

**Divine Wings:  
Literary Flights between the Cyclic Avian in Emily Brontë's  
Poems and Oblivia's Swan Song in Alexis Wright's *The Swan  
Book***

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**Introduction: a Readerly Aesthetic of Ecological Consciousness**

A readerly aesthetic of ecological consciousness, outlined in recent ecocritical scholarship, has led me to connect a number of Emily Brontë's poems (from an oeuvre created between 1835 and 1848) to the swooping turns in Alexis Wright's third and latest novel *The Swan Book* (2013). I respond to Brontë's strange avians in the company of Wright's stranger swans, even as Brontë's Romantic poems strongly connect to the Christian Book of Nature as conceived in the Middle Ages, and Wright's work draws upon her Waanyi nation's millenniums of Dreaming. Reading Brontë's poetry and Wright's novel together moves me towards a promising conceptual space beyond human centrality. There are critical historical and cultural differences that separate Brontë's and Wright's representations of human relations with fellow creatures, but both writers share an acute awareness of the physical dependencies shared by human and avian bodies and suggest a divine unrestricted by the human image.

The speakers in Brontë's poetry often evoke birds as responsive others, drawing particular attention to the shared cyclic patterns between the human and

avian species in ways that indicate an affinity with German Romanticism. The efforts of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, a philosopher Brontë read and admired, to bring together the physical world and transcendental affect, is at the heart of her writing. James McKusick has argued that such strands of Romantic thinking help create the 'holistic paradigm' that offers a 'conceptual and ideological basis for understanding the potential of salvaging our damaged world' (2000, 11). Brontë's poems form part of this foundation for current ecological perspectives that seek to break free from exclusionary humanist thinking by recognising the interconnection of all creatures.

Brontë's ecologically Romantic depictions of the avian also reflect her immersion in the works of Romantic poets, particularly William Wordsworth, even as she departs from the more anthropocentric perspective found in his poems. For Brontë scholar Marianne Thormählen, the work of Wordsworth 'engendered views of Nature as a manifestation of God' in ways that departed from earlier understandings of 'Nature as a repository of evidence for Christianity' (1999, 67). Lyn Pykett also describes how Brontë followed the Romantic poets' conceptualisation of 'nature in its cyclic continuity' as 'a source of harmony', but makes the point that in Brontë's poems 'death is figured as the resolver of all contradictions' and is a 'means of transcendence that will liberate the imprisoned spirit' (1989, 68). For me, Wordsworth approaches a secularised divine through human imagination in a way that inflates human capacities. In contrast, Brontë's poetry is interested in a spirituality that goes beyond human limitations.

Micael Clarke has explored the complexities in the divine represented in Brontë's poetry, through the context of Victorian religious discourses. Clarke's insights support my contention that Brontë's poems disrupt assumptions that humans have a right to a God-given dominion over the world. Working with Jacques

Derrida's theoretical differentiations between the holy, faith and religion, Clarke focuses on the 'mystery and awe' that accompanies a sense of the holy (2009, 199). Clarke's analysis demonstrates the intellectually rigorous ways in which Brontë's poems engage with the immanent. It is this mix of Romantic and Christian philosophies of her time that makes Brontë's work unique.

I extend Clarke's analysis of the spiritual imaginary in Brontë's poems to include a more material divine, building on the work Kathleen Stockton has done with Luce Irigaray's 'spiritual materialism' (Stockton 1994, xv). Stockton's reading of George Eliot's and Charlotte Brontë's work through Irigaray reveals a Victorian spiritual materialism that escapes the conventions of patriarchal religion through a deeply embodied sense of 'escape, shadow and inarticulate utterance' (27). This material mysticism is also present in Brontë's work, giving her poems contemporary force, particularly when they offer an allowance for more balanced relations between humans and avians.

The nascent posthumanism of Brontë's work is extended in Wright's critically acclaimed novel, *The Swan Book*. Where Brontë stresses co-existence, Wright's mix of contemporary and traditional storytelling takes readers further, towards a premise of co-creation, by describing a dreamy world-making between Wright's central protagonist Oblivia, and the equally displaced swans that claim her as kin.

Wright's literary work is increasingly included in tertiary reading lists and her second novel, *Carpentaria*, won Australia's prestigious Miles Franklin Award in 2007. *The Swan Book* was shortlisted for the same prize. The powerful eclecticism that attracts readers to her work is reflected in its literary criticism. Ben Holgate describes her writing as magic realism, then, following Linda Hutcheons, as 'historiographic metafiction' (2015, 635). For Linda Daley, *The Swan Book* sits squarely on the stage of 'world literature' (2016, 8). In an interview with Wright,

Arnold Zable suggests the novel is something like campfire storytelling (Wright and Zable 2013, 28). Arnaud Barras brings together these various claims, working with the postcolonial insights of Alison Ravenscroft to show how Wright's work is constructed to resist 'straightforward fixation of meaning' by 'self-consciously' combining 'Aboriginal storytelling and worldly folklore' to create an 'allegory of reading' (Barras 2015, 5, 7, 9). In this reflexive context I suggest, with care, that to *my* reading Wright evokes an agential nonhuman divine that nurtures more productive dynamics between humans and other earth beings, including, in *The Swan Book*, the avian.

