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**Beyond subjectivity: The appearances of extinction in Judith**

**Wright's *Fourth Quarter* (1976)**

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“What do I want to write? I don’t know,” wrote Judith Wright in a letter to her biographer, Veronica Brady in 1999 (Clarke & McKinney, 2006, p. 561). With failing health, and her death only a matter of months away, the fact she still wanted to write at all is remarkable. Yet, many critics appear puzzled by her apparent abandonment of poetry-writing, seeing it as a radical departure from earlier positions she held on the role of art in society. Angered by critical neglect of her last three volumes of verse, by misunderstanding and misuse of her early work, by the linguistic turn of postmodern literary theory, and feeling above all a deep mistrust in the wider politics of land rights reconciliation, of land degradation and environmental destruction, and in the very future of the human species, the explanation for Wright’s non-production of verse is probably very simple: she was exhausted and the little energy she had left, she devoted to direct intervention in political causes. This is the principal context of remarks she made on her verse, such as her comment in 1995 that “poetry is not of the essence to me... Too many other things in life” (2006, p. 525).

Making sense of Wright’s apparent ambivalence toward her own verse, and that of others, requires a good deal of patient exploration. While we are the beneficiaries of a deepening tradition of Wright scholarship, we believe there is still much to do. In particular, we suggest that a careful reading of the verse and of her letters and speeches leads us to discover many continuities in her life-work, and her verse. Wright’s poetry engaged with the ethics of the interaction between people and land, and confronted the damage to, and risk of extinction of, species and cultures. In that regard, we contend that Wright did not *simply* abandon poetry in favour of politics, but rather, that she spent the last three decades of her life trialling different modes of articulation and different writing genres. The best example of this, perhaps, is a collection of speeches she gathered together, but organised into two parts: one part on poetry, the other on conservation. The two parts are gathered under the heading of the book’s title, *Going on Talking*. In a thoughtful foreword dated 1991, she writes “Poetry, however misunderstood and misused, remains the voice of feeling and of empathy, without which we deal with our “environment” purely as a system to be exploited for our own ends” (1992, pp. vii-viii). This position

confronts the Romantic-modern and Heideggerian view of the world. This is not merely the idiom of Romantic-modern lament either. Rather, it challenges the reader and writer of lyric poetry, with the horizon not just of destruction or tragic waste, but of horizontality itself, in other words, of extinction. If we read Wright's various writings of the last three decades attentively, we find her casting about for generic adequation for just this challenge. Amidst this experimentation, as we shall see, the lyric form proved more capacious than perhaps Wright feared – than, certainly, critics of the 1970s understood. When we take into account the recent expansion of our knowledge of the lyric provided by Jonathan Culler in his excellent study, *Theory of the Lyric*, we will be in a position to grasp something of the persistent critical and pedagogical trends in writing about her work that frustrated Wright by misunderstanding the essentially poetic nature of her project.

A second step in the direction of grasping Wright's explicitly *political* orientation is also needed. Culler's book richly expands our appreciation of the aesthetics of the lyric, but in order to elaborate the politically engaged context in which we can understand what Wright was attempting in her later poetry, we need also to recruit aesthetic theory beyond the traditionally literary domain. The kind of problems that Wright explored, and the ways she wanted to explore them, situate her project squarely in the broad realm of engaged, or activist art. In this respect, it might have been Wright who wrote, "It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist" (Adorno 1997, p. 1). But it was, instead, Theodor Adorno. Like Wright, Adorno was an artist; he was a composer and a precociously successful performer of music. Like Wright, his view of the world was skewed, usefully in our opinion, by his skills and orientations within his favoured artform. Like Wright, he realised that the very horizon of beauty was problematic, and both artists felt deep responsibility for their words and their roles. Where Wright moved from poet to poet-activist, Adorno moved from composer to philosopher. As a philosopher, and as one soundly acquainted with the absurdities of socialist art and literature, he was deeply sceptical of the very possibility of a valuable activist art, no matter how well-meaning. While

we agree that his scepticism was generally well-founded in experience, this only offers an index of the challenge that a fine writer like Wright actually set herself. Wright has been better served by her critics than she realised – there is real strength and interest of scholarship in this area. Of these, we are guided especially by two beautifully produced books, the author-supported *South of My Days* (1998) and the afore-cited *With Love and Fury: Selected Letters of Judith Wright* (2006). A fine critical appraisal (even if we do not always agree with its assessments), Shirley Walker's *Flame and Shadow* (1991) offers real insight into the creativity of poetry from the 1970s onwards, especially on how Wright aestheticised her view of language and politics into powerful and deceptively simple verse. Of most direct relevance is Anne Collett's detailed analysis of *Phantom Dwelling* (1985), an essay which took account of Wright's inspiration in Japanese poet, Matsuo Bashō, on the one hand, and of the idea of "late style", on the other. The latter idea is important to us, but where Collett uses the postcolonial critic, Edward Said's, late essays to develop a lateral commentary (as Said himself does in a quite adventurous series of applications), we return to the author Said himself studiously acknowledged as the source of the idea, namely Theodor Adorno himself.

## **2. The Lyric, Subjectivity, and Beyond**

In her *Flame and Shadow*, Shirley Walker argues a trajectory of early inspiration, mid-career crisis, and late inspiration. She notes the emergence, in the entire second half of Wright's writing, of a "sense of whimsy and humour which is utterly foreign to the portentous tone of *The Moving Image* and *Woman to Man*" (1991, p. 153). We think this is unfair to the delicate lyricism of the early works, but we see the need to be aware of shifts of tone and genre in Wright's later works. Walker goes on to argue that from the 1970s collection, *Alive*, onwards, the poetry is "radically different in theme, mood, and poetic texture" (176). Later in this essay, we will qualify this argument, but we acknowledge her discernment of the shifts in the nature of Wright's writing as valuable, and as quite distinct from the cavalier generalisations and dismissals of many of Walker's critical contemporaries.

