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Wright's Poetic Prose Epic

Françoise Palleau-Papin

Introduction

- 1 In her novel *Carpentaria*, Alexis Wright does not celebrate the prowess of a lonely hero as is often the case in Western epics, but as in its Western counterpart,¹ invokes ancestral spirits to celebrate the union between the people and Country, extolling the strength which numerous characters draw from the elemental spirits of land, air and water, and their joint fulfilment. Strongly anchored in the Gulf of Carpentaria, her epic provides an Indigenous world vision in writing, a medium other than the traditional oral transmission in songlines, or the visual one of cave drawings (both mentioned in the novel), but keeps the memory of the change from songlines to written lines. To do so, she uses meta-textual words such as *stanza* (Wright 2009, 423) and others, to inscribe her work in an exogenous poetic tradition, amongst other borrowings and echoes of English verse, and the occasional English meter in her remarkably rhythmic prose. She also uses Waanyi expressions, both languages including many alliterations and converging to suggest meter in prose. As a bard of her people, she writes a new collective epic in prose that calls for the power of verse to set the story in memorable and glorious terms, incorporating the vernacular and orality in her multivocal diction, in a renewed form of the genre spanning cultures.
- 2 In the cave where Mozzie Fishman's followers bury the three boys who died in custody, the characters hear a droning sound, and before they understand realistically that it comes from dingoes in a chamber of the cave, the expression of Will's perception is meta-narrative and evokes music and poetry: "The sound he heard was as if someone a long way off was playing a stanza on the didgeridoo, then, others responded with their own version of the melody which went droning on as one long prophetic oratorio" (Wright 2009, 423). It is this double strand of narrative that I wish to follow here, the one that clings to realism but veers from it in sideways scuttles, "one long prophetic oratorio" relying on meta-narrative or meta-artistic commentary, and reflecting on the

purpose of the epic, thus standing for a subliminal artistic manifesto that might unite the spirituality of both the Indigenous and the Anglo-European worlds.

Myth on the verge of scansion

- 3 G.S. Fraser sees good free verse as “verse which does not scan regularly but seems always on the verge of scanning regularly” (1970, 74). While Wright writes in the medium of prose, I would argue that her prose sometimes sounds as if it were verging on free verse as it is imbued with distinctive poetic qualities. From the beginning of the novel, active verbs convey the ancestral serpent’s agency in a memorable alliterative doublet, reminiscent of Medieval English poetry as well as the Waanyi repetition of sounds: “Picture the creative serpent, scoring deep into – scouring down through – the slippery underground of the mudflats, leaving in its wake the thunder of tunnels collapsing to form deep sunken valleys” (Wright 2009, 1–2). The alliterative doublets *scoring deep / scouring down*, as well as “the thunder,” all pay homage to the resulting action expressed in the rhyming doublet introduced by the prepositions *into* and *through*, a prowess of invasive and forceful creation that the text makes audible through phonic and structural echoes in the syntax. Before projecting onto the future, the novel’s incipit thus recapitulates ancestral creation in an anamnesis expressed in memorable diction, both euphonic and majestic in its final ternary object (and objective): “to form deep sunken valleys” (2). In *The Stepmother Tongue*, John Skinner reappraises Salman Rushdie’s assessment of how writers from the former British Empire respond to the literary tradition of colonial England: “to borrow the now famous catch-phrase, the Empire is writing back” (1998, 201); writing back to the Empire is precisely what *Carpentaria* does.
- 4 To recall the creation of the world in a mythical beginning sets a parallel between two creations, one explicit, that of the ancestral serpent, and one implicit, that of the writing unfolding in the epic novel under our eyes, which draws its strength from the moral authority of an ancestral culture, and riffs off the English literary tradition, transforming the latter durably. The first chapter is entitled “From Time Immemorial” and lays the foundation for the novel in an extended conception of time, whose immemorial scope is very much alive and consequential in the unfolding of the plot set in contemporary times.