Daley offers a strong critical appreciation of the ontological alterity in Wright's work. She argues its 'material, aesthetic and political nature' has 'a force that opens a world' because of the way her writing resonates with 'her people and ancestry to which she is intimately connected' (2016, 8, 13). Wright supports this contention by emphasising the importance of the stories handed to her by her people (Wright and Zable 2013). Her stories are fleshed into her very being, together with the beings of her elders and ancestors.

The ontological alterity of *The Swan Book* is further empowered by its flexible temporal and spatial boundaries. As Daley incisively notes, *The Swan Book* complicates Western 'cartographic bounds of territory or space' (2016, 13). This is vital to the novel's impact. Wright's novel makes real Giorgio Agamben's theoretical perspective that refuses classifications and exclusions, creating a world that is akin to his 'zone of non-knowing' where the 'mystery' of the nonhuman is accepted (2004, 91, 92). As Daley argues, Wright's central character, Oblivia, is 'connective to ... the untimely different time of the nonhuman' through an 'animation' of Country that 'occurs through the interconnection of human and nonhuman forces' (20, 22). This

connectivity activates Agamben's evocative descriptions of the ways in which time and space are necessarily different for each species.

There is, at the same time, a contemporary punch to the novel, provided by Wright's focus on the impact of climate change. Positioning her work as 'describing the hornet's nest of the world' where displacement induced by climate change is already underway for many species, she asks 'What happens to a bird – or to anyone – who has no story for that country?' (Wright and Zable 2013, 28, 30). In this sense *The Swan Book* is an elegy, lamenting a loss written into the past, present and future of the Waanyi inhabitants. It is also deeply cognisant of the broader world at risk.

The empathetic imagination of contemporary readers approaching the work of Brontë and Wright will be sparked differently depending on their reading position. As Barras has argued, the 'relationality' of the reader is critical to their approach to Wright's work (Barras 2015, 2). The same can be said, to a lesser extent, for Brontë's poems. I approach the work of both authors as an ecocritical reader, concerned about my role in a beleaguered world acutely damaged by sustained human pollution. This mode of ecocritical reading has been contextualized by Timothy Morton, who argues that ecocritical readings can create a 'difficult, disturbing, and potentially traumatic encounter with enjoyment' (2008). This melancholic mode of reading becomes, for Morton, the 'ecological thought' (2010). Beginning from the conclusions reached by McKusick and others, Morton describes the ecological thought as a direct descendant of Romanticism. Ecocritical readers, he suggests, might well understand the interdependence between humans and other creatures as a 'vast' and immeasurable 'mesh' (2010, 15). The links I find between Brontë's material mysticism and Wright's expansive kinship suggest this Romantic enmeshment. Beyond this understanding lies the possibility of a non-Indigenous 'not-knowing' that looks towards Agamben's challenge. As Barras points out, Wright's ontology is not open

for conceptual adoption, in and of itself. It does, however, suggest there are alternative routes to the Western trajectories driving global carbon pollution.

The unspeakable and mysterious interconnections between material objects and discourses of spiritual imagination have been partially described by Karen Barad. Bringing together the insights of quantum physics and literary analysis, Barad has argued for more ‘radical political imaginaries’ pointing to ‘aboriginal cultures’ for understandings of the ‘other within’ (2015). This need not involve the appropriation prudently criticised by Barras. In her earlier work Barad describes, in illuminating detail, the enfolding intra-actions that allow for a physical materiality (2007). As she explains, with other new materialists such as Jane Bennett, humans are, at a molecular level, anything but purely human. Such understandings assume the agency of all phenomena and allow for ways of being that escape human understandings. Such a premise necessarily does away with any sense of one species being privileged over the other. The idea that humans are but one mode of potentiality supports Wright’s contention that ‘If you do the wrong thing to the country, the country will get sulky and cause harm’ (Wright and Zable 2013, 30). As there is no self-contained act at the molecular level, humans can never fully understand the implications of their partial embodiment. Further, they will variously experience the ramifications of their intra-actions with others. Attentive care is therefore required to live with a minimum of harm to others.