We too will begin with the early work looking for harbingers of style, of theme, and of texture that develop, or are allowed to fall away, in later works. We see Wright as a complex lyric poet, one who writes lyric verse – and later, who inhabits a lyrical space even in prose – in the face of a world that, as she frequently lamented, neither valued nor understood it. But to appreciate the force of this, we must ask what this lyric orientation is, and what it means today. The well-known poststructural literary critic, Jonathan Culler's recent book, *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), pulls together a "capacious" rather than formally defined account of the genre, treating it as both generically recognisable and as historically situated. He draws together a neo-Hegelian universalising subjectivity and an event-quality in the lyric whereby, on the one hand, the personal utterance is not just personally voiced, but is a situation of wide application, and on the other, its "address" is personal enough to be an event in and of itself.

First, Culler's learned and comprehensive discussion of the lyric assists us in developing an analysis of Wright's deployment of subjectivity that explains its intimate connection with her late style, in Adorno's sense, and incidentally adds further weight to the defence, mounted by Shirley Walker and others, of the poetic quality of Wright's later work, in the face of the kind of criticism made by Vincent Buckley. Culler's analysis of a lyric by Sappho explains how it "is neither the direct expression of a subjectivity newly discovered nor the ritual expression of community values" but rather a song of which the "event quality" makes the listener want to memorise it (2015, pp. 14-15). For us, this captures the mesmerising bluntness and memorability of entire stanzas of Wright's poems, especially the later ones.

Second, Culler's discussion is particularly valuable for its debunking of the persistent critical belief that the "eventness" of a lyric is dependent on its being read as the utterance of a particular fictive persona. In particular, he notes that the dramatic monologue has become, in critical parlance and pedagogy, the default model for the lyric, making us reluctant to accept the poem as a performative event spoken by the

*poet* (2015, p. 2). In Culler's book, there is much unpicking of the critical tendency to conflate voice and subjectivity that is illuminating for the reader of Wright, and helps explain both the continuities and the developments in her style. Most importantly, it assists us in perceiving the connections between literary criticism of Wright, and Adorno's irritation with music critics who insisted on hearing, in Beethoven's late works, only the elements of an unmediated subjectivity, and were deaf to the very analysis of subjectivity that, for Adorno, is an important element in the "voice" created by the composer in his late style. Similarly, Wright always strove for a mode of address that suggested the wide, and not merely personal, applicability of the situation or topic, while creating a personal event quality that serves to make the poem memorable. It became increasingly complex to sustain and manage the voice of her poems as her early confidence, forged from the responses of her readers, that she "spoke" for many others was dented. Also under attack was her life-long assumption that poetry was a vehicle – for her, the best vehicle – for the expression of meaning and value. Small wonder that (as we foreshadowed in our introduction) she doubted her approach to writing poetry! The frustration evident in her Foreword to the *Collected Poems* appears to be occasioned by the kind of critical and pedagogical narrowing of the nature and scope of lyric discourse that Culler discusses. In his comments on the persistence with which criticism and pedagogy cling to the notion of the fictional speaker as the voice of lyric, Culler adduces several poems, including "Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams, as evidence of the need for a "broader conception of lyric, one not centred on a fictional speaker". He argues that poems like "Red Wheelbarrow" are versions of "epideictic discourse: public poetic discourse about values in this world rather than a fictional world" (2015, p. 115). In the 1940s and 1950s, Wright spoke to and for readers who, like her, took for granted that poetry was about values in this world, but to her grief, the critical horizon shifted, critics and teachers of poetry seemed bent on ridding it of the contexts that give it meaning in the real world, and instead wanted to recruit it as the utterance of a fictional, ahistorical, subjectivity. The concept of epideictic discourse valuably illuminates the way in which a poem's mode of address

may have the personal memorability of an event – the “event quality” Culler discusses – whilst not being a confessional or otherwise autobiographical utterance.

Third, in elaborating his discussion of the lyric’s mode of address, Culler offers yet another observation particularly germane to the defence of Wright’s later poetry as lyric. The event quality of the lyric utterance, he suggests, frequently inheres in its mode of address, which is either apostrophic or hyperbolic or both in its stance (2015, pp. 349-52). Explaining the latter claim, he says that lyrics sometimes demand impossible “action, asking time to stop its course or the winds to blow” and that some poems are themselves “often the most sceptical about their power to achieve what is desired” (2015, pp. 351-52). Indeed, he says, if “lyric is a form where the leap of poetic imagination and scepticism about its efficacy are always implicitly at issue, it is also engaged in the very down-to-earth activity of seducing us with its arrangements of letters, sounds, and silences” (2015, p. 352). These three things – the universalising subjective-inner impulse, the mode of address, and the underlying doubt – are at stake in all Wright’s work, and in her late silences too. She has, as Collett rightly says, a “poetic sensibility” and in her prose, this sensibility “survives” (2013, p. 256).

Poets, more than most, are keenly aware of the limits of the force of their works in wider society. They are also, in certain cases like Wright’s, aware of its value. In the early work, where Wright felt more assured of her heritage’s place, and her own place, in the world, her modes of address are simple and direct, presuming that they speak for others. We see this in the first collection of verse, *The Moving Image*, but as we do so, we notice that even in some of these poems, another, darker, doubting questioning is latent. In “The Company of Lovers” (1994), in the midst of war, the military company is displaced by an imagined company of lovers. In this, to be sure, we see the hyperbolic statement of the impossible, but there is surely also a note of gender political doubt in these lines:

Death marshals up his armies round us now.

