recognises that the markings on the tree in 'Scribbly Gum' might be meaningful, however given the particular *umwelt* she inhabits, Wright is reluctant to claim an ability to read a sign from the perspective of another organism. Despite this she comes to appreciate the way such signs signify complex (hidden) biosemiotic networks. Wright suggests as much in 'Eyes', where she admits, after encountering a fox and recognising the depth of understanding in those eyes, that ,'[t]here's altogether too much I know nothing about:/my eyes slide over signals clear to a fox' (*CP* 419). Wright's appreciation of the obscurity of different signs is based in the way in which they are read differently by different organisms. The different *umwelt* Wright and the fox inhabit – although they might overlap at certain crucial points (a scenario to be explored in the next chapter) – represent insurmountable boundaries to a shared experience of the same environment.

As I showed in Chapter One, *khôra* appears in Plato's cosmology as an important third (non)thing, both the space ('receptacle') and the matter from which all forms emerge. *Khôra* is, as Plumwood observed, passive; it is not responsible for the creation of things herself, but is rather the *tabula rasa* from which a god will shape beings and forms. Later, in order to speak about this same (non)thing Aristotle would employ *hyle*, which as Harrison showed, happens to be the same Ancient Greek word for 'forest'. Aristotle's use of 'forest' as a trope for unformed matter is revealing for attitudes it exposes among the Ancient Greek's towards the nonhuman. As I showed, this was the very same attitude many Europeans brought to Australia: 'silence' was a way of rhetorically neutralising the country, of redefining it as a 'palimpsest' upon which they could impose their own 'inscriptions', a view we find tacitly

repeated once more in constructivist views of 'wilderness'. Yet just as Ovid challenged Aristotle's representation of the forest with his own depiction of Artemis, Wright likewise observed the challenge human and nonhuman signs made to claims that the land was a passive void before Europeans arrived. As I showed in this chapter, a similar challenge is made to more contemporary views of 'wilderness' that continue to silence the land by insisting that it can be 'constructed' in whatever ways one chooses.

The dualistic hierarchy of a silent landscape and a (speaking) European subject is obliterated when we learn that much of this supposedly inert and amorphous landscape is itself constructed by an infinite variety of individual 'voices'. Yet how they select and read the signs around them we often cannot be sure. Wright in turn sought a philosophy that accepts and embraces this alternative vision of landscape: that does not attempt to do away with it, but instead approaches opacity with humility and respect.

RECONCILING WITH THE BOUNDARIES OF KNOWING

In her later work Wright came to more fully accept that there exists a vast field of semiosis that may (and often should) never be deciphered; that '[h]uman eyes impose a human pattern,/decipher constellations against featureless dark' ('Patterns', *CP* 426). Our readings of the world's we inhabit are destined to remain far from objective or totalising, with an epistemological darkness beyond the limitations of these readings. Thus in another iteration of the unity of presence and absence (see Kane) Wright saw in the world, known and unknown are equally significant dimensions of our experience of the world. A darkness of epistemological obscurity has an intrinsic place in human life, animating and indeed defining our experiences of the world, such that it need not be 'enlightened', but nor should it be ignored as non-existent, empty, or without meaning, either.

The depictions we find in Wright's final work, *Phantom Dwelling*, are part of what Anne Collett calls Wright's 'late style': a direction many artists take in their later years towards reconciliation with the failure to attain or reveal a unity between ideas or phenomena. From an ecocritical perspective, these late works have Wright recording a growing acceptance of biosemiotic opacity. 'Rock', for instance, recounts the unearthing of a 'rock-lump square as a book,/split into leaves of clay', a literal text of the past. Here one finds a 'dead sea's leaves', available to 'touch'. Yet in a gesture of biosemiotic humility towards the unreadability of these leaves, Wright admits that, all one can do can do is 'look' (*CP* 414). As 'Rockface', a later poem also from *Phantom Dwelling* admits, interpretation or translation (any effort to

'chisel things into new shapes' [*CP* 420]) is superfluous insofar as '[t]he remnant of a mountain has its own meaning'. (*CP* 420)

Brady reads this embrace of opacity as an example of an 'ontopoetic' approach to the other-than-human ('The Ontopoetics of Judith Wright'). In Brady's understanding ontopoetics presents a position of ontological humility towards a subject, a demonstrated willingness to accept the limits of one's knowledge of an entity. She argues that acknowledgement of these limits is a mark of 'wisdom':

> The 'wise' person is not someone who knows everything, but is one who has learned how not to 'know', not perceiving or understanding as fact or truth, apprehending with clearness and certainty, but rather being open to what may still be revealed and probably cannot be put into words. (61)

Within Judith Wright's oeuvre the embrace of a silence of nonknowledge exemplifies her ontopoetics. In Chapter Four, we return to this issue of epistemological uncertainty, specifically looking at how Wright used silence as a means of evoking phenomena that cannot be articulated linguistically. Before that, however, the question of how Wright attained her refigured view of wilderness is addressed. As I also show in the next chapter, in contrast to earlier colonists, Wright identified the intrinsic place silence has in our encounters with the other-than-human as well.

CHAPTER THREE – 'SILENCE MIGHT BE BEST'

In the first chapter, I identified how colonial descriptions of the land as 'silent' were often based in the land's unfamiliarity to European eyes, and their inability to describe it. The 'deathly silence' many reflect upon (and often sought to overcome) was, I argued, based in a projection of their own speechlessness. Drawing on Plumwood's reading of the figure of silence in colonial Australian discourse as an example of Cartesian dualism, I argued that when this silence was perceived negatively (as something to be broken) it became used as a trope to obscure the fact that some parts of the country could not be easily described, which sometimes functioned in turn as a justification for colonisation. In Chapter Two, I explored the way Wright's own version of 'wilderness' (which reflected its original etymological meaning) challenged this view of Australia. Wright presents a picture of other-than-human beings contributing to the semiotic construction of the world we humans share with them. Instead of landscapes silenced beneath the rhetoric of Europeans, Wright draws attention to multiple biosemiotic landscapes and our own human limitations in reading or interpreting them.

Wright did not arrive at this conclusion simply through theoretical speculation. Instead, the transition we observe between 'a whispering, a promise of sound' in 'The Bones Speak' (*CP* 54) and the 'wild perpetual voice' of 'River Bend' (*CP* 416) unfolds in the context of a contemplative praxis. This chapter identifies how silence, in the form of a renunciation of speech, stands for Wright as a means by which to realise her refigured view of wilderness, and examines her use of images associated with the Christian *via negativa* to represent this passage. As I will show, Wright did not only draw on the *via negativa* as a model to chart and articulate the course to a more astute ecological perception, however. In terms that resonate with the colonial-era explorer's positive view of the (apparent) silence of the land (see Chapter One), Wright observed within the figure of the Australian 'bushman' a similarly precarious path of ascesis that involved a renunciation of, or exile from, the comforts of an affluent or urban lifestyle, and an immersion in 'the bush', with a deeper understanding of the ecology one inhabits often the result.

Wright's experiences with a contemplative practice also influenced her view of the capacities of language to articulate her encounters and perceptions of other-than-human beings. Robert Zeller charts the changes in Wright's view of language. In her early poetry Wright demonstrated a faith in the existence of a vocabulary 'behind' language that could, when recovered, present a more intimate, individualised encounter with the world (see for example

'The Moving Image', *CP* 5). By the time Wright published *The Two Fires* (1955) however, Zeller demonstrates how she had come to believe that 'no language is adequate to express what she perceives' (22). In this chapter I show how Wright's contemplative approach was fundamental in defining these claims. An investigation of 'contemplative ecology' illustrates how Wright took an apophatic approach in many of her descriptions of the other-than-human. Wright's poetry demonstrates a familiarity with the cyclical process of ascetic renunciation and apophasis fundamental to the Christian contemplation of the divine, and this establishes the basis for the silence Wright embraced in her poetry.

The mystical dimensions of Wright's approach to language were also complemented by philosophical critique. The world that emerges following an initial renunciation of self is, as she demonstrates in several poems from *The Two Fires*, defined by flux and dynamism. Wright's attention to the inherent flux that all beings exist within reflects, I will argue, a 'primordial' view of reality promoted by McKinney in his philosophical studies, an approach that resonates with the contemplative approach Wright alludes to in her poetry. Wright's ontology of flux and dynamism represents the basis for her apophatic approach to many of her subjects, and her critique of language more generally.

AN ECOLOGICAL KENOSIS (SILENCE AND DEATH II)

While the philosophical dimensions of Wright's poetry mean that it is as easily surveyed for the various theories many of the poems bear, Wright was well-aware of the inherent limitations of theory. She had little time for literary theory or academic analysis of her work, arguing that such approaches typically ignore the equally-important creative and experiential dimensions the poems embodied, in favour of an effort to decide what the poem 'means' ('The Teaching of Poetry' 10-11). A preoccupation with hermeneutic questions has a tendency to reify a work that was produced, as Wright often demonstrated, in an intense, immersive encounter with her subject. With regards to encouraging a new ecological consciousness, as her correspondence with Shirley Walker shows, Wright believed that intellectual analysis has 'enforced' the separation between modern western culture and the world; an approach that she argued had more generally begun to 'threaten the world with death' (*With Love and Fury* 276). Privileging an embodied and affective approach to advancing environmental conservation, Wright asserted that 'theory never shifted a brick' (qtd. in Brady, *South of My Days* 501); that '"we need more than philosophy", we need "a change of heart"' (qtd. in Coralie 232). Analyses of her work that are exclusively theory-

based risk missing the core of Wright's viewpoint, because they read her work through the narrow or abstract view of which she was critical.

Consideration of these experiential and creative dimensions requires something of a move into biography and eco-cultural analysis, rather than literary exegesis alone. Monographs on visual artists often pay a great deal of attention to the circumstances under which a particular piece was created: what the artist might have been thinking or reading, who they were in contact with, what significant events shaped their lives, all support a more detailed interpretation of a work. Brady (*South of My Days*), Coralie and Davidson each draw from Wright's personal letters and events in her life as a means of assisting a scholarly analysis of some more obscure points in her poetry. In her identification of the ecophilosophical elements of Wright's work, Coralie found within Wright's correspondence discussion of the importance of humility and self-renunciation for the development of a greater degree of ecological awareness and sensitivity, a view that is reiterated in several essays (235). In this section I identify and examine the cultural and intellectual contexts that informed Wright's contemplative view more closely, and demonstrate how they formed the basis for her refigured view of wilderness.