Barad’s fusion of discourse and materiality justifies the attuned responses to encounters with nonhuman others that are found in the works of Brontë and Wright. These intra-actions do not, however, mean that it is possible for humans to speak *for* nonhumans. What *is* possible is acting on a recognition of mutual enmeshment. Cary Wolfe evocatively describes this awareness and attunement to the other as a ‘constitutive dependency’ (2010, xxvi). To understand the human inability to see, or

to speak for the other, to know there are blind spots that come with being human, creates a starting point for newly attentive encounters. This attunement has practical ramifications. Once humans allow for nonhuman agency, then the work to reduce carbon pollution and other damage against the world shifts towards a more ecological orientation. If the earth is to remain liveable for *all* creatures, not just humans, inadequate and ill-conceived human-oriented ‘solutions’ no longer apply. Brontë and Wright both provide literary responses to the nonhuman that make space for these more inclusive actions.

### **Brontë’s Strange Birds: the Fearsome Talon of the Hawk and the Power of the Piercing Eye that Glares Askance**

My reading of Brontë’s poetry has much of the melancholy imbued in Morton’s ecological thought. Her poems depict a ghostly world that might, in less than two human generations, only exist in cultural imaginaries. Further, as Barad has argued in the context of Fukushima, ‘multiple times’ are ‘at the same place’ most clearly when past damage manifests as present loss; ‘hauntings are not immaterial’ (2015). Like swirling radioactive deposits in the ocean, the great acceleration towards current levels of global warming can be traced back to Brontë’s time and place (Steffen et al. 2015). In the mid-1800s the rapidly industrialising textile industries of West Yorkshire were busily producing deposits now counted in the 400 parts per million CO<sub>2</sub> that is already shifting weather and habitats, thus displacing many species, including the threatened avians so evocatively described by Thom van Dooren (2014). With this spectre of loss in mind, Brontë’s divine within her poetry is strikingly relevant.

For Brontë’s speakers, birds are both singular beings and metaphorical allusions. In the first instance, what generally occurs between the represented birds

and the speakers are moments of mutual attunement. Animal studies scholar Vinciane Despret describes these moments as ‘situations of exchange’ (2008, 135). As Barad makes clear in her description of a network of interconnected relations that cross back and forward through a dynamic co-affectivity, humans might ignore these relations, but they cannot exist outside these relations. Of course Brontë does not write directly to Barad’s concept of material intra-action, but her particular articulation of Romanticism allows for this mutual agency by representing the other-than-human in non-hierarchical ways.

Where Brontë’s poems refer to birds specifically, a sense of shared morbidity often emerges, with death being depicted as an inevitability that accompanies creaturely vulnerability to cyclic seasonal change. This important metaphorical emphasis in Brontë’s work makes it clear that as death comes to birds, so too will it come to humans. As Wolfe, with others, has argued, this animal vulnerability, with its ‘shared embodiment, mortality and finitude’ is that which makes humans attend to other creatures in ways that are not human-centred (2010, 62). This shift from human exceptionality and privilege is how Wolfe defines the term posthuman. From this posthuman ecological perspective, if the human aim is to live well, then it is equally important that all other creatures also live well.

Brontë’s (1992) lyrical non-hierarchical perspective is evident in her rousing epic poem ‘The Death of A. G. A.’, where, as a heroine dies on a battlefield, a ‘lark sang clearly overhead’ (line 139). This poem, set in Gondal, an imaginative world created by Brontë and her younger sister Anne over many years, sounds out a death knell that signifies, for the speaker, the transitory nature of life. It also signals that life will continue on beyond the death of the heroine and the lark. As the battle continues, the heroine’s corpse will become carrion for the ‘hungry hawk’ and other watchful ‘wild birds of the air’ (line 319). The birds’ uncanny watchfulness suggests a

perspective as strange ('wild') and familiar ('hungry') as the cry of the lark harmonising with the last breath of a human. As Morton puts it, 'compassionate coexistence' involves getting used to the idea of 'strange strangers' that are 'at the limit of our imagining' for this is where things become 'open and ambiguous' (2010, 17). In this poem, both hawk and lark have an agency of their own that is not beholden to human comprehension.