Their footsteps crowd too near...

Grope in the night to find me and embrace,

For the dark preludes of the drums begin,

And round us, round the company of lovers,

Death draws his cordons in. (1994, p. 7)

In these lines a Levinasian face-to-face challenge, in this case, a variety of lyricism, is pitted against the impersonal realities of international warfare.

In this collection too, we find two themes that, with considerable modulation, will form lasting themes in Wright's lifework. These are the themes of Indigenous-settler relation to land, and the theme of land conservation. In "Bora Ring," the poem takes the form of a Modernist lament. Wright's awareness of white settler culture involves from the outset a sense of its destructiveness:

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. (1994, p. 8)

The power of the poem pricks the conscience of the white settler beneficiaries, of which number Wright herself is counted. This early form of lyric reverie did not prove adequate for Wright and her later work on reconciliation engaged more directly with the living. Her lament, however, takes on savagely critical dimensions even in her first volume, where in "Nigger's Leap, New England," she recalls in vivid terms a massacre, as in just the kind of hyperbolic and apostrophic terms Culler outlines, she invokes the night to "Swallow the spine of range" and to "Be dark" and to "Make a cold quilt across the bone and skull / that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff" (p. 15). The lament, even in this early collection, takes on a harder political edge, posing a challenge to the well-being of anyone who thought simply to enjoy a sea view from a cliff-top. In "Trapped Dingo," the poet lapses perhaps into a deeper Romanticism about a dying dingo, whose "sunlight hide" is "twisted in steel, and spoiled with red" (1994, p. 9). Meantime, from the surrounding hills, its mate yowls,



and Wright as poet imagines herself joining in the calling: “Did you hear / my silent voice take up the cry?” she asks (1994, p.9).

The poems, loved by generations of adults and children, which apparently lionise settler cultural figures are not as simple as many believe, either. While “Bullocky” (1994, p. 17) perhaps is a straight lament for a lost vocation, “South of My Days” is nothing of the sort (1994, pp. 20-21). Her letters reveal that Wright herself came to bitterly resent these poems being used as representative of her work, and eventually, she verged on withdrawing them altogether.

We will not trace the rest of the early work, although we note that the equally successful *Woman to Man* collection developed a far richer sense of the damage that people were doing to the environment, with poems mixing memory with observations about willow-choked creeks, and invasive European plants destroying natural environments. This collection, too, began to dwell on far less sentimental portraits of damaged life than we find in the first collection. “Metho Drinker,” for instance, is a harrowing portrait of alcoholism and homelessness. In noting all the things we have, however, we hope to build on the sense that Wright’s work is not simply a story of radical shifts and abandoned projects. On the contrary, it is a story of development and of persistence. This is the background to our treatment of late style.

### **3. Late Style: Adorno**

As we have noted, Collett’s application of the idea of late style to Wright’s work is mediated by Edward Said. Collett picks up the formal features Said’s rephrasing of Adorno emphasises: a certain oppositionality and intransigence, as well as of deliberate anachronism and contradiction (2013, p. 246). The sense of it, she writes (after Said), “comes with a great artist’s realisation of approaching death” and an artist who works in such a style is “unreconciled” (pp. 246-47). Collett suggests that one interpretation of Wright’s apparent refusal to write further verse lies in just this form of “extreme exile”: Collett (rightly in our view), does not accept that this is what

Wright was doing. This leads Collett, at this point of her argument (pp. 247-49) and then again near its end (p. 256), to qualify her endorsement of the notion of late style in Wright. If that were all there were to the notion of late style, we would agree with her, and be able to leave the matter there.

But Adorno's version of late style is more useful and more significant than a series of formal features assigned to an artist's biographical trajectory. There are a number of features of his quite disparate treatment of the topic that are not just helpful as analytic prisms, but also, prove strangely symmetrical to Wright's own preoccupations and orientations as an artist responsible for her work. To make sense of these, we need to tease Adorno's ideas out in a few different contexts, and be able to acknowledge the variety of ways in which he raised the problem of late style.

To start with, we need to inquire as to why something like "late style" would actually matter. If it were just a series of stylistically interesting commonalities of great artists at career's end, it would have little more than curiosity value concerning the psychology of the ageing artist. Adorno's work on art and artists always sought to evaluate their achievements in terms initially of an autonomously conceived aesthetic domain, but one which existed nonetheless in a social context of power relations. For Adorno, great pieces of art revealed something about the nature of their worlds. Beyond this, though, the late style works he evokes reveal not just the nature of their social and cultural worlds, but offer insights into the very aesthetic domains themselves.

As a musician, Adorno was deeply offended by a very common biographical interpretation of Beethoven's music. He was angered further by the commodification effects of culture, especially the "great conductor" tradition of the twentieth century, as mediated by radio and then by long player recording. His lacerating account of Toscanini is an example of this. While he never devoted a book to it, Adorno repeatedly returns to Beethoven, and especially Beethoven's later work, to attack

those who reduced it merely to psychology. This has particular relevance to Wright's work, and to the view of her as somehow having failed to maintain her early project, of abandoning her interest in and value of art. The letters and interviews of the last years of her life do show exhaustion, physical exhaustion. They do *not* show that she ceased to value the work of art, or its role in society. What they do show, however, is that – as with Adorno – the task of creating art that is adequate to its responsibility in a society where its reception is uncertain is greater than ever.