New epics

- 5 As a guest speaker at a conference held in June 2020, the Global Landscape Forum, Alexis Wright explained the necessity for writers of joining forces to write about climate change in our contemporary times. The speech, “Thinking about Writing Climate Change Fiction,” sounded like a manifesto addressed to the writers of the world. She formulated the purpose of writing “new epics” and “new sagas” for such an endeavor, in a continuous relationship with those of the past:

The writers must be capable of seeing that all time is intertwined, important and unresolved as Aboriginal people see the time immemorial in our culture. Their literature can be a powerful instrument of persuasion with the capacity to contribute to a global conversation in shaping how we think about living with climate change. These will be the writers that will create the new epics, and the

new sagas to add to those that came before, and contribute ways of understanding what lies ahead. (Wright 2020)

- 6 Her vision of the new epics allows us to reflect upon our times, and possibly to have an impact upon them. It integrates the ancient knowledge which defines the place of the Indigenous groups in their current lives in an ongoing transmission, and a take on current events and new disruptions, but without a breach in the transmission. In her view, contemporary epics do not only lay the founding tenets of a people in a unique tradition, but also open up the possibility of a global relation in a group with a shared goal, a mapping of “compassion”: “These writers create the human map of compassion” (Wright 2020). The world summoned by this epic would thus be enlarged from a geographical and cultural anchorage to one of a shared philosophy amongst the prospective writers of the world concerned with climate change, whom Wright addresses in her speech. Setting her work against an Enlightenment vision, which tended to erase distinctive cultural traits in a covert form of colonization, Wright rejects the idea of an overarching universalism, and calls for a local vantage point in the global mapping of a common goal, which she calls “the universal local” (Wright 2020). To draw the map of compassion, one must begin where one stands.
- 7 Uncle Micky, an old Indigenous character only seen in chapter one, collects bullet cartridges with his metal detector to keep a trace of the “massacre of the local tribes” (Wright 2009, 10). He scans the ground in a desperate attempt for redress: “He had maps, names of witnesses, details, the lot” (10). But his mapping of traumatic events is ignored, his museum never visited, his voice without an audience, as no tourist seems to care: “Now his voice lives on in the great archive of cassettes which he left for the war trials he predicted would happen one day” (10). Uncle Micky fails to carry forth an epic voice, because no one listens to his antiquated recordings on cassettes and he has no political leverage from which he might draw visible power, yet his museum seems more authentic than the mishmash of mining detritus, packaged for tourists. Uncle Micky’s voice commemorates the dead, but it is a voice empowered by the group in the novel and by the story told to readers beyond it; it speaks from the land recovered after a cyclonic tabula rasa caused by colonization, a land on which Wright draws a human map of compassion that redresses the wrongs and glorifies the strength of union and creativity, in spite of the destruction wrought by both colonization and the cyclone. The cyclone eventually becomes an instrument of divine retribution, brutally correcting the historic wrongs of the past. Wright’s fictional voice is not devoid of an occasional expression of bitterness in the exhaustion of the fight throughout, when weariness can be heard in the repetitive evocation of the battle, in the wake of Micky’s exhaustion: “That’s fighting for you. Fighting, fighting all the time for a bit of land and a little bit of recognition” (10–11). The sentence sounds on the verge of scanning regularly with its strong trochaic attack repeated three times in “fighting” and the anapestic acceleration (“for a bit”), bringing to the prose the subliminal memory of epic battles recounted in verse. However, Wright’s epic will be told not only by the fully-fledged characters but also by the anonymous dead, of whom the narrator might be the mouthpiece: “The old Gulf country men and women who took our besieged memories to the grave might just climb out of the mud and tell you the real story of what happened here” (11). What matters in the novel is the transmission between the characters, and between the Indigenous group speaking in the first-person plural and the readers addressed in the second person, singular or plural. This allows Wright to draw a broadly encompassing map of compassion, and build up the hope of an

understanding between the two parties, across the divide, thanks to our suspension of disbelief and our involvement in the diegesis.