Brontë's refusal of a presumptive anthropocentrism is also present in another Gondal poem, 'Julian M. and A. G. Rochelle'. A 'tender child' does not brutally grab or catch a much desired object (line 113), yet still the childish 'hands did just enfold / Safe in its eager grasp' a bird (lines 113-114). As this child 'wept to hold' the bird (line 114), as if the bird's gaze was the point of a sword, the child is 'pierced with one wild glance from the troubled hazel eye' (line 115). Power shifts in this poignant moment. Affect takes away sovereignty. The artery of co-existence is opened, the life-blood of interconnectedness flows, and the child 'gushes into tears and lets its treasure fly' (line 116). Recognition of the fragility that comes with being a creature vulnerable to the actions of another creature is enough to overcome the child's anthropocentric eagerness to control, to possess, to make a 'treasure' of that which is not designed to be owned. In this moment of an attuned shared gaze, a new flow of co-existence begins. The 'troubled' bird is present and powerful and will not be held in the prison of the child's gently intentioned hand and eyes. The 'wild glance' that pierces, like talons that carry the spoils of human flesh, remind readers how strange the bird's world is to the human. The avian is, as Agamben might put it, in the 'open'. Yet still there is a blind spot, conveyed in the speaker's 'knowing' preconceptions of the 'wild'. Brontë's avian is not 'outside of being' in the way Agamben proposes (2004, 91). Despite this limitation, Brontë's poems do important work in offering the reader both the strange avian and the strangeness of the grasping

human. By pushing these creaturely boundaries, Brontë's speaker shows an acceptance of the impossibility for humans to fully understand the strange avian.

In an earlier untitled poem, beginning 'Still beside that dreary river' (line 1), a deeper strangeness appears through metaphor. As a murderer muses, a 'raven's screaming' is heard overhead (line 7). The scream of the raven does more than enter into the realm of the human imaginary by marking the murderer inhuman, just as the lark's cry does more than show the futility of war. The speaker is demonstrating Despret's moment of engagement. The raven functions as a symbol of death and, at the same time, the interruption of the raven is material. This bird is a carrion seeker who will assist, like the scavenging hawk, in the processes of death, decay and new life. This specific raven, that screams and that will consume, is an agent of the life that swoops in after death.

Brontë often conflates death with night and winter in the avian flutter of a life briefly lived. In 'Stars' the importance of night is emphasized through a 'hostile' morning that harshly interrupts the speaker's repose by stimulating the 'birds' that 'sang loudly in the woods' (lines 43, 35). The birds, like the morning, are as intrusive as the 'fresh winds' that 'shook the door' (line 36). Night, valorised as necessary and as welcome as death, creates space or new beginnings.

Like the welcome night, Brontë's poems accept winter's deathly cold without denigration. The presence of summer's birds speaks to their inevitable demise; they sing to death as much as to life. The speakers must accept the onset of winter as do the birds. This is particularly clear in the untitled poem beginning 'A little while, a little while' (line 1). Readers are presented with a 'mute bird sitting on the stone' (line 17) surrounded by 'dank moss dripping from the wall' (line 18). The speaker, like this 'mute bird', is part of the 'all' (line 20), both will be there for just a 'little while' and both would rather die (in a 'little while') than leave their beloved home.

The metaphorical directions here position the sense of belonging to place as transitory, like a season, like a life.

This acceptance of the presence of death within life is also realized in ‘Song’ (1992, 11). The lilt in the opening lines, ‘The linnet in the rocky dells / The moor-lark in the air’ (lines 1-2), is followed by slower lines with a longer perspective, where individual ‘wild birds’ of a specific place are part of an ongoing series of repetitions (line 6). Like generations before and after, these birds ‘raise their brood’ and then they will be gone (line 6). The linnet and moor-lark, and by implication, the speaker, share equally in this recurrent pattern. They are singular and yet part of a generalized whole. These sentiments are echoed in an untitled poem beginning ‘Loud without the wind was roaring’ (line 1). This poem positions the speaker in winter, reflecting on a time when it was ‘spring, for the skylark was singing’ (line 11). Death is, again, ever present. Even as ‘the wild skylark was filling / Every breast with delight like its own’ (lines 49-50), there is a sombre ‘brown heath’ a little to the distance (line 54), ‘stunted’ (line 55), on a ‘lonely hill’ (line 53). The barren landscape amplifies the whisper of winter closing in. The moment of fullest life for the avian body – and by implication, the human body – is a fanfare for its mortal end. Death is as much a part of life, as day must dissolve into night.

In this time of rapid climate change, Brontë’s depictions of transient individual lives held within a broader certainty of repetition can no longer be assumed as a given, not for humans and nor for birds. This broader shared vulnerability of humans and avians, read through the ecological thought, resonates strongly when reading ‘Loud without’, where the ‘linnet’ is ‘trilling / Its song on the old granite stone’ (lines 47-48). Brontë’s speaker juxtaposes the life and death of animal species, brought about by seasonal change, with a larger cycle, a deep time told through the layering of life that creates hardened rock. This unfleshed becoming

world is a bittersweet offering to an ecocritical reader. The world will go on, with or without birds and humans. There are other ways in which the earth can live.