The late style, Adorno writes, is not mature like sweet fruit, nor rounded and full, but rather is, "furrowed, even ravaged...bitter and spiny" (Adorno). Attacking the psychologico-biographical version of this, he says:

The usual view explains this with the argument that they are products of an uninhibited subjectivity, or better yet, "personality," which breaks through the envelope of form to better express itself, transforming harmony into the dissonances of its suffering. (Adorno)

Studies of the late Beethoven, he says, "seldom fail to make reference to biography and fate. It is as if, confronted with the dignity of human death, the theory of art were to divest itself of its rights and abdicate in favour of reality" (Adorno). Adorno's work, despite some incorrect caricatures, frequently offers nuanced interpretations which are carefully situated, socially, and yet also aesthetically astute. He does not, as may first appear, simply reject all psychological explanation, but rather, insists on both a subjective and objective account. Adorno addresses this issue in many places, perhaps most clearly in "Subject-Object," where having shown different orders of lyrical subjectivity (the "I" in the poem, the subjectivity in the poem), and how the artwork nevertheless is also an object, then says:

Subjectivity, however, though a necessary condition of the artwork, is not the aesthetic quality as such but becomes it only through objectivation; to this extent subjectivity in the artwork is self-alienated and concealed. (Adorno 2004, p. 231)

This is what Beethoven resolutely refuses to reconcile: “objective is the landscape, subjective is the light in which – alone – it glows into life. He does not bring about their harmonious synthesis” (Adorno).

Finally, the “alienation” in Adorno’s other major essay on late style, “Alienated Masterpiece,” concerns just these terms of existence of art itself. The alienated masterpiece in question is Beethoven’s late mass, the *Missa Solemnis*. At stake this time, though, is what Adorno sees as a kind of avoidance. Beethoven, the conqueror of worlds, suddenly avoids the triumphalism, not so much of his own work (though that too), as of the very Romanticism that framed it:

But what compelled Beethoven, that immeasurably deep human being in whom the power of subjective creation rose to the hubris of the human being as the creator to the opposite of this, to self-limitation? It was certainly not the psychology of this man who could traverse at one and the same time the composition of the *Missa* and the composition of works entirely its opposite. It was rather a pressure in the thing itself....Here we find something common to both the *Missa* and to the last quartets in their intellectual structuring. They share a common avoidance. The musical experience of the late Beethoven must have become mistrustful of the unity of subjectivity and objectivity, the roundness of symphonic successes.... (Adorno, 2000, pp. 315-16)

If we can accept Adorno’s explanation for the peculiar intensities of Beethoven’s late style, it suggests that in Wright’s case, we can expect to find it emerging in a related way in her work too. Adorno does not find the late style in just one text, nor even in just a couple of years: he traces it in a variety of places and over a period of years: from the over-emphatic *Credo* in the *Missa* (Adorno p. 313), his sometimes savage piano sonata (opus 106), the fractured and at times anguished late quartets (especially op. 131-134), and even (for Adorno at least) the late Diabelli variations. We believe the same thing is true of Wright’s work, and in that respect we tend to endorse a view like Shirley Walker’s that something of a new

problematism crept into Wright's work far earlier than *Phantom Dwelling*. It is to these mid-period poems that we now turn.

#### 4. Extinction, Rupture, and Reverie

In her poem, "Extinct Birds," Wright poses a question, and then appears to answer it. Summoning up the spectre of the nineteenth-century Australian poet, Charles Harpur, she describes his writing in "hope and in love" about the birds of the forests. Now, though, these "birds long vanished with the fallen forest" are still available to us in the poetry, but this is undermined by Wright's description of them as being "in copper plate on unread pages" (Wright 1994, p. 179). The final stanza notes that the poet thought himself immortal, and then, ironically, even quizzically remarks of this that indeed, "is he not immortal, where I found him....the poet vanished, in the vanished forest, /among his brightly tinted extinct birds?" (p. 180).

We have seen the earlier idiom of modernist lament in poems like "Bora Ring" and "Half-caste Girl." In our view, this intensifies in *The Gateway* (1953), where poems like "Eroded Hills" name the object of their mourning more directly. Walker cites "Nameless Flower" (1955) to note how Wright begins to develop a commentary on language itself, and its inadequacies in relation to its object (Walker 1991, pp. 155-57). With "Extinct Birds," however, we see a deliberate lightness that does not befit its theme. The tone in this poem, gently sardonic, is the more disturbing for this reason. For us, this poem marks the onset of Wright's overt realisation that extinction itself was the issue. Most of the rest of this collection, though, are – just like Harpur's own works – renderings of birds into art and are, indeed, often light-hearted.

The letters and other documents now available to us offer useful insights into the transformations in Wright's priorities: certainly, with the 1970s, came a new, leaner, and simpler style of verse. While Walker finds much to criticise in *Shadow* (1970), this is the collection where Wright experiments with what can only be called a plain

style. This tendency had already disconcerted critics like Vincent Buckley, and to such a mind, none of what followed really counted in her oeuvre as art. But *Shadow* (1970), *Alive* (1973), *Fourth Quarter* (1976), and *Phantom Dwelling* (1985) all experimented with style, content and form, and did so not just because of “what” Wright felt she needed to say (though with the lyric poet, this is always part of it), but also, their new forms demanded, to paraphrase Adorno, a new kind of creativity, one that, as Walker remarks, she actually managed to find (p. 176).