Mead observes that Wright's and McKinney's preference for the geographical and intellectual 'edge' of post-war society played a formative role in the path of their thought (277). As he shows, the couple's life on Mount Tamborine (Queensland), then a small farming community, along with their occupation of 'relatively undisciplined and uninstitutionalised margins of knowledge', allowed them to think themselves to 'the centre of human experience' (277). In their renunciation of a variety of social and intellectual comforts, Wright's and McKinney's life together resonated with that of the contemplative mystic.

In the Christian context, contemplation involved one's removal from society's distractions and demands, so as to devote all efforts towards attaining a purer grasp (or vision) of the divine, not only for one's own good, but for the good of society as a whole. Male monks were often also known as 'anchorites', and their female counterparts 'anchoresses', terms that emphasised their role in keeping the church (and society more broadly) safely moored within the beneficent bays of God's holy creation. For Wright and McKinney, privations were cheerfully endured in the interests of exploring and exposing the fundamental intellectual factors that contributed to a world that had twice gone to war with itself, and the crisis faced by modernity more generally.

Many monks (though certainly not all) sought the solitude of forests, deserts and mountains to draw closer to God; yet such a life was not without its risks. For the earliest monks, the desert was both a 'provisional paradise' in which one could find a 'haven for contemplation, refuge and redemption', and 'a place of trial, temptation, sin and punishment' (Bartra 47). Prolonged periods of solitude focussing on prayer or the image of God brought one under 'attack' from all manner of forces that threatened to lead one astray (see Athanasius). For this reason, in the Middle Ages at least, solitude was perceived as something of a dangerous pursuit (Bartra 113), not only for the individual, but for greater society. Medieval history particularly is rife with heretical mystics and monks who, having returned from an extended period alone in the mountains, forests, or deserts, bring visions and prophesies that, while scandalising the ecclesiastical establishment, inspire and captivate the laity (see Cohn).

Such heretical fringe dwellers feature often in Wright's poetry. In 'The Moving Image', the 'singing madness' of 'poor Tom O'Bedlam' identifies him as such a figure. Tom's divine visions have led him to a cell, his very 'madness' a punishment for transgressing prescribed limits. Labelled 'mad', Tom is silenced; society has turned its back on him, and whatever he has to say. Yet social alienation and accusations of madness can be read as an affirmation of one's vision, for 'God is not seen except by blindness, nor known except by ignorance, nor understood except by fools' (Eckhart qtd. in Davidson 166-7). Furthermore, Tom's prison cell becomes the site of yet more profound visons. A self-confessed 'heretic' (quoted in Brady, *South of My Days* 172), Wright identified with 'the madmen singing, the lovers, the blind', and with those who heard 'the sound in the silence' ('The Moving Image', *CP* 6). As I will show, she shared the vision those songs evoked from beneath 'Pride, greed, and ignorance – that world's three veils' ('Vision', *CP* 199). This identification was grounded in recognition of the privations each had endured for a more profound vision of one's place in history and the world:

> The first birth and the first cry and the first death,
>
> the world of the first cell and the first man,
>
> every sound and motion forgotten, remembered,
>
> left their trace in his body, their voice in his speech. ('The Moving Image', *CP* 5)

Brooks finds in this vision of Tom's a case being made for the redemptive virtues of madness, 'that, in some way or another, a losing of our sanity may be the only way to regain a world our sanity has lost us' (60). 'Madness' might be a necessary preface to a new mode of perception.

Later works would draw more overtly from Christian imagery to tell the story of this path to *gnosis*. Kane finds within Wright's poetry references to the Christian *via negativa* in the form of (what he refers to as, echoing Harold Bloom) *kenosis* (161). *Kenosis* gives particular emphasis to the 'plenitude' (161) that emerges following an ascetic self-renunciation. A negation of the self results, Kane argues, in the realisation of an 'absent (divine) presence', otherwise identified by mystics in negative terms. Kane draws particular attention to the role 'silence' plays in this context as a metaphor for voicelessness (163). As he shows in his reading of 'The Lost Man', a renunciation of speech and an embrace of contemplative silence is crucial for the realisation of the divine plenitude:

> To reach the pool you must go by the black valley
> among the crowding columns made of silence,
> under the hanging clouds
> of leaves and voiceless birds. (*CP* 113)

Such a path can also be used, as Tim Lilburn shows, to chart the return of consciousness to the world (30). Wright shared this view.

In images associated with the *via negativa* Wright found a means of articulating her and McKinney's solution to the crisis of modernity, as they saw it. This crisis stemmed from the logical conclusion McKinney believed the modern episteme (which has its roots in Ancient Greek thought) had reached in the early post-war era: the fragmentation of knowledge and the relativisation of 'truth' (Hawke 165). However this crisis also carried its own solution. McKinney argued in *The Challenge of Reason* that this relativised knowledge marked a return to an earlier, 'primordial' mode of understanding 'when experience was a unity and knowing and being were one' (McKinney qtd. in Hawke 165). Instead of a knowledge of the world informed by concepts, McKinney argued that experience needs to be recognised for the role it plays (and greater role it could play) in the modern episteme. He found evidence of such a return in the observations made by quantum physics (Hawke 166), which argued for the degree to which perception is responsible for the construction of reality. Attention to the wave/particle phenomenon, where one's attention determines whether reality, at the sub-atomic level, will exist in wave or particle form (and from which one may conclude that 'distinction is evermore radicalised and intermediate' [McKinney qtd. in Hawke 165-166]) is a salient example of the way empirical evidence contravened abstract logic. With its engagement of an ever-more intense focus on a particular object, image, sensation, mantra (etc.), contemplative practice represents one means of accessing this primordial vision of

reality, a fact McKinney acknowledged in *The Challenge of Reason*: 'For him the way to this "mountain-height of understanding and true power [lay] through the valley of renunciation"' (McKinney qtd. in Brady, *South of My Days* 128). Wright evidently shared this view. In a letter to Len Webb she quoted the 17th century Japanese poet Bashō:

> Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo and in doing so you will lose your subjective preoccupations with yourself. Otherwise you'll impose yourself on the object and do not learn. (qtd. in Brady, *South of My Days* 447)

Wright saw contemplative attentiveness as a necessary preface to a more authentic encounter with the world she inhabited. The reading of 'Scribbly Gum' in Chapter Two can be expanded to observe the way that the ambient silence Wright invokes in the poem ('I passed and heard') plays a fundamental role in the emergence of the 'one strange word'. 'Scribbly Gum' also points to the way that one's own silence, as a willingness to listen, contributes further to the foregrounding of emergent other-than-human voices. The virtues of silent contemplation as the context in which to observe the world around us is increasingly recognised within contemporary literary studies (see Cladis, Slicer, and Christie). Wright drew on the Christian contemplative approach for a guide and vocabulary in encounters with the world beyond the limits of the towns and cities.

> Who walks this way, then? Only
> the rebel children who fear nothing
> and the silent walker who goes lonely,
> silence his goal, out of the holiday crowd.
> And these, if they go far,
> will find the clustering moons and stars of white
> that jealous night saves for her wanderers. ('Sandy Swamp', *CP* 88)

'Sandy Swamp' is not an allegory for religious devotion, in my view, but rather instantiates Wright's own version of contemplative ecology. Wright describes a similar journey to the one narrated in *The Gateway* (1953) poems, with the plenitude that emerges an ecological one. The 'night' that 'rebellious children' and lonely walkers enter is not of the soul, but of the swamp. Fearlessness, or a pursuit of silence for its own sake, brings a wanderer upon worlds they had not expected to find: 'clustering moons and stars of white'; distant lights one can acknowledge, but not (as I argued in Chapter 2) know.

THE BUSHMAN AND THE WILD MAN

A local cultural influence for Wright's contemplative ecology can also be found in her work. The Australian 'bushmen' (also known as 'swagmen') were a class of itinerants particularly common in Australia during economically depressed periods of the 19th and 20th centuries. They could be found walking the roads and bush tracks between farms and homesteads, finding in 'the bush' a home, an asylum, or a prison. The abject poverty and transient lives of these men meant they typically only owned what they were capable of carrying in their 'swag' (a name for one's bedding, rolled up and carried on the back), making them a class of Australian ascetics who were not looking for God, only work and 'a feed'. Not surprisingly, the bushman has become a favourite (and often romanticised) subject for generations of Australian writers. In terms preceding Wright, Marcus Clarke extolls the life of the solitary 'dweller in the wilderness' as one who, familiar with 'the beauty of loneliness', might decipher the 'strange scribblings' of the Australian 'bush':

> Whispered to by the myriad tongues of the wilderness, he learns the language of the barren and the uncouth, and can read the hieroglyphs of haggard gum trees. (647)

The bushman demonstrates a deeper intimacy with his surroundings that contrasts with Wright's own inability to 'read' the 'written track' on the tree ('Scribbly Gum', *CP* 131). For this reason, for Clarke, and Wright, the life of the bushman is a model means by which nonindigenous Australians might find a home in Australia. The bushman is in accord with several cultural traditions whose renunciation of worldly comforts forms the path to an intimate familiarity with more subtle dimensions of their world.

Lest we be tempted to romanticise the bushman, it bears remembering that the circumstances that led them to an itinerant life were rarely glorious:

> The fraternity of swagmen welcomed all types: delusional cranks, ne'er-do-well parasites, seasonal labourers, failed selectors, illiterate and educated idlers, down-at-heel artists, and innocent victims of economic depressions and other misfortune. (Watson 125)

Furthermore, their itinerant occupation of land coincided with, or followed, the displacement of First Nations people (in which many were directly involved). Wright's dissatisfaction with the teaching of 'Bullocky' in schools was due to its decontextualisation from the other poems it appeared alongside in *The Moving Image* such as 'Bora Ring' and 'Nigger's Leap: New England' ('Reading and Nationalism' 46-47). Approached without the important historical

setting those poems provide, the bullocky appears a sacrificial or prophetic figure. Without 'Bora Ring' and 'Nigger's Leap' the irony of the final lines of the poem ('The prophet Moses feeds the grape,/and fruitful is the promised Land' [17]) disappears, and the significance of the 'bone beneath the grass' is lost. While the bushman (like the 'frontiersman' of North America and Canada) was an irrefutable agent or beneficiary of colonial violence, his ancestry is somewhat more benign. An examination of this ancestry will introduce some of the primary characteristics that define the Australian bushman's relationship to the country, and in turn clarify Wright's own use of the bushman in her poetry as figure who has undergone a 'purification' comparable to the Christian mystic.