Aware that it is no longer possible to take for granted the cycles depicted by Brontë's speakers, ecocritical readers may feel like the 'sullen' wedding guest, in 'A Day Dream' ruminating that 'these bright things' will be 'vanished like a vision vain' once 'winter' comes (lines 12, 25-27). Like those 'birds that now so blithely sing' (line 29), humans may also, soon enough, be 'Poor spectres of the perished spring' (line 31), that fly towards extinction 'In famished troops' (line 32).

Brontë's attention to the hawk's watch, the linnet's trill and the deserted nest serves as a reminder to contemporary readers of what is at stake. Brontë's speakers appreciate the lack of exceptionality in the seasons. Summer and winter, death and life, night and day might be expected to carry on into the next two human generations, but these cycles may not include the flourish of diversity offered by creatures suited to seasons as they are. In the stony face of such a future, Brontë's poems are highly pertinent. No fleshy creature, neither human nor avian, can demand dominion over the other, or over the earth. Flesh and blood, together, they need a world that remains largely as it is.

With this in mind, the deathly quiet of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1963) echoes through Morton's ecological thought back to Brontë's mortal winters. The gate on global emission reduction targets is closing. It may be that a four-degree rise has already bolted, like a horse through an open gate, into an apocalyptic future. Just as Brontë's speakers shiver with foreboding for the vulnerable, so too might contemporary readers fear a final end, particularly those who feel the talons of endangered birds in a citizenry of science. Each cycle may be the last. There is, however, hope in the piercing eye of the bird held in a child's hand. New human/avian relations are possible, beyond the desperate throes of DNA capture in a

time of mass extinction. Humans have the option to look and respond to nonhumans in more inclusive ways.

### **Wright's Swan Song**

In Brontë's poems, creatures are responsive *to* each other, co-existing in an attuned way. In Wright's novel, creatures are responsive *with* each other. Wright brings her Waanyi nation's world into a post-apocalyptic future, while also making present the oral stories known to her community for over forty thousand years. Her work suggests that in a world suffering extreme environmental degradation, it is imperative that birds, as well as humans, are invited to co-create the world through more co-affective ways of being.

*The Swan Book* is a tragic and fiercely political novel, set in an imprecise future in the next century. The setting traverses two areas in remote northern Australia, a busy urban southern city and finally, the long walk between both places. Severe environmental degradation has displaced many humans and other species, including the black swans who share the centre of the text with Oblivia, a fragile girl-woman who is estranged from her family, her body and her country.

It is not possible to provide a clear method or synopsis for this far-ranging tender novel. It draws on the Indigenous knowledge Wright is privy to as a respected elder of the Waanyi nation, but, as Barras cautions, with Ravenscroft, *The Swan Book* does not provide access to the ontology and epistemology of this community. It is this disallowance that creates the productive uncertainty that makes *The Swan Book* so affective. As Barras goes on to argue, readers are encouraged to acknowledge the cultural inaccessibility of the novel in a reflexive way through a 'process of interpretation and meaning-making' created by 'the figure of the inscribed reader', Oblivia (5, 9). These hermeneutics fostered by Wright's novel may well include a

consideration of extended relations between humans and nonhumans. For Oblivia, the deep and unquestioned kinship that the black swans claim with her provides a sense of hope, even in a tortured world where the spring of growth can barely be discerned. Readers approaching this work through Morton's ecological thought might hear Wright singing to the despair of a world out of patience. Wright is acutely aware of the harm that comes with pushing climatic cycles towards an apocalyptic future. Her song to a future rise of four degrees is an elegy for all creatures, including the humans and birds that share in and shape each other's stories. As Wright says, telling stories is one of the ways 'business' can be done (Wright and Zable 2013, 28). This novel is very serious business indeed.

Wright's novel is set in a dystopic future but its concerns are very much of this time. The devastating impact of climate change is already being experienced by those on the margins, including people of the Waanyi nation. Yet the past, the present and the future are not separate in *The Swan Book* as they are in Western representations. Daley calls this the 'double time of chronology and events' (2016, 21). For Daley, Wright's work places readers in a world outside the confining logic of the Western bounded rational individual (9). While non-indigenous readers cannot access this world, they can be given a sense that such a world exists. This perspective aligns with Barad's application of quantum physics to literary discourse, insofar as the world is more than Western logic has traditionally allowed.

The generative relations Wright depicts between humans and birds maintain the absolute otherness between species, even as she evidences the ties of kinship between Oblivia and the swans. These swans are stranger than Brontë's moor-larks, hawks and linnets. Their metaphorical weight is also different because of the way Wright continuously reminds readers of the swans' textual and ancestral familiarity to Oblivia. As Daley evocatively puts it, the blurring of Oblivia's characterization

suggests that she may be also ‘a figure of relationship itself, to the land, or to the animal and spirit beings’ (2016, 20). The same too might be said of the swans depicted by Wright. They tell stories in their actions, most particularly in their responses to the humans they encounter. The details of these stories are not discoverable in the text but they influence the force of the narrative.