The kind of creativity explored in *Shadow* (1970) appears to require, for Wright, a more overtly analytical approach to subjectivity than she had previously felt necessary. The volume opens sombrely, with “Two Sides of a Story”, in an enactment of the unassimilated orders of subjectivity that reveal the rupture of the colonial condition (1994, pp. 255-58). The poem plainly maps the different subjectivities, European and Indigenous, by allocating them two different, named, sections. In a new departure for Wright, she attempts to psychologise the Indigenous perspective by showing how the complex motivations of the Indigenous man, stemming from his status as songman for his people, bind him strangely to the European man who is setting up as a hero to be sung. While the end of both the explorer, Kennedy, and the Indigenous man who accompanied him, is death, the ironies play differently over each. Certainly, Kennedy’s heroic pretensions are punctured for the reader, but his own subjectivity appears to stay intact to his death and there is no question mark over his name for posterity. In contrast, the Indigenous man must struggle between two names and identities, his own tribal name, Galmahra, and the name given him by the colonisers, Jacky Jacky. With his adopted European hero gone, his occupation as songman is destroyed and the poem ends in a graphic image of extinction, with the man grasping his own death, a burning log, caught between his unresolved dual subjectivities of Galmahra and Jacky Jacky. For this reason, we do not agree with Walker in her criticism of the diction of this part of the poem as “too prosaic” (1991, p.175).

Elsewhere in the volume, the poet performs the anatomy of subjectivity on herself. Throughout *Shadow*, she casts about her for a subjectivity that will fit, in her state of personal and socio-political dislocation following McKinney's death, when she was also suffering from the angst of the intellectual during the nuclear age. Unusually for her, she experiments with the subjectivities of past figures from history or myth: Eurydice, Heloise, Rosina Alcona (the last a character from Emily Brontë's fictive kingdom, Gondal). The uncertainty over poetic subjectivity may also be revealed by the experimentation, in several poems, with a kind of gnomic voice. The loss of confidence that she is any longer speaking for others could explain the reaching back to a traditional, impersonal and generalising voice.

Wright's next published volume, *Alive* (1973), seems poignantly to be a series of fractured attempts to return to past sources of the *heimlich*, while discovering all the while a sharper sense of alienation. Again, poetic subjectivity is bound up with the emotional vicissitudes of the quest. The volume is bookended by two poems that measure the journey from a rediscovered homeliness to a new, bitter alienation. Again, too, the thematic or topical complexities are met by a restlessness over form and convention, as Adorno would find inevitable. The volume opens with "Habitat", which finds something of the fresh, confident interpersonality of the seventeenth-century divine, George Herbert, in the midst of rehearsing a theme akin to the traditional *topos* of the body and soul dialogue, with the long-inhabited house sheltering the dislocated spirit and giving it a renewed sense of belonging (1994, pp. 297-309). Yet, by the last poem in the volume, "The Slope", the poetic subjectivity has been riven by doubt and the poem is a kind of medieval *psychomachia* of warring impulses cloaked under a fable of a tortured landscape and a division between land and people (1994, pp. 336-37). In between, the poems journey back to the past only to show, in a mood far from nostalgic, the impossibility of recapturing it. In "Falls Country", there is a momentary return to a pastoral vision of unity between land and people but it is neither heroic nor ideal. The land and people are seen as united only in being tentative and fragile - the poet's remembered aunt and

uncle are “reluctant as leaves” in a pastoral pragmatics of quiet adaptation, which is, in any case, long gone (1994, pp. 328-20).

Two poems in *Alive*, “Oriole, Oriole” and “Reminiscence”, relate the matter of poetic subjectivity overtly to the theme of extinction in a way that prepares the reader for what is to come in Wright’s next volume, *Fourth Quarter* ((1976). The theme of the impotence of art in the face of the extinction of species is picked up from where it was first announced, in “Extinct Birds” (1962), but now Wright is bent on relating it to her own explorations of subjectivity. “Oriole, Oriole” shows the poet still relatively secure in her subjectivity, despite the melancholy awareness of the vanished oriole from her acres (1994, p. 318). She still trusts her remembered observation, and her power to record what she saw, and while the vanished oriole may imply species vulnerability, this is not thematised. There is no doubt that the oriole, though now gone, did exist. But in “Reminiscence”, the surface charm and lightness only throws into relief an underlying anxiety that infects even memory and the observing subject. Whereas “Oriole Oriole” was based on an observation of the poet that is not in doubt, in “Reminiscence”, the huge profusion of different kinds of parrots has no certain existence for the poet. The catalogue of the various types is not introduced even by an account of someone else’s literal observation, but rather by the quotation, by her father, of an old neighbour who, when “asked for difficult detail in his stories would exclaim ‘Madam, you might as well / ask me to enumerate the parrots’”. There follows a breathless roll-call of types of the species, but no certain sighting, or even memory of a sighting. The only existence of the parrots is figurative; they recede into the “coloured country” the poet invokes in the first line, with its implicit doubt over whether the landscape is only “coloured” by nostalgic memory. The last line, “Parrots! They were something to remember”, leaves the subjectivity of the memory (the poet’s? Her father’s? The old neighbour to whom her father referred?), ambiguous. The deliberate lightness of tone floats the popular meaning of the phrase – the parrots are a sight to behold, something worth remembering – over the grimness of the literal meaning: the parrots were only the stuff of memory now, with no real existence (1994, pp. 329-30).