From the narrator's to the narratee's involvement

- 8 Although the difference between the narratee and the implied reader is rather slim, because such critical notions rely on a refined level of implication in the relationship between either narrator and narratee in the text, or the implied author and the implied reader at a slightly more distanced level from the storyline (in the latter case, overarching the plot and getting closer to a critical commentary), there is a sense of direct address to an addressee in the novel from the very beginning. The first chapter addresses the implied reader in the second person and calls for our involvement in the timeless present of the reading process, as if we were inside the story like a narratee. We are invited by a metaleptic, authoritative narrator to become a bird and contemplate the creation from above: "It moved graciously – if you had been watching with the eyes of a bird hovering in the sky far above the ground" (Wright 2009, 1). The active reader is a participant in the story enabled to fly like a bird in delight of such poetic prose, to the rhythm of ternary accelerations in dactylic ("graciously" / ... / "hovering") or anapestic meter in prose (with four anapests in succession: "with the eyes" / "of a bird" / ... / "in the sky" / "far above"). From the opening of the novel, we are asked to take part in the epic story as witnesses to the heroic actions of the group in the vengeful unfolding of retribution leading to the final, apocalyptic destruction of the mine.
- 9 Often too busy commemorating colonization every January 26th for over two centuries, (white) Australia may forget to commemorate the immemorial creation of the world, and to observe it with delight, from a higher perspective. Yet if the reader whom the narrator addresses in the second person accepts the summons, if we agree to step onto the epic story path, then we may partake of the ancient sunlight that reverberates on the serpent's body, because our vantage point will grant us a glorious view of both creations, at once serpentine and textual: "Looking down at the serpent's wet body, glistening from the ancient sunlight, long before man was a creature who could contemplate the next moment in time" (Wright 2009, 1). From the first paragraph of the novel following a preamble announcing the end of time (i.e., the Apocalypse), we are called upon to step into the epic story connecting past and present, and to acknowledge the change of scale from short-term to long-term memory, basking in a light that took a long time to reach us from the stars, or from an ancient sun.
- 10 The narrative voice keeps involving implied readers further into the narrative, as if we were direct intradiegetic observers of the action. When Will Phantom decides to stay near Elias Smith's body and bring him back to the coast to Norm Phantom's house, in a gesture of trust cancelling the father-and-son squabbles of the past, the empathetic transmission of thought is so successful that Will is described as looking like a younger version of his father: "If anyone had seen him standing there, they would have believed it was Norm, fishing this lagoon years ago, at the onset of the Wet season as a million fish teemed up the river, when he was twenty-four" (Wright 2009, 160).
- 11 The narrator addresses the implied reader here, with the hypothetical invitation to visit Country and witness the events as if we were narratees inside the story. We are this "anyone" when we partake of the character's moment of decision-making, his feet

in the lake, his eyes on Elias's dead body. We can imagine we may feel the grains of dirt and dust on him as if on ourselves after a long journey, because the lyrical poetry of the passage brings us closer to an empathetic understanding, at once physical and emotional. The evocation of the dirt recalls the ancestral creation, and brings the young man back to a powerful tradition, even though he is a contemporary youth wearing jeans, the ubiquitous uniform of globalism: "Will with bare chest, no shirt to his name, covered with weeks of accumulated desert dust, his jeans, no longer blue, were ingrained with dirt from months of travelling through the dry country" (Wright 2009, 160). He does not wear a shirt; he wears Country, a country which he embodies and personifies in the dry dust covering his torso and jeans. The set idiom "no shirt to his name" is here reactivated, because rather than signifying poverty and dereliction, it turns Will into a proud young Waanyi, as if he were walking home from the initiation of young men, when he is returning from his travels with the convoy of Mozzie Fishman and his followers. Everything in the style contributes to his glorification: the alliterative echo in /w/ at the beginning ("Will with"), the alliterative rebound on the name of the hero in the renewed idiom, making the lack of a shirt an actual gain, stressing "with" rather than the negation "no," the transformation of the imported clothing into a second skin, or even a second nature thanks to the use of the word "ingrained," which reverses colonization. The denim of American cowboys, a sign of global standardization and levelling of local cultures today, has been turned around by more than a coating of dirt, because it now includes (with the prefix -in) the actual grain of Will's culture ("ingrained" as In the Aboriginal Grain, to paraphrase William Carlos Williams): the grain of dirt of ancestral creation.