The agency of Wright’s black swans ensures they are not subsumed in the human narration of Oblivia’s swamp country, even as they enter her world through her traumatised dreaming. They have their own dreaming that exists outside human stories. In this way, the swans exist in Agamben’s ‘zone of non-knowledge’ (2004, 91). Wright’s novel never represents human perceptions as the beginning and the end of what is possible, veering off from human exceptionalism with something akin to the intellectually rigorous material mysticism suggested through the work of Clarke and Stockton. The first sound of the swans is ‘like angels whispering from the heavens’ (Wright 2014, 15). The swans this novel evokes are textually divine as well as being sacred in a materially ancestral sense.

With the arrival of the swans, Oblivia’s world and its stories begin to change. A displaced swan gazes upon ‘the little girl far down on the red earth’ and then, as the swan falls ‘through the air’ the narrator wonders if ‘perhaps’ the swan ‘placed itself within the stories of this country’ (18, 19). This swan, and those that follow, bring with them stories that cannot be charted through human cognition. Yet, the ‘swamp people’ did know these stories in an earlier time; even while ‘nobody in the North remembered the stories in the oldest Law scriptures’, it is, importantly, understood that ‘these big wetland birds’ also ‘had Law’ (67). White swan stories are contained in the books and stories granted to Oblivia by her European foster-mother, Bella Donna, but the black swans embody stories that exist beyond human recounting. It is

this narrative, beyond and with European stories, that compels Oblivia to accept the black swans as her kin.

These ‘angels’ settle gingerly, as have the humans inhabiting this murky damaged ground, littering the swamp with ‘floating feathers’; there is something divine in this flagrant waste, it is as if ‘black angels had flown around’ (51). This complex divine both reveals and challenges the culturally loaded concept of the Judeo-Christian angel. The scriptural Word and Wright’s work with traditional stories rub against each other, sparking new spiritual imaginaries for the reader.

As Oblivia feeds her kin, running ‘through the water with the fledging cygnets’, she, like the story, is re-birthing and begins to ‘take flight’ (69). The material mysticism I propose, through Clarke and Stockton, has an ineffable materiality here for non-Indigenous readers, a strangeness harder to grasp than the fecundity of the past world in Brontë’s poems. The avian enters Agamben’s zone of not-knowing through this cultural blockage of perception.

There are complicated intra-actions between the swans and the endangered swamp community. The swans hungrily devour the food Oblivia gives to them, scraps gathered by her carer, Bella Donna, because they are worthy of eating. The ‘people grew skinnier’ as ‘the swans became fatter on their food’ (70). Humans are not, in Oblivia’s world, a priority. She is driven to look after her kin. As the community changes, so too does Oblivia. The swamp, like the world, is no place for stable entities.

When Bella Donna dies, relinquishing her questionable care of Oblivia, Warren Finch, the President of Australia in Wright’s dystopian world, arrives, determined to marry Oblivia. By the ancestral law of their families, she is his promised wife, and he has come to seek her after a dream of a swan woman who becomes a ‘black angel cloud flying in a starry night and playing harp music’ (109).

The mix of irony and Romantic sensibility in these lines becomes more complex as Warren Finch's dream continues. Such a sight 'should be easy enough to find' but Warren Finch can only sense 'slithers of a woman's naked body' that had 'come to him like a promise', flowing along a 'river that flowed as slowly as his blood. He felt her presence bonding with his own' (109). The vulnerability of swan and woman is as apparent as the potential harm of a righteous man. The world in change will be remade.

With inexorable confidence, Warren Finch hunts down his 'mangkarri', his promise wife, Oblivia, despite being told he is no longer obliged because she has been gang-raped, then disowned and lost (136). Finch too, is of the avian, but his cultural affiliations are unclear. His ancestors are owls but he bears the name of a small European bird through his adoptive parents. He embodies both destiny and contingency, a hope of salvation shaped by the past and a sloughing thick invasive muck that he now enfolds into Oblivia's story. He is a flawed saviour, and despite his powerful status the community's response to him is cautious. Oblivia is their kin, but also their ostracized. The idea of a promise wife only lightly presses upon their memories. Yet there he is, close to a god. His will must be done. The fatalism in the narrator's story-telling is as fixed, yet as salvageable as a rise in global temperatures forced by the silencing of the earth's voice.