### 5. *Fourth Quarter*: Magic Without Synthesis

The disconcerting lightness of tone heard in “Reminiscence” does still occasionally sound in *Fourth Quarter*, but it is only an element in an experimentation with form and convention more comprehensive even than in *Shadow* and *Alive*. Following Adorno, we think that this formal restlessness – with its concomitant demystification of artistic subjectivity – is connected to the artist’s social, political and ecological anxieties. The rupture we find in *Fourth Quarter* goes to the heart of our departure from Walker’s interpretation of the volume (1991, pp. 185-94), and it requires close and patient commentary. Her analysis of the poems situates them within an abstract philosophical debate, drawn from Romanticism, over human encounter with the mutability of nature. She thus finds reconciliations of a philosophical kind in the poems. Our perception of the unity of Wright’s writing project means that we find, in *Fourth Quarter*, a confrontation with the extinction of species that cannot be accommodated within a Romantic acceptance of mutability. The poet may well be able to accept her own ageing and changing as inevitable, as Walker argues, but it would be another matter to accept the influence of colonialism on Indigenous peoples and on the landscape, with its flora and fauna, as likewise natural and inevitable. Wright would never, did never, accept such a thing.

To the contrary, in a preliminary move, Wright invokes nature’s power and its magic and apparently abandons the lyric in its favour. A number of the poems in *Fourth Quarter* relentlessly confront extinction and do so whilst also sustaining the anatomy of poetic subjectivity that Wright has performed from *Shadow* onwards. These manoeuvres occur through a final, determined essay on the lyric mode and they complete the rupture of the Romantic-modern stance that Wright has engaged in since *Shadow*. The first two poems of the volume, the eponymous “Fourth Quarter”, and “Easter Moon and Owl”, use lyric apostrophe and hyperbole to signal a point of no return for humanity and nature, and establish the tone for the rest of the poems. In “Fourth Quarter”, the typical lyric address is reversed and the poet, instead of instructing or exhorting nature – the moon – imagines the moon

commanding her. Rather than confirm a Romantic connection between herself and nature, she traces a sharp disjunction, telling the moon that while it will return from its fourth quarter, she will not be back this way again - so, if she is to effect anything, she must not yield to the moon's imagined direction that she should "give in" (1994, p. 241). The disruption to lyric subjectivity that this suggests is confirmed by "Easter Moon and Owl", which, in its explicit yielding of the traditionally conceived lyric mode, may be said to reverse the abjuration of magic uttered by that famous ageing artist, Prospero. For, the abandonment of lyric, as commonly understood, does not mean the abandonment of poetry; rather, poetry retrieves its ancient connection with magic and is to be permitted to curse – yet, it is still to be recognised as poetry while its maker begs to be allowed to be "hag, but poet" (1994, pp. 241-42).

To complete the manoeuvre described in the preceding paragraph, we then realise that even Wright's self-confessed departure from the lyric is only apparent. Jonathan Culler insists that the ritualistic element is as integral to lyric as the mode of address and the event-quality, and cites Northrop Frye's linking of *melos* to charm and magic (2015, p. 351). In the rest of *Fourth Quarter*, this new, ancient *lyric* poetry is still to be a matter of experimentation. There is a real sense that Wright appears to be finding her poetic bearings anew, thus late in her career, in these poems. She casts about amongst the conventions of Romantic-modern poetry, earlier poetry, and her own past practices, sometimes accepting, sometimes rejecting – with the end results of destabilisation and ambivalence. At times (in "Tightrope", for example), she appears comfortable with figurative language; at others, she undercuts its pretensions to convey worthwhile meaning. Sometimes, she uses, without overt self-commentary or implicit irony, the projection of the microcosmic onto the macrocosmic, typical of the heroic mode. In "Remembering Michael", her tribute to the Australian poet, Michael Dransfield, who died in 1973 at the age of twenty-four, she makes the projection explicit in the first lines of the poem:

When you were dying, we couldn't stop thinking of you,  
counting what we had of you  
letters, kisses, poems.

They tasted chemical-strange. So did the world.

The body of the poem is an account of a plane journey. In it, she expands the idea of the "chemical-strange" taste of the world in the imminence of the young poet's death, and concludes:

That wild copper mare of a sunset  
reared right out of this world.

Flanks stabbed by chimneys,  
acidic smoke in its veins,

kicking the sun's last arc

to death. (1994, pp. 355-56)

Yet, elsewhere, in "Interface III", she sketches a cosmic frame around her observations of nature, only to dismantle it. She spends the body of the poem tracing an analogy between the tendency of whales to beach themselves and humanity's tendency to self-destruction, yet ends, deprecatingly, with:

But this is to mourn a whale -

only a whale. (1994, pp. 345-47)

Nor are these isolated examples. Wright accomplishes a deftly ironic and amused exercise on the theme of the vanity of human wishes in "Notes on Canberra", and a wryly postcolonial account of Olympian revels in "Party with the Gods".

## 6. Late Style in *Fourth Quarter* vis-à-vis the Early Works

In the midst of what we see as deliberative uncertainty about form, convention, voice, Wright achieves, in some of the poems, a disillusioned subjectivity that presents a bleak vision of extinction. In these poems, we most clearly we see Adorno's "late style", something which may be illustrated by comparing the poems with earlier explorations of similar themes. In "Platypus", Wright addresses the

extinction of animal species in a distinctly different poetic voice from the one used in “Extinct Birds” (1962). The sardonic reference to the Romantic poetic pretensions of Charles Harpur, which blurred the focus on the extinction of birds, is gone. Instead, there is a recognition of the link between the destruction of habitat and the fate of species. While the species platypus is not actually extinct, the poet perceives that the car-choked rivers and contaminated waters of its former habitat could spell disaster, so that the reference, in the last line, to “the ripples of your wake” plays on the double meaning of “wake”. For the poet, this means that there is no possibility of a Romantic identification, either with the platypus glimpsed years before, or the girl who glimpsed it: unlike, for example, Wordsworth’s famous recreations of earlier nature and earlier self in *The Prelude*. Here, the orders of subjectivity are kept coolly distinct, in a way typical of Adorno’s notion of late style. There is the remembered self from long ago, there is the older self who prosaically picks up a pen to record a past memory, and there is the long-vanished platypus; there is no artistic reconciliation amongst the three (1994, pp. 368-69). To reiterate what Adorno said of Beethoven’s late style, there is no “harmonious synthesis” but a recognition of different orders – “objective is the landscape, subjective is the light in which - alone - it glows into life”.