The cultural roots of the Australian bushman can be found in the medieval European 'wild man'. Like the Australian bushman, folkloric medieval wild men, such as Merlin the medieval soothsayer, and the Christian saint John Chrysostom represented (and romanticised) an array of 'marginal peoples' that inhabited the European forests, ranging from itinerant 'foresters' that ventured there for wood, bark, or wild foods, to fugitives, hermits, saints, victims of religious persecution, beggars, thieves and madmen (Bartra 81).

As I argued in the prior chapter, acknowledgment of the particular *umwelt* a species inhabits involves recognition of certain insurmountable boundaries that prevent humans (for example) from 'thinking like a tree'. There are however, significant points where the life-worlds of different species overlap; that is, where different species select, read and respond to the elements within an ecosystem in similar ways. The medieval wild man is a somewhat more spectacular embodiment of such an overlap, forgoing the trappings and signifiers of human civilisation (clothing, cooked food, a house, conventional language, civilised manners and morals) for a life somewhere between human and animal. A hirsute appearance and a language '[o]f senseless words, wich [sic] nature did him teach' (Spenser 6.4.11, 14), further established his liminal position. The wild man often shared the company and language of various wild animals, real and fantastic (Bartra 124), in a relationship of co-existence and domination, 'for the beasts appeared to recognise both their affinity with the wild man and the superiority of man' (Bartra 96). The wild man's liminality addressed a collective (subconscious) cultural need in the Middle Ages, preserving a connection with what was believed to be a 'shadow of civilisation' (Harrison 64), that bore a *logos* and set of laws of its own.

The occupation of such a liminal space often prefaced a 'path to salvation and prophecy' (Bartra 83) in narratives depicting the medieval wild man, inherited from earlier Christian

accounts of monastics whose inhabitation of deserts and forests was part of an ascetic pursuit of redemption (Bartra 62). Merlin and John Chrysostom, along with various 'knights-errant' like Lancelot or Yvain, sought the solitude of the forest after going mad in a fit of forlornness over love lost, unrequited, or improper (Bartra 133). After a stretch living 'as a wild beast, suffering the chill of water turned to stone in snow, in rain, under merciless lashing wind' (Geoffrey of Monmouth qtd. in Barta 72) such figures would typically recover their sanity and return to their place in the Royal Court or church. The virtues of the knight's errancy lay in his journey across the boundaries separating wilderness and civilisation. Just as the monk endured a range of privations in the interests of wider society, Harrison argues that the knight's familiarisation with 'wildness' or 'bewilderment' represented a means of 'overcoming its menace' (68), not only for himself, but for medieval society as a whole: the wild man becoming a mediator between the forest and medieval society.

The bushman (in mythology at least) followed a somewhat similar path of renunciation and redemption that we find in the life of the medieval wild man. Banjo Paterson's 'Waltzing Matilda' can be read as a paean to a man who also renounced the comforts of a city or town, preferring an itinerant life 'waltzing matilda' ('matilda' being a colloquialism for a person's 'swag' or bedroll), over the accumulation of land and property . The nameless swagman's suicide redeems him of his petty crime, as he attains a unity with the land that echoes the wild man's path of renunciation and redemption. Now a ghost that haunts the 'billabong' in which he drowned, he invites others to join him. Like the earlier wild man, the merging of the swagman with the land (through an allegorical death) represents the fulfilment of a common nonindigenous Australian yearning for a sense of 'belonging' to the land (see Read).

Echoing the ideas voiced in 'Waltzing Matilda' and the mythology surrounding the medieval wild man, in 'Australia's Double Aspect' Wright argued in favour of 'a kind of death of some things in us, in order to make room for others' as the means by which nonindigenous Australians might begin to acquire a legitimate chthonic relation to the country (xvii). Instead of emptying the land so that Europeans might create a 'home' for themselves, Wright argues that an emptying (or 'death') of the self might be a necessary prelude to finding a home in Australia. Wright suggests that certain sacrifices need to be made, if settler Australians hope to live (or 'belong') in Australia in a more 'authentic' manner, rather than merely 'sprinkled on the surface of a darkness into which it never penetrated' (Lawrence 8). Yet reiterating Jung's warnings regarding the alchemical 'individuation' of the self (Berman 85-86) (and the precariousness of the path followed by contemplatives from a range of religious traditions),

Wright observed a slender distinction between mortal death (or madness) and one that signifies a 'crossing over' into a new mode of perception (see also Tacey 118). Kane finds an awareness in several of Wright's poems (such as 'The Forest Path' and 'The Traveller and the Angel') that self-abnegation does not always conclude with the successful attainment of a divine plenitude (165). 'The Lost Man' narrates the journey through these perilous territories, a journey through a 'bewildering' liminal space of concurrent light and darkness, and life and death:

> To reach the pool you must go through the rain-forest –
> through the bewildering midsummer of darkness
> lit with ancient fern
> laced with poison and thorn. (*CP* 112)

Kevin Hart's reading of 'The Lost Man' draws attention to the historical context surrounding it, leading him to suggest that the poem may not only refer to Christian self-renunciation. *The Green Mountains* was published in 1941 by Bernard O'Reilly ('a local Bushman' [Hart 310]), and details his location and rescue of 2 survivors from the wreck of a Stinson aircraft, *The City of Brisbane* that crashed into the remote McPherson ranges in South East Queensland in 1937. Hart identifies several parallels between O'Reilly's story and Wright's poem. 'The Lost Man' is a set of directions, Hart argues, to locating the body of Jim Westray, an Englishman who fell over a waterfall while attempting to walk out the mountains for help. Aside from a description of one's ascent to the divine along the 'negative way', Hart argues the directives that '[y]ou must go the way he went – the way of the bleeding/hands and feet, the blood on the stones like flowers' ('The Lost Man', *CP* 112) allude not only to Christ, but to Westray, thus making the poem an address to O'Reilly. However, as I have suggested in drawing a comparison between the wild man and the bushman, the thematic distance between a 'dark night of the soul' and O'Reilly's successful search for Jim Westray may not be as significant as it appears. As a 'local Bushman' O'Reilly is a figure whose familiarity with country beyond the bounds of European civilisation is only attained with a comparable degree of asceticism.

Both experienced in solitary travel in mountainous country, Westray and O'Reilly are themselves in possession of knowledge that may appear esoteric to the uninitiated. Westray survived the plane's twist into a massive tree, and after severely burning his hands dragging two others from the wreck, began following a creek down a mountainside that he predicted (correctly) would eventually lead him to human habitation. Westray's experience as a

mountaineer (which O'Reilly acknowledges) sustained him in his efforts to seek help. However, unfamiliarity with local flora would prove fatal. After falling from a waterfall and smashing his ankle, Westray continued to crawl a further distance along the boulder-strewn creek, before O'Reilly discovered him dead: 'beside him tumbled the wild creek and from around a bend the deep musical note of a waterfall dropping into a deep black pool' (O'Reilly 32). As O'Reilly regretfully shows, his own success in finding and ensuring the rescue of the survivors came with a knowledge of the country that Westray lacked.

Wright's poem and O'Reilly's book both identify the narrow path one walks between mortal death and triumphant endurance on any solitary journey through rugged terrain. In 'The Lost Man' Wright combines references to physical rescue and spiritual redemption (Hart 317), suggesting the place of both in an episteme of the Australian landscape.

> To go by the way he went you must find beneath you
>
> that last and faceless pool, and fall. And falling
>
> find between breath and death
>
> the sun by which you live. (*CP* 113)

Wright's advocacy of self-negation and liminality ('falling […] between breath and death') picks up a tradition that is not located solely within the Christian *via negativa*. The Australian 'bushman' is the local embodiment of a more secular mode of contemplative ecology that did not see the forest as context through which to draw closer to God, but to draw closer to the beings that inhabited it, entering a space between human civilisation and wilderness as a means of survival. O'Reilly can be viewed as an exemplar of Wright's 'new Australians' ('Australia's Double Aspect' xix); who are more attuned to the country having recognised its demand for 'a death of some things in us, to make room, perhaps, for others' (xvii).

Thus Wright's bushman is not an ecocentric reconception of the Christian mystic, but a local reworking of the European archetype of the wild man, a figure who sought out the forests and mountains for their own sake, and in so doing found something resembling an ecologically responsible home within it. For the bushman it is only by inhabiting a liminal zone between 'breath and death' that one might find the redemption of 'the sun'. Hart reminds the reader that although the poem does direct one to the pool, what they find is 'the reflection of the sun in the water' (316); the darkness of the pool being the means by which one sees the sun. The 'sun' is a traditional image, Hart argues, for Christ: a descent into the darkness of nonknowledge is simultaneously an ascent to an encounter with the divine (316). Sensitive to

Wright's reading of Jung, meanwhile, Toby Davidson suggests that the sun reflected in the pool may be 'the living water of the inner "complete" or contemplative self' (172), following a Jungian alchemical transformation. From a more ecologically-conscious perspective, one that aligns with the historical context of the poem, and the 'double aspect' of the country Wright believed could be overcome by it, a descent into deprivation and danger prefaces the attainment of an ability to 'read' the country (and the myriad signs within it) more comprehensively.

Accounts of immersive ecological contemplation and inhabitation of a geographical and intellectual liminal space are themes that resonate in Wright's own life. Inasmuch as the 'fall' signified humanity's expulsion from the Garden, where human and other-than-human shared a common language and understanding, Wright draws on O'Reilly's story to suggest that another kind of fall – a letting-go of existing prejudices and perceptions – prefaces an appreciation (and even understanding) of some of the layers of biosemiosis that constitute the world. Indeed, 'The Lost Man' might not be an allegory for a '"mystical union of the psyche with the eternal cycles of nature"' (Walker qtd. in Hart 317); but it is an allusion to a path that for Wright led to the kind of encounters we find in 'Scribbly Gum', 'For Precision', and 'Sandy Swamp': a refigured view of wilderness (*wildēorness*). After sufficient time inhabiting such a boundary zone, one will be able to discern 'the voice of the water' ('The Lost Man', *CP* 113); to find within the water its 'musical note' (O'Reilly 32).