Chanting, re-enchanting nature

- 12 The lyricism of the moment relies on the implicit relationship between the dwellers of the land and their surroundings, which the readers are invited to understand as if from inside the group, even when a house rests on "the top of the nest of a snake spirit" near a dump (Wright 2009, 13), as in the case of Angel Day and Norman Phantom's house. When Will stands in the lagoon near the body of Elias, looking like a younger version of his father, he is able to overlook the current deprivations because the sense of continuity with the past is strengthened by the nostalgic memory of previous abundance, as Norm was "fishing this lagoon years ago, at the onset of the Wet season as a million fish teemed up the river, when he was twenty-four" (160). The verb "teemed up" may build up a homophonic pun with the evocation of the family team the previously estranged father and son are going to bring together again in their solidarity to bury Elias. There is a sense of delight in the abundance of fish at the Wet, as if nature celebrated the likeness of father and son, as if transmission could now resume, in the prospect of a plentiful catch of fish again. The description then goes on to suggest the idea of an illumination, provoking, or concomitant with, an instinctive revelation of what has actually happened, because neither Will nor his father Norm are taken in by the staging of Elias's dead body as an accidental death, and Will guesses that their friend has been murdered by thugs from the mine: "Will Phantom walked knee-deep through the mud, breaking the crust of salt crystals which sparkled where hit by sunlight, as enchanting as snow" (160). Snow is an impossibility in the region, and to set the light on the salt crystals against this impossible standard of comparison, with the word "enchanting," carries the realistic description to another plane altogether. It

becomes a moment of hieratic vision, an actual illumination for Will, who has now come full circle from his initiatory travels with Mozzie Fishman, who became a surrogate father when Will was estranged from Norm. The understanding that his friend has been murdered comes in the sentence immediately following this enchanting vision in the here and now of the character's stance in the lagoon. Enabled by his connection to Country, Will sees beyond false appearances, and is ready to take action.

- 13 The vision unites the spiritual and the physical experience of the character in his grasp of the truth. It marks the conclusion of a demonstration, coming at the close of chapter 6, entitled "Knowing Fish." Ancestral knowledge of fish and fishing has overcome the false logic of destruction imposed by capitalist colonization. While most white people see themselves as upholders of a scientific logic, and implicitly dissociate the so-called real world from the spiritual world of belief, the novel demystifies this fallacious myth: "Now Will, who had spent too long following the illusions of the Dreamtime, was thrown back into the real world, where men became clowns and clowns men, which was another string of illusions altogether" (Wright 2009, 157). Will's reasoning is expressed in a memorable cross-structure, an antimetabole reversing the same words (men / clowns / clowns / men), exposing the false logic of profit which relies on a staging of cause and effect that is far from the actual truth, which is that nothing can justify profit if it means destroying sacred land in a mine and polluting rivers and soils through lead extraction. The epic tale of Will's involvement in the fight against the mine rights the wrongs caused by misconceptions in a mnemonic formulation. All responsible young men like Will are invited to stop being clowns, and start being men, in a lived-in experience which does not separate the mind from the body, or the living from the dead.
- 14 The novel relies on the Indigenous conception of the union between mind, spirit and matter as well as the "encounters" between "animate beings and inanimate things" (Muecke 2004, 70), thus re-enchanting the world of Post-Contact Australia. The intradiegetic tellers of the epic saga are invited to reassess the place of humanity in this spiritual nature without any hierarchy, as Wright invited writers to do at the Global Landscape Forum when telling the story of life in the climate-change era of the Anthropocene: "By this, I mean the story of all life as being equally of value, where the light is not just shining on ourselves, but on the whole. We need to develop this way of imagining" (Wright 2020). If one does not assume any human hegemony over nature, then one will automatically become conscious of belonging to nature as a physical and spiritual entity and respect it as one respects oneself, because it forms a part of the self. This is made clear in passages when the body and the mind work together, communicating with the spirits of the dead without any interruption, as exemplified when Norm takes the body of his friend Elias out to his sea burial.
- 15 Norm then remembers the past fourteen years as if it were yesterday, in his conversation with the deceased Elias about Norm and Angel's failed marriage. His speech is punctuated by the rhythm of his rowing, the oars dictating the pattern of his thoughts like so many stage directions between his utterances, in succession: "Norm said on the forward lift of the oars."; "swinging the oars back."; "Swoosh."; "Swish." (Wright 2009, 228). Norm's rhythmic pull on the oars frees his mind, and allows him to reminisce without anger. His short sentences, punctuated by his physical progress on the water, also free the speech of the dead man, who answers Norm, even if his voice is