The avian swamp inhabitants are less hospitable than the humans. As Warren Finch rows to Oblivia's home 'swans swooped at the boat' to stop him, they 'hissed' and they 'stabbed' and 'he could feel the warmth of their soft bellies as he brushed through their barricade' (154). His violation of their bodies mirrors the rapes that destroyed Oblivia's voice, her memory, her sense of self, his obligation to marry her. When he enters her domain she cannot speak, she cannot move. He calls her the 'swan maiden' and she meets his deflowering voice 'with a knife in her hand' (154).

He takes the knife as easily as he has taken the world but the mastery Finch would grasp slips away like a dream. Like porous matter, Oblivia will not be held in stasis. She escapes through the presence of the swans. Warren Finch may be an earthly godling, but Oblivia is kin to black angels. She has the ability, the gift, the madness of being able to take herself to a place beyond her body. She may seem to be in the same place as Warren Finch, but in fact she is reaching towards the swans, readying to depart with them. As he talks, the swans panic. Oblivia feels them ‘becoming disconnected from her’ even while she feels their ‘erratic and chaotic struggle’ (158). She has ‘the very same nervousness running through her own body’, she falters, she cannot yet comprehend the extent of ‘the swan’s electrified sense of danger, the sudden readiness to lift in one synthesized movement’ and so she is unable to fly with them (159). The reader and Oblivia are stunned into stillness as the birds swan away like a ‘midnight storm’, disappearing ‘in a cloud that looked like a black angel lit by lightning’ (160). Like weather, the complexities in the interconnections between Oblivia and the swans are difficult to contain in sure analysis. The angelic swans and the dreamy Oblivia are not completely separate entities but their responses differ. This is the hope I find in Wright’s novel and it blends with the philosophy of Barad. The intra-actions flow both ways in a confused and unpredictable way where the human is not the only force at play.

The narratorial logic of the novel refuses to place the needs of Oblivia over the swans. As Oblivia dreams herself after them, they dream themselves towards her. This mutual desire is powerful enough for the swans to begin ‘forming their spirits through films of salt to reach her during the night’ (191). Oblivia works her fingers skinless in her efforts to help them fly, peeling away salt, straightening their feathers. Her compulsive grooming also saves herself. Oblivia and the swans co-create a world that will hold them safe.

When the swans find her, at last, in a prison-like apartment in a dilapidated southern city, Oblivia can barely lift her wings to help them. She is the First Lady, Warren Finch's tribal bride, present on television. At the same time Oblivia is living in a dark world of alterity, bending the rules that Daley points to, through Wright, that encapsulate the 'bitterness of pure logic and rational thought' (Wright in Daley, 2016, 21). As the swans circle the apartment, injuring themselves in their need to be closer to Oblivia, children jump in the streets that are their home, readying to fly, becoming holy, 'calling the very ordinary land a sacred site' (247). The swans' drama envelops the children, as it does Oblivia. The swans circle her building in hundreds 'driven by nervousness' and 'their bond with the girl', coming 'so close their wings clipped the buildings' (247). The old zoological gardens, canals and other semi-stagnant waterways are soon thick with swans. The birds multiply until their numbers grow so vast that they block the night sky. Privy to this inversion of power, Oblivia readies to 'fly with the swans so they do not leave her behind' again (277). The presidential world of Warren Finch has become immaterial through the swans' dreaming circling dance.

Then the wind changes, the swans' escape is foiled by the force of hostile traditional powers, their 'wings' are 'buffeted' (277). At this point in this lavish always-unravelling story, when hope seems gone entirely, the trap of Warren Finch opens through his death. Oblivia's shadow self, the self who is real enough to be captured by television cameras, may have assassinated him. The Oblivia known by readers is full of fear. She flees after the swans, escaping ceremonies held to create Warren Finch and his promise wife into a performative story on the fringes of the novel. His corpse continues to travel the roads as a moving tourist destination while Oblivia seeks refuge in another world. Once again the 'wind intensified through the ruffling feathers on their breast' and the swans ready to leave (303). When 'a startled