THE WHEEL OF ASCESIS AND APOPHASIS

The complex of life-sustaining knowledge of and affinity for the other-than-human the bushman and the wild man acquired in the liminal space between wilderness and civilisation cannot be expressed in ordinary language. Led towards a more intimate vision of the world by a contemplative praxis, Wright found silence. The ascetic self-silencing (or 'death') that the contemplative approach demands in preparation leads to a silence of another order following the emergence of the 'plenitude'.

The wild man sought alternative means to convey such an intimate vision of the forests. As Edmund Spenser writes in *The Faerie Queene,* the 'wyld man' expresses himself:

> by signes, by looks, and by other gests
>
> […]
>
> other language has he none, not speach,
> But a soft murmure and confused sound

> Of senseless words, wich nature did him teach
>
> T'expresse his passions, wich his reason did empeach. (Spenser 6.4.11, 14)

In his inarticulate vocal 'gests', the wild man has learnt to communicate 'his passions' after observing the semiosis between his fellow forest dwellers ('wich nature did him teach'). His 'senseless words' are less focussed on communicating meaning through words themselves, than in the nonverbal gestures with which he expresses them. Through the use of voice and other nonverbal gestures ('by signes, by looks'…'a soft murmure and confused sound'), the wild man communicates his own intimate experience and understanding of the world.

This 'wild speech' can be conceived of as lyrical, whereby a poetic selection of words is made according to their efficacy in sonically conveying one's own personal 'feeling' for an entity. This lyrical use of language can be seen as a response to its perceived incapacity to express experience in literal terms. Particularly in her later work, Wright often gave a lyrical emphasis to the language she used in her poetry, as a means of articulating encounters with animals, plants and landscapes that occur on the plane of feeling rather than the intellect. As Wright shows, quoting Susanne Langer, poetry's unique virtue lies in its ability to express a complex and dynamic perception of phenomena that '"cannot be rendered linguistically, that is, stated. But they are precisely what comes to light in a good work of art"' (Langer qtd. in Wright, 'The Teaching of Poetry' 14).

> The actual felt process of life, the tensions interwoven and shifting from moment to moment, the flowing and slowing, the drive and directedness of desires, and above all the rhythmic continuity of our selfhood, defies the expressive power of discursive symbolism. (Langer qtd. in Wright, 'The Teaching of Poetry' 13)

The lyric expresses a more profound and dynamic impression of phenomena than is available through a literal approach to language. Words are not as important in conveying a literal meaning as for conjuring the experiential and emotional atmosphere in which an entity is encountered, which those very words would be hard-pressed to describe.

Given her contemplative approach to the other-than-human, Wright's poetic attentiveness to the shifts in her own response to phenomena was accompanied by an acknowledgement of the way the same phenomena exceed the names and words she uses to describe them. In *Woman to Man* (1949) we can observe a shift in Wright, from an assurance in the possibility of finding the words to talk about her encounters with animals and plants, to a more forthright denial that a sturdy linguistic bridge between word and world can (or should) be built. The

assertion by 'The Blind Man', that 'I have made silence speak; I found/for the night a sound' (*CP* 68), bears an optimism that one can find the relevant words to describe obscure insights. 'The World and the Child' meanwhile, warns that language is ineffectual in recovering a lost unity with the world. The child's mystical intimacy with his world (where 'the moon swings from his ceiling' [*CP* 36]), and a life lived in a perpetual present ('Nothing is named;/nothing is ago, nothing not yet' [*CP* 36]), is disrupted by a burgeoning consciousness of separation. Wright uses the image of 'the net' to convey the way words, which combine to form larger structures of meaning, are cast over phenomena in order to 'catch' or 'hold' them. Out of a desire to recover this lost intimacy, the child 'makes a net to catch the unknown world'; yet all it draws back, Wright shows us, are more words, 'heavy as fish, and tears' (*CP* 37), imperfect representations of the world, and intrepid tales of efforts to capture 'that secret no man knows' (*CP* 37). 'The World and the Child' suggests that our linguistic re-presentations of phenomena are far from objective, and draws attention to the frailty of any conceptual net, for '[n]o net is strong enough to hold the world,/nor man of such sinew ever was made' (*CP* 37).

The view that no language can be found that will adequately 'hold the world', strengthened in later works. In 'The Unnecessary Angel', Wright observes the subtle change to the weight carried by words for those whose contemplative approach has redefined their perception:

> Yes, we can still sing
> who reach this barren shore.
> But no note will sound
> as it did before. (*CP* 291)

Once one learns a few of the essential truths that define human reality – that 'Law surpasses Art./Not the heart directs/what happens to the heart' – Wright suggests a sparseness of speech might be preferable:

> Let the song be bare
> that was richly dressed. Sing with one reserve:
> Silence might be best. ('The Unnecessary Angel', *CP* 292)

The contemplative approach that leads one to 'this barren shore', while salient in revealing a semiosis one may not have otherwise seen, also produces a depth of perception that defies ordinary language, leading to the conclusion that 'silence might be best'. On 'this barren shore', one is implored to allow any 'song' used to evoke the world to be basic in its imagery.

Indeed, we are implored to continue singing, with 'one [paradoxical] reserve': that we promote the virtues of silence as the 'best' means of communicating such understanding. Such is the approach Wright took to her ecopoetics. She is not alone.

The Canadian ecopoet and essayist, Tim Lilburn, also found himself resorting to an apophatic use of language as the only means by which to convey his contemplative encounters with various biota. His collection of essays, *Living in the World as If It Were Home*, detail many of the observations he made about language, the other-than-human world, and the relationship between the two, observations that assist us in clarifying Wright's own use of silence in her poetry. Traditionally, apophasis is an approach to language whereby words and names used to represent the divine are demonstrably negated as a means of articulating the profundity of one's encounter with God. The language employed within the apophatic tradition is used to describe the 'souls approach to God' (30) through a progressive erasure of all words and names used to describe or refer to Him, upon which one is left in a state of total receptive silence. Lilburn believes such a discourse can also be used 'to plot the return of consciousness to the world, unnameable in its athletic variety' (30).

In an apophatic context, the meaning or 'truth' of a thing is intrinsically tied to the point where the contemplative finds language failing to relay what emerges in a contemplative context. Highlighting the moment of 'language's brokenness' (30) is important in the apophatic disclosure of meaning:

> The birch branch is an intuition meandering endlessly toward a clear idea. No it is music: fifty violin concerti locked in gangling wood a chasm-like sparkgap from the ear. It echoes a profusion of stars. No, it is like complication, the odd angledness of bird song. Silence – the gaze going on, a probing. (30)

An intensified encounter with the other-than-human results in increasingly abstract attempts to represent it. Meanwhile, a silence borne of the successive negation of any name or description looms larger. This observation is shared by Douglas Christie:

> The mystery at the heart of such stillness begins to reveal itself, in particular moments of insight and understanding about the self and the world, and in the emergence of an awareness so capacious and wide-ranging that it cannot be bounded by anything. Or even named. (176)

Some colonial writers approached different parts of Australia in the same way, as Brooks has suggested in his discussion of the ontological anxiety the aporetic experience of the country

encouraged in many colonial minds. As an alternative to describing country as 'silent', the gaps in what one could say about the country were retained through informal apophatic language. Thomas Watling's remarks in his *Letters from an Exile at Botany Bay to his Aunt in Dumfries*, that the 'air, the sky, the land, are objects entirely different from all that a Briton has been accustomed to see before' (31) are similarly apophatic. He is unable to express the character of these 'objects' to his aunt, describing them only in terms of what they are not:

> The climate is an extremely sultry one, especially in summer; and yet paradoxical as it may appear, it is in no wise propitious for tropical vegetation. A few European culinary vegetables grow, but never arrive to their pristine maturity, and when re-transplanted dwindle unto nothing. – The face of the country is deceitful; having every appearance of fertility; and yet productive of no one article in itself fit for the support of mankind. (23)

A tropical climate and no tropical vegetation. European vegetables grow, and then cease to do so. The country appears fertile, but in fact isn't. No vegetation will grow that is fit to support 'mankind', and yet the region was already heavily populated. After reading Watling's letters, his aunt probably knew less about Australia than beforehand. At the same time however, Watling was demonstrating a deeper intimacy with his surroundings, and, more importantly, a willingness to suspend judgement until greater clarity on these matters came to hand (28). He opts instead to point out the paradoxes as he encounters them. Unwilling to satisfy himself by seeking points of comparison, Watling undertakes a process of unknowing, the effect of which is the emergence of several blank spots in his 'account' of the country, an approach not uncommon among colonial-era explorers (see also Arthur 54-55). Yet Watling's unknowing is not undertaken in order that he might eventually reinscribe the land for himself.

Catherine Martin's colonial-era novel *The Silent Sea* offers a description of the arid South Australian interior in comparable terms:

> 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)

With few words to describe the arid South Australian interior, Martin also takes an apophatic approach, offering a picture of the land largely in the negative. Like Watling's account of the country, for Martin the landscape is not a 'wilderness', since it 'lacks luxuriant herbage', neither is it a desert since a 'desert may consist of leafy scrub or shady forest' ('desert' in this case probably referring to the Late Latin *desertum*, meaning 'to abandon', 'to leave', or 'forsake' [Harper]). She draws on these terms only to establish their inefficacy in representing such country, instead offering readers a picture as sparse as she perceived the country to be.