described in an expression which calls attention to his being dead: “Elias’s deadpan voice came back through the night, the way he usually spoke to Norm while they were fishing, back-to-back, waiting for a bite” (228). The set idiom *deadpan*, meaning a face devoid of expression, is thus reactivated and made memorable because it is literally the “pan” (slang for face) of a dead man. But this dead man speaks and interacts with his friend, as if he were alive, his spirit being alive, his body about to go back to the elements, the sea and the sky. By bringing together the rhythm of the text, the gestures and the speech of the characters, and by reactivating a set idiom by giving it a literal and figurative meaning at once, the text becomes self-reflective, it draws our attention to its construction, its fabrication, and its relationship to the world. Reading becomes a game in deciphering the reactivated language, and in delving into the world of the protagonists, one dead, one alive, as if boundaries no longer mattered, as if we were encouraged to jump over the gap of the metalepsis between our world and the characters’ in an ontological leap. For what is magic, if not a prevailing belief in metalepsis and projection into an imaginary world, one that freely communicates between the living and the dead, obliterating barriers? The following sentence presents this all as terribly normal, following the first and last names of the character Normal Phantom, because it is normal to see phantoms and talk to them, as the dead are part of the living world: “In the darkness, he felt Elias’s presence, sitting at the end of the boat, looking at him, as he usually did on their way out fishing in the good old days” (228). The good old days of friendship between two men when they were alive thus continue after death, because one of them feels the presence of the other without seeing him in the dark, as perception involves more than the eyes; the body being inseparable from the spirit of the man, dead or alive. The enchantment of the world prevails in the succession of three circumstantial phrases about the living presence of the dead (In the darkness / sitting at the end of the boat / looking at him), anchoring the evidence both physically in the diegesis and rhythmically in the narrative, for those who might otherwise fail to observe its reality.

Making up a common language

- 16 To write an epic story about such an enchanted, spiritual world, a world teeming with the spirits of the living and the dead, one must have the right vision. One must see the *yinbirra* spirits who have made themselves invisible to the intrusive “envoys” of Indigenous Australia who have “theories” about them, much like white ethnographers (Wright 2009, 287). The *yinbirras*, also known as the Yanngunyi, shy away from such theorization, refusing to be objectified into a case study of the intangible. It is telling that their language has been forgotten, and that they communicate through sign language with Norm when they help him save Bala from drowning (292–93). Including their spiritual vision and making up for the loss of their language, the novel invents a common language, a new English dialect, after the glottocide of colonization, and elaborates an expression which conveys the Indigenous world vision, placing the two languages on an equal footing. The code-switching between the Waanyi and the English languages is one way of developing the possibility of a better understanding between the colonizer’s language and an Indigenous language of the Gulf of Carpentaria, avoiding the linguistic habits that have distorted or attempted to erase Indigenous philosophy and belief.

- 17 To avoid an intrusive approach involving the transformation of the *yinbirras* into objects of study, even for their own living people, as well as to avoid “oppression under the white man’s thumb,” they are said to have “simply disappeared into the wilderness of life” (Wright 2009, 287). Both the adverb “simply” and the choice of the noun “wilderness” are highly ironic. The spirits hide in the absurdity of the word, because the “wilderness” is not a concept that makes sense in speaking of Indigenous Country. Like the colonizing concept of *terra nullius*, to designate the land in such terms seems to imply that it carries no inhabitants and basks in a void of “civilized” occupation awaiting colonization, taking for granted that capitalist development and profit-making from the land are the only desirable pursuits. The linguist Eve Fesl has commented on the use of a term such as “wilderness”:

Fields cleared of natural vegetation then fenced in for the sowing of crops and raising of animals were associated with “civilisation.” These methods were considered superior to harvesting from existing natural environments and to animals grazing freely. Terms such as “wasteland,” “untamed land,” “savage” and “wilderness” were used to contrast Australia with the “ordered woods and gardens” descriptions of the English landscape. (1993, 30–31)