Our second example, “The Dark Ones”, represents the end point of Wright’s poetic exploration of the fate of Indigenous Australians under colonial rule. It is a graphic reminder of the truth of the point made by these Australians that, for them, there is no “postcolonialism”. The stance of “The Dark Ones” is quite different from the much earlier “Bora Ring”, a Romantic-modern lament for a vanished culture. There is no longer any special, privileged “lyric” voice available to the poet, who elides any sense of her separateness from the general company of non-Indigenous Australians. She creates a sense of the ethical encounter between the two cultures that has a new intensity in her work. It is akin to what the philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, calls the face-to-face relation, in which the other is faced and recognised, not assimilated, by the self. Whereas the earlier poems we examined gave a Romantic-modern existence to Indigenous Australians by virtue of the voice of the lamenting lyric poet,

here, the challenge to white Australians is precisely that the processes of destruction have produced people who are indeed still alive, but in themselves material reminders of the extinction of cultures. The lyric mode of poetry might at first seem inadequate to the task of capturing what these people are. Neither apostrophe nor hyperbole will do. Instead, the poet reaches for narrative precision, and the plainest of plain style:

On the other side of the road  
the dark ones stand.  
Something leaks in our blood  
like the ooze from a wound....

Those dark gutters of grief,  
their eyes, are gone.  
With a babble of shamed relief  
the bargaining goes on (1994, pp. 334-35)

Yet, even while seeming to test the lyric mode, the poet appears to settle on a confidence in figurative language that eluded her in other poems in the volume. The metaphor “gutters of grief” pierces through any conventional Romantic storehouse of figures to fashion an image perfectly suited to the pervading theme of a pastoral people lost and displaced in an alien urban milieu. Despite the fears and uncertainties rehearsed in other poems in *Fourth Quarter*, the poet has again found a poetic language to give her the vision of horizons she declared, in “Tightropes”, to be a thing of the past (1994, p. 343). The horizon this time, as we noted early in our discussion, is horizontality itself: extinction.

As Shirley Walker has perceptively argued, Wright explores the uses and limits of poetic language in her poetry of the early 1970s onwards. In *Fourth Quarter*, two poems, “At Cedar Creek”, and the last poem in the volume, “Unpacking Books”, trace the trajectory of her hopes and fears for poetry. “At Cedar Creek” explicitly

quests for the formula for poetry and ends doubtfully, in fear that unpalatable mundanities have “blurred the old radiance” (1994, pp. 379-81). Yet, *Fourth Quarter* ends with the last stanza of a poem dedicated to the West Indian writer, Derek Walcott, with a renewed faith in “essential music” (1994, pp. 388-89). In this context, the visions of extinction in “Platypus” and “The Dark Ones” seem to be occasional and evanescent, as Adorno described the *Credo* from Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis*. They are manifestations of late style, which, again as Adorno has argued, is a matter of the stance of the artist to his or her material, rather than of any discernible chronological development. Such a disillusioned stance can perhaps be held only fugitively, if the artist is to be able to go on making art.

## 6. Conclusions: the Meaning of Late Style

“Poems written in age confuse the years” says the poet in “Dust”, the poem that ends with the reference to the Japanese poet, Bashō’s, “phantom dwelling”, which gives Wright’s last volume its name. This gnomic utterance could be said to capture the confusion of the years that haunts any attempt to isolate late style, which in Adorno’s analysis, is independent of chronology. Thus, the possibility remains open that Wright’s own late style appeared earlier than *Phantom Dwelling* (1985) and that, as we now suggest, she moved beyond it. If Collett’s commentary convinced us that we were not ourselves imagining lyricism where there was none, our impression is distinct from hers. And if both Collett and Walker see a poetic trajectory culminating in a less than lyrical kind of cerebral awareness, we too have found a trajectory of sorts, just one that is different in kind from theirs. That does leave the question, however, of what to make of the “last” late style, the one Collett, for obvious reasons, saw as most fitting of the term, namely, *Phantom Dwelling* itself.

There are certainly present, in this final collection, formal features of late style, and even an explicit espousal of them: Wright tells us in “Brevity”, for instance, that she is trying haiku for its “honed brevities, its inclusive silences” (1994, p. 413). Yet, the very decisiveness about style and form appears largely to bring to an end the

dissection of subjectivity that we have argued, after Adorno, to be the hallmark of Wright's late style in the volumes of the 1970s, culminating in *Fourth Quarter*. The rupture that characterised *Fourth Quarter* is partially covered over. While the theme of extinction does not quite disappear in *Phantom Dwelling*, it slides out of close focus. The settling on particular forms, like the ghazal, often fixes the poet's gaze upon the living. While individual deaths are recorded – an insect that drowns in the poet's glass of wine, the fox shot for killing chickens – the visions of species-extinction that troubled Wright in the 1970s volumes are no more. We can illustrate this by comparing "Reminiscence", from *Alive*, with "Seasonal Flocking", from *Phantom Dwelling*. The uncertainty about the existence of species that haunted the earlier poem is resolved. In "Seasonal Flocking", the parrots are undoubtedly present; the poet finds, in the very certainty of their seasonal return, a desire that vanished human friends would likewise come back (1994, pp. 405-06).