The apophatic character of Martin's description, like Watling's, functions as a means of evoking silence, rather than using it as a preface for reinscription. The reasons for this are certainly clear: Watling would happily watch the entire colonial edifice fall into this oblivion than continue to face the drudgery and humiliation of his talents as a convict artist at Sydney Cove. In *The Silent Sea* such descriptions of the landscape set the scene for the characters that inhabit it, particularly those that relish a life in this 'eerie waste'. Martin's 'vast, impersonal, unfathomable landscape upon which it seems impossible to impose any control, order or meaning' (Foxton 122) once more repeats the image of 'the bush' that so often appears in relation to the 'bushman': a potential source of transcendence or disintegration. One of Martin's characters in the novel, Kenneth Campbell, is the archetypal Christian mystic at home in this arid empty space: the solitary shepherd turned itinerant preacher, offering spiritual advice and guidance to those who find themselves psychologically and morally adrift in the vastness and monotony of the country (65-66). For Campbell, in 'the great Salt-bush plains' God can be found (67).

Wright similarly eschews words and names at the point where she finds they do not adequately convey her encounters with animals, plants, and landforms. Returning once more to the 'Scribbly Gum', we observe how, while silence is the context in which to hear the 'mountain, palm and fern', spoken in 'one strange word', these three names are recast in apophatic terms, their inefficacy exposed by their juxtaposition with the succinct (and untranslated) word of the spring. Similarly, in 'For Precision' the names of the coastal environment are instantly negated in the (similarly undisclosed) 'sole note' of the gull, as distinct and disparate elements of the coastal ecology (cloud, sky, sea) are unified in a 'whole'.

Thus the contemplative approach that begins in silence returns to silence, in a ceaseless cycle. In the course of his own ecological contemplation, Lilburn identifies the cyclical relationship that binds asceticism and apophasis. Lilburn's reference to a 'probing' (30) in his apophatic descriptions of the birch branch reflect the dimension of desire that drives ecological contemplation (as it did in the Christian context), and ensures that the ascetic silence of contemplation, and the apophatic silence that emerges as a result, remains locked in a progressive cycle of linguistic negation: 'a period of ascetical denial precedes contemplation, meanwhile the impulse to know the world ends in asceticism' (13). In following the 'path' of Christian contemplative practice the initial ascetic embrace of silence marks but a prefatory stage. An initial renunciation of speech reveals a plenitude for which successive descriptions are found unsatisfactory. This apophatic silence leads one back to a state of receptive silence; yet the unfolding plenitude once more leads to a further pursuit and negation of description, in an endless cycle. Wright's poem 'Dream' illustrates her understanding of this process.

> I travel through this night and by this light
> to find upon a hill the unsought rose
> that out of silence into silence grows;
> and silence overtakes me at that sight. ('Dream', *CP* 39)

Davidson observes the fundamental 'Christological dimension' to 'Dream' in its thematic resonance with 'The Dream of the Rood', written in the 8th century by an unknown author, and Yeats' 'To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time' (164). The 'visionary silence' (165) that 'Dream' alludes to is a cyclical one: contemplation leads not to a more confident linguistic depiction of phenomena, but to yet deeper silence. One's journey 'through this night' of a dream-like, non-ordinary mode of perception leads to the 'unsought rose'. The encounter with the rose emerges 'out of' a contemplative silence and 'into' an apophatic one. This apophatic silence impels a further contemplative approach, and a yet deeper silence ('and silence overtakes me at that sight').

Wright's ability to hear the voices of the other-than-human occurred within a contemplative context: a self-silencing that led to a biosemiotic plenitude that could not be read. However an appreciation of biosemiosis is not all that emerged from Wright's self-renunciation. A number of Wright's poems express an ontological view of the other-than-human that also resists description. In the next section it is identified.

LANGUAGE AND FLUX

For Lilburn, ecological apophasis is tied to the profound individuality or *haeccity* (the 'this-ness of a thing that makes it unlike all others' [16]) of a thing that emerges in contemplation. Wright's own contemplative approach led her to a similar conclusion. However this individuality was also encountered in a temporal context. Wright's early poetry demonstrated a faith that contemplation would unveil a word that can, like the other-than-human signs she observed, grasp the 'whole'. However her hope that bird and tree 'are simple and stand still', allowing for 'the word that when all words are said/shall encompass more than speech' ('Sonnet', *CP* 16) is, ironically, the precise basis for her later critique of language.

As Wright illustrates in 'The Writer and the Crisis', her own disillusionment with language is founded on the belief that the original experiential ground, the poetic ground of the word, has 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 (173). The conundrum Walker identifies between Wright's desire to remain 'faithful to the uniqueness of the individual object whilst, at the same time, subsuming it under the universal concept' (*Flame and Shadow* 166) can be defined in terms of a tension between an effort to hold the object within the word, or allowing it to manifest in its own being. Walker points to 'Nameless Flower' as an example of Wright's condemnation of 'the hubris of mind which imagines that it can marshal a unique phenomenon – the frail and beautiful flower rising from the rainforest floor – under the universal and human label, the name' (*Flame and Shadow* 156). Wright reflects on the way in which the word functions as a construct, a 'home' for the flower, with a 'lock' with which to hold the flower in a 'white song', under the misconception that through the name the flower can be known in its entirety. However, Wright equates the 'white' heaviness of words – their determination to leave no shade, no shadow, to take possession and dominate entirely – with that of the gravestone. The image of the gravestone 'implies that words, or a name, are but an epitaph for the vitality of the natural event' (Walker, *Flame and Shadow* 157); a suppression of the inherent transience and impermanence of the thing in the static image of the word. Yet it becomes apparent that this home/grave is a 'trap' that the flower manages to evade ('But before the trap is set,/the prey is gone' ['Nameless Flower', *CP* 130]). The 'nameless flower' does not perish in the static name; rather, in virtue of Wright's recognition of it's 'Being now; being love', her own ontopoetic (Brady, 'The Ontopoetics of Judith Wright' 168) perspective of the flower acknowledges and accepts its existence in the transience of the present moment.

The particular significance Wright gives to 'now' is based in a Heraclitean ontology, itself primordial in the terms McKinney defined. *The Two Fires* (which features 'Scribbly Gum', 'Nameless Flower' and 'For Precision') is prefaced with a telling fragment from the Pre-Socratic philosopher:

> This world…was ever, is now, and ever shall be an ever-living Fire, with measures of it kindling, and measures going out. (qtd. in *CP* 118)

For Wright the flicker of the flame embodies the passage and cycle of life. As she illustrates in 'The Two Fires', the first poem of the collection, despite our collective tendency to deny and ignore the transience of all life (and, as Wright reminds us, love), the fire is a *memento mori*, a reminder that 'you too burn' ('The Two Fires', *CP* 119).

As I showed in Chapter One, the connotations carried by silence in colonial-era discourses were in part defined by a Christian and Platonic cosmology. 'Silence' created a passive landscape to be broken and shaped with a voice of human creation. Wright's own apophatic silence is grounded in the inability to affix names to a world observed to be in continual flux. In 'Boundaries', after identifying the ontological significance of flux, Wright concludes by observing the way this transience generates silence:

> It's just that we think in limit, form and time.
> Only language invents
> future and past (now gone before it's said).
> What's I, what's here?
> It's the whole flow that's real,
> the whole change pouring through the lens of eyes
> that first distinguish, then forget distinction;
> record the many, then rejoin the all. (*CP* 387)

In a vision resonant with Actaeon's (see Chapter One), Wright points out the superficiality and subjectivity of any static distinctions we might make between things. With attention to the way all beings exist in a state of flux, language, limit, form and time are exposed to be mere inventions: 'It's the whole flow that's real'. Individual difference and distinction break down under the unifying factor of change: 'record the many, then rejoin the all'. The problematic connection between words and the world as it is given to experience is the focus of 'The Writer and the Crisis'. Her account for the failure of the 'tool of language' to meet the 'modern demands placed upon it' (167) also draws on a Heraclitean ontology:

The current of events which forms the life-stream of the individual escapes – and we can now see, has in its essential form always escaped – description. The word tree for instance, is only a label – the tree seen, the momentous living event, slips through it as through a sieve; it is part of the flow of our relative individual experience, and our perception of it is no more lasting than a dream-perception. (168)

In the context of Wright's contemplative approach, her empirical or 'primordial' sense of the tree – 'the tree seen, the momentous living event' – is at odds with its 'label'. Wright's encounter with the tree has strained a language whose ontology affixes identity to its utility, thus leading to her apophatic disclosure of it. Lilburn reached a similar conclusion: 'The world is its names plus their cancellations, what we call it and the undermining of our identifications by an ungraspable residue in objects' (5). The typical response to the disjunction between language and experience leads Lilburn not to a critique of language per se, but a critique of its use. These gaps are ignored, and we imagine or assume that the world can be 'caught in our phrases' (5); that the world can be made to fit within the words (and meanings) we have for it.

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 (in Foltz's paraphrasing) 'the conditions under which nature can be forced to show itself within that framework' (12). Like Lilburn, in 'The 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 (what she calls the 'poetic faculty' [178]). 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. In contrast to Heidegger however, Wright also recognises the intrinsic limitations of language, poetic or otherwise, to express certain encounters (Coralie 158).

Wright's response to the ineffability of this world in flux was to place new significance on silence. As she declares in 'Silence' (another poem from *The Two Fires*), 'the silence between word and word,/in which the truth waits to be heard' is also 'the rock where I shall

stand'. Such 'silence' is present in a number of Wright's poems, in a willingness to leave aspects of phenomena (or an object in its entirety) in silence:

> I
> know the ungathered stone alone stays beautiful
> and the best poem is the poem I never wrote. ('Beside the Creek', *CP* 226)

Context is intrinsic to the stone's beauty. To gather something (physically or conceptually), drawing it from the broader (dynamic) context of relations in which it is found, is ultimately to destroy the source of its beauty. In a gesture of ontopoetic humility, Wright acknowledges that the aesthetics of the stone lie beyond what her poetry is capable of conveying; the 'best poem' being the poem that was never written. For this reason, Wright's stone can be said to lie within an 'aesthetics of silence' (Sontag). In the next and final chapter I will show how Wright sought ways to address the limitations of language within the context of her ecopoetics, and the intrinsic role a poetic figuration of silence played in this.