- 18 The descendants of the colonists destroy nature in many ways because they fail to acknowledge its sanctity. This may be seen in a satirical passage stigmatizing a tree-cutting spree of epic proportions, with the goal of destroying the natural habitat of the bats over the town. The bats then descend like a biblical plague onto Desperance, and finally fly away from “The Great Bat Drive” (Wright 2009, 445), in a poetic sentence which shows that it is actually a great loss for everyone: “Finally, flying away from the destruction of fallen trees, they headed up the river corridor, following the freshly open, pale yellow rivergum blossoms that filled the air with a sweet honey-scented perfume” (447). The alliterative echoes in /f/ (finally, flying, from, fallen, following, freshly, filled, (per)fume) and in /s/ (sweet, scented) convey the beauty of the evocation, which requires a new awareness, liberated from the conventions of Victorian good taste, or good smell: “There, they would eat and expel a foul-smelling, pungent gum-blossom-aroma-like shit, as they moved all the way back up to the freshwater springs and rock caves, several hundred kilometres inland” (447). The common language, which the novel creates, finds an expression which cuts across languages to make such joint poetry possible, both anchored in realism and calling for a spiritual vision in a lived-in, inhabited landscape. One must keep one’s nose to the wind, inhaling the rich smells of Country, and one’s ear tuned to a new idiom, to enter that vision of a common language like a guest in the traditional world of the ancestors, with respect.
- 19 From the various modes of code-switching one may find in the novel, some translated, some not, some explained by context, some not, I would like now to study a few examples, which are remarkable for their creativity across both languages, and for the way they set up a viewpoint linguistically and help us into this new world vision. In one particular instance, an alliterative closeness brings together Waanyi and English vocabulary, making the expression “a *wirriwidji* whirly wind” (Wright 2009, 264) phonically memorable. According to Gavan Breen’s dictionary, the word *wirriwidji* means “whirlwind” in English, so that the expression is a bilingual pleonasm, bringing both languages to the same belief in the spirit’s action in nature. It makes the alliteration in /w/ resonate four times in close succession, five times if we take into account the word “while” at the beginning of the sentence, as if mimetically, we could

hear the wind whirled up by the spirit of the “land woman devil Gardajala” in her fight against the sea woman’s cyclone over the land: “And all the while, all poor old Gardajala could do was to raise herself up into a *wirriwidji* whirly wind to throw her spiteful hand full of dirt at the sea” (264). The pleonasm in translation and the phonetic matching between the borrowed word and the target language thus bring the language of the colonizer and that of the colonized into a conjunction in this instance.

- 20 An example of another kind is a loan translation, a lexical and syntactical borrowing translated word-for-word from the Waanyi *Gundugundu*, seen from the viewpoint of Bala, who is afraid of Norm at first. The passage reads: “He edged further away just in case the old Malbu grabbed him because he might be a Gundugundu man, or some other devil-devil from the sea” (Wright 2009, 270). Repeating and hyphenating the word “devil” imitates the structure of the Waanyi word *Gundugundu*, which is not italicized in the text of the novel to emphasize that it is not a foreign word in Bala’s vocabulary. Mary Laughren transcribes the word as “kundukundu” and defines it as “short scrub devil” in her dictionary (Laughren, 47). The English language has thus integrated the principle of reduplication, or reduplicating structures, which consists in “duplicating a morpheme or a word to coin new words and express various grammatical aspects,” a linguistic phenomenon common to many Asian languages (Abbi 1990, 171), but not to standard English. The lack of italics for both “Gundugundu” and “devil-devil” shows that this code-switching of a syntactical form is normal for the child, who although the heir to both languages, is yet firmly settled in the Indigenous world vision of his people.
- 21 Finally, marking the progress of a form of reverse creolization of the English language, in few but memorable occurrences when the Empire writes back through the very medium of language, other Waanyi words are transcribed without italics in the text, emphasizing that they have been lexicalized in English, putting both languages on an equal footing, and anchoring the experience of Country in Waanyi first, as in the case of the bilingual expression “mulburru-turpentine bush” (Wright 2009, 444), for the *acacia chisholmii* in Latin (G. Breen, *mulburru* entry).
- 22 Through such lexical and syntactical borrowings, translations and lexicalizations of the Waanyi into the English language of the novel, this new epic tale manages to convey an Indigenous viewpoint forcibly, from an insider’s vision passed on to any outsider reader, thus creating the sense of a greater community, as one of the functions of code-switching is to express “group identity” amongst the speakers of both languages (Gardner-Chloros 2009, 5). For readers who only speak English and have no access to Waanyi dictionaries (the language being unavailable on Google Translate or more generally online), the sense of inclusion may come from the familiarization with the recurrent Waanyi words in context, making such references our own in the joint experience of reading and inhabiting the geography and the culture of the Gulf, for example “malbu” for “old man,” which recurs no less than twenty-two times throughout the narrative.