Such an awareness of the transitory nature of the human, indeed, infuses the poems with a compensatory resolve to preserve visual images of living nature. The volume opens with "Four Poems from New Zealand", in which the poet, to be sure, does observe a similar triumph of introduced over native species of birds and plants as she has in earlier poems lamented in Australia. Yet, she ends the set of poems with a vision of the enduringness of rock, and of love for both countries, New Zealand and her own (1994, pp. 293-96). While an occasional poem, "Victims", for instance, or "Small Town Dance", traces a human vulnerability, most use a verbal equivalent of pointillist technique to delineate elements of the Australian landscape and its flora and fauna with a confidence that their enduring quality can be captured. This certainty of form and style is matched, in these poems, by a secure poetic subjectivity very different from the vacillations of the 1970s volumes. The security is not bought at a retreat into Romanticism. That is to say, it is far from the conviction of a Charles Harpur that he could immortalise himself by writing poems about extinct birds, a conviction that we witnessed Wright ironising in that earlier poem. Rather, the easeful subjectivity of these poems about nature suggests a poet who has put self-conscious anxieties about writing and its dangerous pretensions behind

her. The technique is securely imagistic; the poet appears confident that the brief and sometimes elliptical forms chosen are adequate to the task at hand of expressing a “Late Meeting”, as the title of one of the poems would have it, between herself and the natural world she loved.

Still, Collett is right to see “late style” in this collection. Emerging in relief against this backdrop of poetic ease, in particular, the fate of Indigenous Australians continues especially to trouble the poet and once again causes the swerves of form and subjectivity that are the traces of late style. There are just two poems in *Phantom Dwelling* that treat this topic, and they are wildly different. “For a Pastoral Family” revisits the matter of Wright’s family’s dispossession of the native inhabitants, but the tone is resigned and ironic, not accusatory; the poet uses retrospection and reflection rather than the contemporary encounter that made “The Dark Ones” such a stark image of extinction of cultures. The sense of living with their mutual differences informs Wright’s attitude to her own family and her own generation. The legacies of pastoralism and dispossession are boiled down: to “rural security” for Wright’s brothers and for Wright, to merely a “base for poetry / a doubtful song that has a dying fall” (1994, pp. 406-10). Yet, the ironic awareness, the literary sophistication that enabled this last definition of poetry, with its Shakespearean reference, vanish in “River Bend”, itself the epitome of a doubtful song. Here, the focus falls on Indigenous Australians only as one element among several of death and sacrifice. The doubt infects the poetic subjectivity, making it quite different from the confident voice of “For a Pastoral Family”. While the kangaroo and the dog appear to have been observed or heard by the poet, the Aboriginal woman recedes into the realm of legend:

Down by the bend, they say, the last old woman,  
Thin, black, and muttering grief,  
Foraged for mussels, all her people gone. (1994, p. 416)

In this landscape, only the most powerful forces survive, only the “swollen winter river” that “curves over stone, a wild perpetual voice”.



Yet, this detached, doubtful subjectivity cannot be allowed to have the last word for Wright, with her long commitment to what Sartre, in the early days of *Meanjin*, called “engaged literature”. The final lines of the final poem in the volume, “Patterns”, turn the screw one last time:

“Twisted are the hearts of men – dark powers possess them.  
Burn the distant evildoer, the unseen sinner”

That prayer to Agni, fire-god, cannot be prayed.

We are all of us born of fire, possessed of darkness (1994, p. 426)

It is possible, of course, to read these lines, as Collett and Walker both do in their different ways, as an apotheosis of the cerebral scrutiny (what Collett, reasonably enough, calls “reasoned self-reflexivity” (p. 248) Wright undoubtedly conducted in her poetry, from beginning to end: Walker thinks that the scrutiny is of opposing elemental forces, individuation, and mutability. Yet, such a reading seems dependent on the kind of developmental progression Walker (rather than Collett) traces in Wright’s poetry, from *Alive* onwards, a progression we think needs rather more nuance than this. We have suggested, instead, that while there is a topical or thematic constancy in Wright’s poetry throughout, her tendency in the 1970s was to analyse subjectivity and experiment with form, to the extent that, even when she appears to abandon lyric expression, she was in fact refashioning it by testing its capacity to the utmost. The capaciousness of lyric for Wright’s purposes is intimately connected with the epideictic, public nature of its discourse, and with the hyperbolic and apostrophic modes of its address, modes that are never “mere rhetoric”, in the pejorative sense, but rather integral to the event quality that gives Wright’s poetic speech its directness and urgency.

For us, the exhilarating sense of the ad hoc, of the grounding of poetic discourse in the materiality of the poet’s life and concerns, public as much as, if not more than,

private, forces the poems of *Alive* and *Fourth Quarter* free of the kind of Enlightenment narrative of thematic development and maturity that Walker finds in them. We thus read those last lines of “Patterns” differently. Walker finds in them an overt statement of reconciliation of the kinds of opposing forces that, in her reading, Wright has been working progressively to balance in her last three volumes of poetry. To us, though, the spectre of extinction, which Wright has managed to confront in those fleeting manifestations of her late style that we have discussed, hovers over the very end of *Phantom Dwelling*. In setting individual mortality, of humans, creatures and plants, amidst the power of the elements, and in forbidding the detachment that would preserve the innocence of the self while blaming destruction on others, the poet falls silent. But she has left us the creation of a subjectivity that meets Adorno’s condition for the production of ethical art: the admitted implication of the artist in the violence that human history has created.

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