CHAPTER 4 – INTO GREAT SILENCE

Fay Zwicky observes that silence (as a concept) 'must always imply its opposite': to recognise the presence of silence requires the existence of 'a surrounding environment of sound or language' (33). As we saw in Chapter One, calling country beyond the limits of colonial towns and cities 'silent' (even when it was not) served to affirm the 'presence' of those colonial towns and cities, dividing the country (as Carter puts it) into (silent) 'space' and (articulate) 'place'. Kane observes a differently configured, but analogous unity between speech and silence in Wright's poetry, whereby speech is measured by silence, and silence marks the various negative spaces that fill everyday life 'between one breath and another, between lovers, language, the world and even between and within oneself' (169). In drawing attention to such absences, Kane argues that Wright produces a 'metaphysics of negativity', with the intent of recording the 'pattern absence makes' (160).

In her Heraclitean critique of language Wright offers a different perspective on the disjunction between language and land I discussed in Chapter One. The incongruity between European words and the landforms they sought to describe was not solely based in experiences resulting from the European colonial diaspora. Wright questions the adequacy of human languages in general to translate experience, leading her to reframe her use of language to reflect this narrow capacity.

In his prescription for a Foucauldian world of silenced 'nature', Manes advocates the learning of a new language 'that incorporates a decentred, postmodern, posthumanist perspective' (17), in order to pull back the veil of silence that has been drawn across nature by modern humanist discourse. This language would balance speech and silence in order to present an ontology that remains respectful of the autonomy of the other-than-human from our own linguistic structures:

> Perhaps the new language we require can draw upon earlier practice from our own culture: the medieval contemplative tradition with its sparseness, sobriety and modesty of speech[…]Medieval discourse, for all its absurdities, at times revealed a refined sense of human limitation and respect for otherness, virtues much needed today. (26)

A language characterised by the humility of the contemplative tradition would be one that avoids attempting to translate the voice or being of the other-than-human. In this thesis I have

identified such a language in Wright's poetry. In this final chapter I show how a refigured silence lies at the core of it.

In a number of poems, Wright's use of silence echoes its employment in Christian mystical discourse. The boundaries between the spoken and unspoken, rendered palpable (particularly in her later work) by short stanzas and often short verse, signify a boundary between a sign and the broad, inaccessible semiotic network it is part of, or the flux that all entities inhabit and are defined by. This final concluding chapter identifies how Wright uses silence in response to the boundaries I identified in Chapters Two and Three. Silence becomes a means, I will show, for poetically invoking detail that lies beyond both the epistemological and linguistic boundaries Wright identified.

In 'The Aesthetics of Silence' Susan Sontag observes the way modern artists drew on the silence that lay beyond the limits of an artwork to suggest the inefficacy of its representation, and to gesture toward the ineffable depth of meaning that lay within this silence. Such a use of silence was inspired, Sontag argues, by mystical representations of the divine:

> As the activity of the mystic must end in a *via negativa*, a theology of God's absence, a craving for the cloud of unknowing beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the 'subject' (the 'object,' the 'image'), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence. (182)

As this final chapter will demonstrate, Wright employs silence in several ways that accord with Sontag's comparisons, including the role of silence as a means of drawing attention to the inefficacy of artistic representation, the role of silence in the promotion of a contemplative approach to art, and (finally) the silence that remains after Wright's own departure from poetry. Wright's work exemplifies the modern artistic use of silence in her framing of many of her poetic images in 'aesthetic-contemplative' terms.

Silence is enlisted by the aesthetic-contemplative image to allude to dimensions of being that remain otherwise unrepresentable. Inasmuch as silence marks the limits of the expressible, it is also a symbol of infinite depth, implied by the insignificance of the poetic or visual image. The infinite expanse and 'autonomy' (Picard 19) that silence signifies is employed to lend the aesthetic-contemplative image a similar weight.

NEGATIVE ECOPOETICS

'Negative ecopoetics' is a means of poetically invoking the other-than-human while acknowledging its own limitations in doing so. Heidegger's claim that '[m]ortals dwell

insofar as they save the earth' ('Building, Dwelling, Thinking' 150) implies an ethic that embraces a notion of wilderness as Wright defines it. To 'save the earth' is to approach something in accordance with its own 'presencing': to approach it beyond the instrumental or technical frame by which we ordinarily encounter things, and allow their being to emerge on their own terms. As the title of his essay '…Poetically Man Dwells…' suggests, Heidegger believed that it is only through poiesis that we can genuinely 'dwell' on the earth, approaching being in such a manner that allows for its self-presencing and self-concealing. The poet is crucial in guiding one towards the self-disclosure (*phusis*) of an entity when they strive to present things in such a way as to allow 'the most familiar things to appear in all their strangeness' (Rigby 432). Yet Kate Rigby points out that Heidegger's insistence on language as the only means by which 'the otherwise undisclosed being of things is revealed' (433), is an overvaluation of the functional capacity of the poetic word, especially when we recognise that in trying to capture the world with the word, we engage in yet another mode of 'enframing' on par with that of the technocratic perspective. Nonetheless, Rigby recovers the point of difference between the artistic and technocratic perspectives in the former's preservation of the undisclosed, unspeakable presence within the context of the work, by drawing attention to its own status as 'text'. Through this disclosure, the boundaries the artist has imposed on the world in order to draw it into language, are revealed:

> Only to the extent that the work of art is self-cancelling, acknowledging in some ways its inevitable failure to adequately mediate the voice of nature, can it point us to that which lies beyond its own enframing. (437)

Negative ecopoetics takes such a position. While Rigby's focus is on the 'voices' of beings, rather than the beings themselves, the same approach can be applied. This is a mode of poiesis that declares its inability to neither translate or decode many of the signs in a colonial landscape, nor convey the being of the entities that create or read them. As we have already seen, such an approach is present in Wright's poetry. In 'Scribbly Gum', we find an early example of Wright's negative ecopoetics, both in the admitted ineffable profundity of the ecosystem the spring conveys, and her inability to 'read' the markings on the tree.

'River Bend' is an expansion of the themes Wright introduced in 'Scribbly Gum'. As she shows, this particular location on the river's edge is constituted by an array of fragmentary signifiers, all suggestive of a number of 'shoots' emerging from a biosemiotic rhizome, signifying a deeper network of meanings below the surface of sight, articulation, or understanding. Wright presents a series of episodes and impressions, with a negative

ecopoetics playing an integral role in disclosing the presence of these wider networks of meaning:

> 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. (*CP* 416)

'River Bend' presents the world at the interface between static language and the transience of all life. In each stanza, a particular sign marks the existence of a story whose details Wright cannot fully articulate or know. The 'Pad-tracks in sand' adjacent to a skeleton suggest the presence of 'something'; what, when, or why, we do not know. Later, a hungry dog howls 'somewhere', whose very placelessness in the night renders it a 'ghost' – another 'absent presence' – part of the same cycle of predation as its prey. Finally, the bend at the river is also a mnemonic device – similar to the bora ring or 'Niggers Leap' – an inspiration for an old story of 'the last old woman', whose 'muttering' no one can recall. Time is intrinsic to Wright's negative ecopoetic representation of the bend at the river insofar as the temporal dimension of each event is integral to its obscurity.

In the presentation of these fragmentary episodes, 'River Bend' dexterously balances the spoken and the unspoken in such a way as to present a broad ecological picture. Yet inasmuch as Wright draws attention to the inefficacy of her own ability to read these signs, she also highlights the existence of a voice that draws and conveys these disparate fragments in a coherent whole: the 'wild perpetual voice' of the river. In its voice we can hear – just as we did the 'cold spring' of the 'Scribbly Gum' – the history of each of these signs, and their relationship to one another. The river is both facilitator and witness to each event, and in its passage over the rocks, continues to speak of them all. Insofar as the contents of this voice are left undisclosed by Wright, it can be seen as an 'aesthetic-contemplative' image.

> But there is more to language than mere communication; its immediate source is not the object, the dead, already named and defined world, but the *image*, to which man contributes all that is creative in him. It is at this source, the image – 'the word beyond formulated language', Pound has called it – that art begins, as well as language. (Wright, 'The Writer and the Crisis' 177)

In taking an ontopoetic approach to nonhuman semiosis, or following the path of ascesis and apophasis to a world defined by transience, Wright's relationship with other-than-human beings begins in silence and continues in silence. Wright's ontological observation that one can 'first distinguish, then forget distinction;/record the many then record the all' ('Boundaries', *CP* 387) found its most potent example in the 'voices' of her subjects: the unification of disparate and static identities in the 'word' of the spring, the 'note' of the gull, the 'perpetual voice' of the river, and the 'thrush's call'. While the 'one strange word' of the spring is only heard by Wright in the event of her own stillness, in verse this very word becomes an 'aesthetic-contemplative' image through which Wright can tacitly evoke the dynamic being and history of the 'mountain, palm and fern'. As the aforementioned 'Sonnet' demonstrates, even in Wright's early poetry we find an understanding of how language can function in an aesthetic-contemplate fashion:

> Here the word that, when all words are said,
> shall compass more than speech. (*CP* 36)

As Christie shows, a field of experience in which size and complexity lies beyond the capacities of the intellect or language to grasp has been evoked in a variety of ways within the contemplative tradition, with tropes such as 'mystery', 'darkness', 'silence', or (the term Christie prefers) 'the whole' used to refer to it. Some contemplatives deny that it can be evoked at all, instead using visual devices, such as Evagrius's 'blue sapphire' as a means of encouraging 'a certain way of seeing and to signal the limits of images and the imagination in helping us to apprehend the divine' (171). In the frame of the aesthetic or literary image, the infinite expanse beyond it is tacitly alluded to, with the image itself becoming a means of contemplating this larger unrepresentable dimension. In the context of a contemplative ecology, Christie draws on examples from fine art to show how visual devices can imply the mystery or complexity of an ecosystem. Such visual devices Christie refers to as 'aesthetic-contemplative': presenting a singular object in such a way as to point beyond it and evoke the

'whole fabric of reality'. Christie identifies the work of visual artists such as George Innes, whose technique of 'painting softly' was 'an effort to behold and represent things in their utter singularity, in their ever-shifting relationship to every other thing, and in their relationship to the whole' (172).