swan flies up' there is 'the roar of the lift off, and the sky is blanketed by black swans in the cold night' (303). The redemption in this passage ripples with reflexive irony. The fairy tale 'bright starry night' with its 'northerly flowing breezes' lead readers, with Oblivia and the swans, like a 'heartbeat' all the way back to the swamp (303). The tone is sardonic, but also poetic, only the swans can take Oblivia 'safely through the laws of the country' if 'the spirits who were the country itself' have not yet been exterminated (321). The novel, like the swans, is filled with songlines, making this section of the text, like the country that the swans seek, 'holy and beautiful to behold' (323). For the swans, these stories are strong enough to take 'the oldest swan to the youngest cygnet' all the way from the 'abandoned botanical gardens' of the south towards the 'northern swamp' of Oblivia's home (323). It is, the narrator suggests, 'as if the ancestors had pulled the swans across the skies' taking Oblivia with them 'to be cleansed' (324). There is a baptism of sorts also available to the reader. This closing section sings with epiphany as Indigenous story and European folktale conflate in the flute Oblivia uses to create a 'swan tune that dances around the hills' (324). The flute, an ancient keepsake from the family of her carer, Bella Donna, is made from the 'wingbone of a Mute Swan' and has been played with by the rescued 'cygnet' (324). This swan, aptly named the Stranger, has saved Oblivia by keeping her head down to care for him, ensuring that she is not revealed as the president's wife who may have killed her husband. Oblivia's flimsy notes create a 'sound known to be sacred to swans' and it is heard 'among the din of winds' (324). It welcomes the swans 'into the country's song' (325). It is a tune that only the swans can access, but human kin is needed to help bring the song into being.

Upon her return Oblivia enters the water and is cleansed, a doubling rebirth that repeats an earlier time when the black swans first entered her life. As she runs through the water with their babies, the swans 'observe her as though she is a newly

hatched cygnet' and then they rest 'beside her, necks curled over their backs and asleep' (326). The story finishes here, more like the end of a species than the turn of a season. As 'the winds grow warmer' and the 'land dries' and 'the spirit of the drought' enters, the expectation of a returning wet season disappears (328). Many 'stranded swans' scatter and fall under 'hotter skies', they 'fly in every direction' until their only option is to 'stand on baked earth and hiss at the sky they cannot reach' and then, soundless, as silent as an apocalyptic spring, 'with wings spread they wait for the spirit flight' (328).

In the fallout from this devastating conclusion, Oblivia nurses the 'old Stranger swan' she nurtured from a cygnet, who has saved her from facing those who would destroy her, and he sleeps on her lap when not 'gazing over what had been a swamp' (330). The 'old swan leader' has changed after the loss of his kind. In a conventional fairy tale he might wait for a millennium to pass but instead, when Oblivia tells him that regeneration is not possible, the swan 'swooned and dropped its head to the ground' in profound grief (332). So too might the reader despair. The world that offers life to flesh and blood has dried up and gone.

In this arid finale, Wright's narrator still manages to offer some kind of hope. 'This might be the same story about some important person carrying a swan centuries ago, and it might be the same story in centuries to come when someone will carry a swan back to this ground where its story once lived' (333). The business of this story might be attended to, change might emerge in its telling. To my reading, this is possible without raiding the dreams that belong to Oblivia. Wright's novel allows for a space to be given to other beings, like the black swans of the swamp, so they can make their own stories as fit them best.

### **Conclusion: the Fragile Nest of the Dying Stranger**

One of Australia's foremost ecocritics, Kate Rigby, has called on writers (and, implicitly, readers) to attend to literature in a 'mode of prophetic witness' that includes being open to 'communications from the nonhuman other' so that the world's 'warning call' might be heard (2013, np). Reading back to Brontë's nineteenth-century poems, there is a preparation for this call in the silence that follows the trill and the cry of birds in the flush of their season. The silent dirge of a 'mute' bird on a 'still grey stone' becomes the heartbreak of humans and avians all out of season.

Yet the Stranger that flies across Wright's apocalyptic sky urges readers to find ways to respond to the wash of swan stories told in birdsong and wing. The readerly trauma of ecological thought that Wright evokes through her critique of human-inflicted damage upon the world harkens back to Brontë's Romantic depictions of the impact of wintry seasons on the fragile nests formed by creatures such as humans and birds. The cyclic seasonality in Brontë's poems is fiercely awry. There is much to lose. While Brontë's poetry and Wright's novel are centuries and cultures apart, they both support a posthuman reading. Through this lens these works gravely reinforce the fact that the world will go on, with or without humans or birds. A stony future will suit at least some species, if four-degree climatic havoc is the best that humans can do. If this trajectory is followed, then Brontë's poetry of life, death and rebirth will be left behind as absolutely Romantic, *The Swan Book* will be disastrously real and humans will be very strange indeed to themselves and the rest of the surviving world. There is an alternative. Brontë's poems remind readers that the avian and human begin and end with the seasons and places they inhabit. Her work soars towards Wright's swan song of a winged divine beyond human making. These avian divines, these nonhuman holies, have potential to extend acceptance of

human/avian co-existence to a search for a co-creative kinship beyond the zone of human knowledge. It is a search that begins with the heart-rending spread of the dusty wings of the black swans. The possibilities in an unknowable nonhuman angelic mentorship are needed to help humans relinquish control over a world not designed for their ruination. To be mentored in this divine way, humans must listen and follow.

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