In terms similar to Evagrius, 'Scribbly Gum' and 'River Bend' both demonstrate the way Wright trains an expansive focus upon an individual entity, using a single, individual object as a means of projecting the imagination into the much-larger spatial and temporal context that it is located within, whilst also eschewing any attempt to disclose it. As each poem demonstrates, this is often achieved with a clear (negative ecopoetic) marking of epistemological and linguistic boundaries: the establishment of the unknowable and the unnameable, and the suggestion that a world continues beyond these limits. In this way Wright manages to draw attention to the broader ecological networks that each being exists within without degrading the complexity and transience that characterise them.

Efforts to evoke the spatial and temporal infinite her subjects exist within led Wright to frame her aesthetic-contemplative images in fractal terms, where a single object (or image) reproduces and repeats the structural organisation of the larger concentric worlds it exists within. Wright conceives of a variety of entities as fractal images that signify a vast (decentred) spatial and temporal network. In 'Boundaries' Wright defines the dimensions she only alluded to in 'Scribbly Gum' and 'River Bend':

> The whole plant-history's coded in one seed
> and not just plant: the whole planet, its changes,
> its wobble and spin, air, water, stars,
> the sun's force, the moon's pull, wax and wane. (*CP* 387)

Like the 'cold spring', and the 'perpetual voice' of river, the 'one seed' can be seen as a text that can (theoretically) be read. In drawing attention to the presence of various histories 'coded in one seed', the juxtaposition between the minuteness of a single seed and the vastness of time and space collapses as Wright finds each signifying the other. In its very being the seed signifies the histories of larger and more complex ecosystems it is nested within. In an earlier collection, Wright trains such an awareness on the pregnant female body and encounters similar dimensions:

> There moved the multitudinous stars,
> And coloured birds and fishes moved.

> There swam the sliding continents.
> All time lay rolled in me, and sense,
> and love that knew not its beloved. ('Woman to Child', *CP* 28)

With the observation that '[a]ll time lay rolled in me', a woman's pregnancy marks an initiation into, and participation in, a universal cycle of conception, birth and death, shared by all organisms. The pregnant woman becomes a fractal image that encapsulates the entire earth, if not the universe. With the unborn child the 'node and focus of the world' (*CP* 28), the mother becomes the 'earth', the 'root', and 'the stem that fed the fruit' (*CP* 29). She finds within herself the totality of existence and meaning for her unborn child, including the darkness, death, and nonknowledge that completes the whole.

INTO GREAT SILENCE

The dialectical counterpart of the aesthetic-contemplative image is silence. I observed in Chapter Three that the cycle of ascesis and apophasis creates a situation in which one takes a position of silence in preparation for a contemplative approach to a being, and is similarly reduced to silence as a consequence of the plenitude of meaning that emerges. 'Boundaries' and 'Woman to Child', like 'Scribbly Gum' and 'River Bend', articulate the product of such a perspective. The limitations of the poetic image gesture toward the infinite space the object is part of but cannot represent. Silence is the signifier of this space.

'Scribbly Gum' and 'River Bend' adeptly draw the ambient silence of the surrounding poems close (with short, succinct lines, or short stanzas, respectively), presenting short, fragmentary images that direct the attention towards the larger complex and dynamic world these signs are nested within. In this way Wright's sense of silence is similar to that of other earlier explorers; it animates experience, and suggests hidden surfaces and meanings, beseeching further exploration (or contemplation). In these poems a poetic silence, the limits of what is disclosed, combines with speech to present a much larger ecological picture. Wright defines the formal parameters of this approach in 'Brevity':

> I used to love Keats, Blake.
> Now I try haiku
> for its honed brevities,
> its inclusive silences.

> Few words and with no rhetoric.
>
> Enclosed by silence
>
> as is the thrush's call. (*CP* 413)

In 'Scribbly Gum' and 'River Bend' Wright combines the poetic fragment (representing nonhuman semiosis) with a perspective on the silence that intersperses these fragments informed by Japanese *haiku*. These poems present pictures of locations consisting of an assemblage of inhabitants and features, whose history and reason for being Wright cannot ascertain. These brief episodic pictures are separated by equally-significant silences that do not imply emptiness or meaninglessness, but a biosemiotic dimension beyond knowing and an ontology words cannot grasp. Silence is refigured by Wright to become a linguistic device in its own right, a means of signifying these fields.

Max Picard's phenomenological investigation of silence in *The World of Silence* assists in our reading of this particular mode of silence in Wright's work. Picard shares with Heidegger the project of finding the means by which to 'dwell' authentically in the world, allowing all being its own presence and self-concealment (*phusis*). However, similar to Wright, instead of the disclosure of presence through poiesis, Picard argues that it is in and through silence that we might approximate the wholeness of being (19). Through an investigation of the being of silence, Picard recovers the positive and productive sense of it, finding all dimensions of reality uniting to form a 'whole' within it.

As Wright has shown, representations of phenomena, be it words or images, disclose only a fraction of the whole. The rest is apprehended by the imagination, with the assistance of a silence that conveys not so much quantities or details, as dimensions of timelessness and infinity that encourage a feeling associated with the sublime. Silence brings the gravity of its sublime dimensions to poetic verse: 'In no other phenomena are distance and nearness, range and immediacy, the all-embracing and particular, so united as they are in silence' (Picard 18). Silence, as Wright's poems show, draw the very large ('Scribbly Gum'), the very complex ('River Bend') or the very old ('Rock') within tangible grasp, allowing a reader to survey these expanses via the sublime feelings of immensity poetic silence encourages:

> I turn a dead sea's leaves
>
> stand on a shore of waves
>
> and touch that day, and look. ('Rock', *CP* 415)

Patrick White derided settler society for its preference for 'huddling' on the fringes of the continent (11). As I have already mentioned, Lawrence likewise viewed Euro-Australian society as something 'sprinkled on the surface of a darkness into which it never penetrated' (Lawrence 8). Wright's interest in Plato's dictum, 'time is the moving image of eternity' (which she quoted when introducing *The Moving Image*) was often reproduced in her poetry through the relationship she created between poetic speech and silence. Silence, like eternity, is what Picard defines as a 'basic phenomenon': a 'primary objective reality that cannot be replaced by or exchanged with anything else' (21). As we can see in 'Love Song in Absence', words become for Wright moving images in their own right, placed over an infinite, ineffable and eternal transience, a silent sphere disclosed with the assistance of an aesthetic-contemplative image (in this case the absence of her husband):

> But as I sighed, I knew: incomprehensible energy
>
> creates and destroys, all words are made
>
> in the long shadow of eternity.
>
> Their meanings alter even as the thing is said. (*CP* 262)

Wright's sentiments regarding the relation between words and eternity, of static linguistic representations of reality rendered diminutive by an infinite context whose 'truth' lies in its flux, are reiterated by Picard:

> [S]ometimes all the noise of the world today seems like the mere buzzing of insects
>
> on the broad back of silence. (23)

Picard argues that the 'autonomy' that silence preserves is the basis for its suggestion of infinite space and time. For Picard, part of the capacity of silence to disclose the totality of being can be attributed to its 'holy uselessness' (19). Unable to be 'exploited for profit' silence remains an autonomous phenomenon: nothing has been subtracted from it; it has not been enframed in any way. It thus holds everything within itself: silence is the *khôra* (though the fact of its own agency is a topic beyond the scope of this thesis). Translating the contemplative approach to silence into the language of phenomenology, Picard observes how silence lends this autonomy to things encountered within it; when 'things' are encountered in the all-embracing, unlimited space that silence evokes, their own autonomy is apparent: 'the autonomous being in things is strengthened in silence' (19).

Wright's poetic silences stand in dialogue with the rhetorical silences of absence, emptiness and passivity that are part of the colonial landscape discussed in Chapter One. In the lacunae

between the English word and the landscape it sought to evoke, silence becomes a boundless frame in which Wright infers other dimensions of reality. Wright's negative ecopoetics lay the foundation for a poetic image that draws on silence to symbolically complete the totality of an entity that linguistic description has only partially reached towards. No longer is silence the 'pause' between speakers, or between words, or a momentary absence of speech prior to its resumption. Instead silence becomes a sign in its own right.

Sontag's study demonstrates that Wright's eventual abandonment of her art was far from unusual for intellectuals and artists of her generation:

> The scene changes to an empty room.
>
> Rimbaud has gone to Abyssinia to make his fortune in the slave trade. Wittgenstein, after a period as a village schoolteacher, has chosen menial work as a hospital orderly. Duchamp has turned to chess. Accompanying these exemplary renunciations of a vocation, each man has declared he regards his previous achievements in poetry, philosophy, or art as trifling, of no importance. (Sontag 183).

The publication of *Phantom Dwelling* marked the end of Wright's efforts to articulate many of her experiences of and feelings for the nonhuman world. In an interview she reflected on the way the state of the modern world had left her feeling 'incapable of dealing poetically with what is happening now': 'The whole situation that we've got ourselves into is too immense, too insane as it were for verse to encompass' (Glover qtd. in Strauss 23). In regards to being unable to 'deal poetically' with what the world was becoming Wright's silence marks the resignation from a career balancing a contemplative/primordial approach to the world with the linguistic tools available to express it.

A prolonged immersive relationship with the world had led her into territory where words and names are indeed 'trifling' if not impossible. As her late work suggests, alongside an acceptance of a number of irresolvable paradoxes, Wright was encountering a world increasingly profound in its detail. With the assistance of *haiku* she was able to describe this world succinctly, with a silence of ineffability always looming around her verse. Ultimately, however, such immersive encounters with the other-than-human would lead her to want to devote all of her time to their protection.

Intensified contemplative encounters with other-than-human beings undoubtedly created a depth of affinity in the terms she promoted in 'Australia's Double Aspect'. In Wright's own lifetime, the rate (not to mention the magnitude) of cultural genocide, land degradation, and

species loss increased significantly. To watch as the very world that unfolded for her is disregarded or only evaluated in terms of a monetary resource depressed and enraged her in ways she could indeed scarcely contain in words. A sense of this anger is on display in 'Australia 1970':

> I praise the scoring drought, the flying dust,
>
> the drying creek, the furious animal,
>
> that they oppose us still;
>
> that we are ruined by the thing we kill. (*CP* 288)

Wright never saw her poetry as political. It was never written with the intent of changing minds or opinions, of impelling others to look at the world in a different way (even though it surely did have this effect on some). Her poems were documents of her changing experiences in life, and encounters with places, histories, plants and animals, ideas and people. As she put it in 'Skins': 'You ask me to read those poems I wrote in my thirties?/They dropped off several incarnations back' (*CP* 423).

Wright's poetic silence reflects a willingness to accept the direction her life was taking. With age she lost the energy needed to marshal language effectively to respond to the subtleties of experience (Koval). At the same time, her relationships with Oodgeroo Noonuccal and 'Nugget' Coombs encouraged a part-time activism into a full-time occupation. Insofar as 'theory never shifted a brick', Wright, flush with encounters leading from a unity of theory and practice, saw it better to direct her energies into doing exactly that.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have not sought to present a comprehensive reading of Judith Wright's work, nor attempted to present a new reading of it. Instead, I have offered a more nuanced view of a particular and (I believe) important element of it, identifying and examining Wright's ecologically-informed engagement with the silence of the Australian colonial landscape. While Paul Kane has identified Wright's metaphysical interest in silence, I examine its presence in her work through an ecocritical lens. As I showed, the contemplative approach is important to the quality of the encounters she has of other-than-human beings. With attention to the contemplative dimension in Wright's ecopoetics, we arrive at a deeper understanding of the role silence plays in her representations of various plants, animals, and land features.

Although she critiques the colonial use of silence to suggest that the land is inarticulate or passive, Wright does not pursue a more refined vocabulary in order to articulate her encounters with it. Instead she refigures silence, presenting it in a number of her poems as a signifier of the ineffable complexity and flux she observed. Within Wright's contemplative encounters with the other-than-human one can find a case being made for the important place silence has in our modern encounters with the land and its inhabitants. Wright's ecopoetics illustrate how silence can stand in dialectical relation to speech, signifying aspects of being that lie beyond the boundaries of linguistic representation.

Reading the silences in Wright's poetry from an ecocritical position, I identified three broad modes of engagement with it: the 'rupture' of the (materially and ontologically) silenced colonial landscape by evidence of semiosis among its other-than-human inhabitants; the use of silence (as self-renunciation) as the means by which to 'hear' this biosemiosis; and the use of silence to signify both the obscured networks of meaning these signs implied, and the ontology of flux and transience to which Wright's contemplative (or 'primordial') approach to the other-than-human led.

As Kane has shown, silence appears in Wright's early poetry in the form of a recuperated absence. Poems such as 'Nigger's Leap' and 'Bora Ring' demonstrate a sensitivity to the silence in the land that was the result of massacre, the forced removal of First Nations people from traditional lands, and the delegitimisation of their languages and knowledge of country those languages represented. As I showed, there is also an ecological dimension to this silence-as-absence, with 'Northern River' and 'South of My Days' depicting encounters with country silenced as a consequence of environmental degradation.

Carter and Plumwood both argue that initial perceptions of the land as silent served as justifications for its material silencing, the evidence of which Wright recorded in her poems. In Chapter One I established why Australia was figured as silent, and how this justified its material silencing, reviewing existing literature that contributed to this question. Arthur and Cathcart argue that colonial references to the silence of the land pointed to the absence of signs and sounds of European civilisation, and an inability to describe many elements of the country. I elaborated on this claim, and argued that figurations of the land as silent often amounted to a projection of European speechlessness onto the land itself. If this silence was perceived negatively, as something that needed to be overcome, 'silence' became a trope, both to obscure lacunae in colonial descriptions of the land, and to construct it metaphysically as empty and passive. These connotations in turn became justifications for colonists' attempts at the 'improvement' of the land.

An identification of the historical foundations to figurations of Australia as silent also assist in our understanding of the precise terms of Wright's challenge to it. Wright details several encounters with the presence of nonhuman 'voices' within this supposedly passive and empty landscape that I read in terms of Ashcroft and Salter's 'rhizomic' approach to the Australian landscape. Although Ashcroft and Salter employ the concept of the rhizome to model the continued rupture of the colonised human 'other' through the palimpsest of the colonial landscape, reading poems such a 'Scribbly Gum' and 'For Precision' in biosemiotic terms, I argued that the 'one strange word' of the spring and the 'sole note' of the gull can be read in the same way: evidence that other-than-human beings were also assembling landscapes that remained below the 'surface' of the colonial cultural landscape.

In Wright's poetry, particularly her later work, one can find a humility in relation to the obscurity of nonhuman semiosis; of her professed inability to read various phenomena through the eyes of other species. Out of respect for the many insurmountable semiotic boundaries between herself and the creatures with whom she shares the world, Wright's 'late style' (Collett) reflects an acceptance of the place of mystery in her encounters; that the 'darkness' that borders our knowledge of things is often immovable. However rather than ignoring such obscurity, in a return to the unity Kane observed with regards to presence and absence in the land, Wright also creates a dialectic out of known and unknown, such that the combination of the two are fundamental in defining our experience of the world.

In establishing how Wright came to hear this plenum of other-than-human voices, I argued that her poetry demonstrates a contemplative approach to other-than-human beings,

underpinned by an ascetic embrace of silence. Kane has identified several poems that demonstrate Wright's familiarity with the Christian *via negativa*, an ascetic renunciation of various worldly comforts in the interests of a greater intimacy with a divine 'plenitude' (161). Taking an ecocritical approach to Kane's analysis, I identified poems that employ images associated with the Christian *via negativa* to figure a mode of approaching the non- (or more-than-) human world in a practice known as 'contemplative ecology' (Christie). As my reading of 'Scribbly Gum' showed, a contemplative ecology is a principal means by which Wright is able acknowledge the presence (and variety) of other-than-human semiosis.

Wright also drew similar influence from a tradition of secular inhabitants of 'wilderness', whose lineage included the medieval European 'wild man' and the colonial Australian 'bushman'. 'The Lost Man' – one of a number of poems that allegorised a 'death of the self' or self-renunciation in the course of the attainment of a plenitude – speaks to both the *via negativa* that is undertaken in the course of the soul's ascent to God, and the liminal space between human civilisation and wild 'nature' inhabited by both the medieval European wild man and the Australian colonial bushman. Both figures demonstrated an attainment of a measure of life-preserving affinity and knowledge of 'wilderness' through a 'kind of death', which Wright held as a model for settler Australia's own realisation of a chthonic relation to the country (Wright, 'Australia's Double Aspect' xvii).

In this thesis I have sought to show how a focus on the contemplative dimensions in Wright's work assists in an understanding of how she refigures silence in her ecopoetics. As I demonstrated, the Christian apophatic approach to the divine was also embraced by Wright as a means of presenting the results of her own contemplative encounters with the other-than-human. Discussing her work in the context of contemplative ecological observations made by Tim Lilburn, I demonstrated how Wright's contemplative approach to her subjects also led to scepticism with regards to the capacity of language to convey her experiences. While Wright advocated an ascetic renunciation of speech as a necessary preface to the contemplative approach to the other-than-human, her encounters with animals, plants, and landforms in this context led to a further apophatic renunciation of language, as she found the universalising tendency of words and names poorly suited for the quality of experience she had of them. In 'Scribbly Gum' we can observe a negation of existing words and names for the 'mountain, palm and fern', through the reference to (untranslated) 'one strange word' that conveys the being and relationship of these things in a far more cohesive and succinct manner.

While Wright shares with Lilburn reservations towards language in light of the particularity (or *haeccity*) of a thing that emerges in the contemplative context, one that exposes the inefficacy of the universalising picture presented by a word or name, her critique of language was also informed by a Heraclitean view of the flux that all beings inhabit. Wright's preference for an apophatic silence was grounded in a view that 'it's the whole flow that's real' ('Boundaries', *CP* 387). The transience and flux of all things led Wright to employ words and names with an eye to their inefficacy in articulating an adequate picture of the world, and thus towards presenting such phenomena in negative ecopoetic terms.

As my reading of 'River Bend' showed, a negative ecopoetic approach to phenomena foregrounded their re-presentation in aesthetic-contemplative terms. As with the cold spring in 'Scribbly Gum', Wright refrains from attempting to translate the 'wild perpetual voice' of the river. Instead, in presenting both in an aesthetic-contemplative context, the reader is petitioned to meditate over the image and sound of water flowing through a particular location, and muse on the complex and dynamic network of histories and relationships a water course has facilitated and in turn articulates. Both present a word that, as Wright put it in 'Sonnet', 'shall encompass more than speech' (*CP* 36).

'Scribbly Gum' and 'River Bend' are both examples of Wright's ecopoetic use of silence and speech in a dialectical fashion to gesture towards complex and dynamic ecologies. As an aesthetic-contemplative image, both the spring and the river gesture towards a dimension of reality that whilst palpable, is beyond linguistic representation. This leads Wright to employ a poetic silence such as we find in Japanese *haiku*, which Wright preferred for its 'honed brevities/its inclusive silences':

> Few words and with no rhetoric.
> Enclosed by silence
> as is the thrush's call. ('Brevity', *CP* 413)

While the common colonial response to the unfamiliarity of the land and its inhabitants was to use 'silence' as a trope through which to obscure the speaker's own speechlessness, Wright allowed this speechlessness to linger in her work. As I have suggested with the identification of comparable approaches to the silence of the colonial landscape, Wright was not alone in her positive valuation of silence. Wright's silence, refigured in ecopoetic terms, can be likened to an explorer, rather than settler, mentality, insofar as it signifies a dimension of obscure and inaccessible significances, rather than something in need of breaking or filling.

Establishing Wright's view of silence assists a deeper understanding of her eventual abandonment of poetry. Insofar as silence is less a signifier of absence than a profundity that cannot be grasped in words, we might read Wright's departure from poetry in terms of an unwillingness to channel the energy necessary to dexterously evoke complex and dynamic encounters with other-than-human beings.

For Wright, the lacunae between her brief fragmentary sketches stand as portals to a world beyond and between language; an entry point into a sublime world of complex interconnections, where an object is also a sign being read by an untold array of creatures, themselves definable only as a set of shifting identities moving through a range of complex relationships. Like Wright, in this thesis I have not sought to prescribe an alternative mode of viewing the land, or the animals and plants that inhabit it, as part of a solution to our 'current ecological crisis'. Instead, I have attempted to present a work of critical understanding, one that finds the silences in Wright's ecopoetics to be as important as the words themselves.

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