A new epic diction

- 23 By code-switching between two languages, the novel also mixes high and low diction, bringing together an Indigenous or Australian colloquial vernacular and an exogenous literary expression, often in very close proximity. While Indigenous orality, and its

impact on the narrative structure, has been commented on (Rodoreda 2016), its versatile mixture with high diction has drawn less attention. Here are a few examples of high usage, often loaded with irony, as in the case of Latinate vocabulary, via the French, or even, the Italian and Corsican languages: “the fetor of rotting fish” (Wright 2009, 142); “La Goddess” (355); “Femme fatale” (356); “their savoir faire in being Australians” (75); “Vendetta, vendetta, such a strange word for the Gulf” (109), the latter drawing the reader’s attention to the borrowing, just as in the case of a high-flown, overwrought literary language to stigmatize a racist inscription on the town’s water tower: “Modern literary skills adorned the pinnacle” (432).

- 24 To convey the complexities of Indigenous feuds, the novel also uses a mixture of Germanic, Greek and Latinate roots, for the description of strange household noises during a confrontation between two families: “The fracas coming off a combination of the jumbled voices of wild men pitching for trouble, making pig noises, and the Toyota’s distinctive revving was reverberating from corrugated-iron clad wall to wall in Norm’s house, down through the long curving corridor which resembled the shape of a cochlea inside an ear” (Wright 2009, 109). This sentence combines an ancient borrowing from the French *fracas* passed on into English, and many Latinate roots (*combination, distinctive, reverberating, corrugated, curving, corridor, resembled*), or Ancient Greek for *cochlea*, the snail emblematic of the shape of the inner ear. Such diction confers a mock-epic grandeur to the hostility between two families over the killing of a wild pig, in which the men are wilder than the animal.
- 25 To convey an idea of Wright’s versatility, let us compare the latter excerpt to what follows immediately, transcribing the same sense of strife, but in a lowly and comical fashion, taking the inversion between mankind and animals one notch further, when Girly expresses herself in direct speech: “You are worse than a fucking mangy crap dog following around sluts on heat all night long with your diseased pricks dragging through your legs on the fucking dirt” (Wright 2009, 111). While direct discourse conveys the scale of the insults directly and registers the character’s vulgarity in her use of the f-word twice without any narrative filter, other passages use indirect discourse to beat about the bush of euphemistic formulations, conveying a wide range of tones in this gathering of group speech, and bringing in all voices without levelling them into a uniform diction, thus building up a multivocal epic novel.
- 26 Moreover, expanding on the novel’s mixture of high and low registers, euphemisms suggest the low while paying lip service to high, proper, conventional diction. They range from the simplest kind, to suggest the f-word very obviously but without writing it, as in “a flippen better look” (Wright 2009, 141), to more imaginative expressions, as in “a fruit salad full of abuse” (10); they also rely on the unsaid, creating a sense of playful interplay between narrator and reader in an exchange of nudge-nudge, wink-wink complicity, as in: “The old people they had tactlessly taken to calling simple-minded retaliated with a hundred months’ worth of evil curses and sorcery” (75–76); in this case, insults are not uttered explicitly but measured against the duration of their performative intention, the round count of one hundred months sounding far more impressive than the eight years they stand for. Another instance of reliance on the unsaid and a sense of complicity, without direct expression of vulgarity, can be found in the way Mozzie Fishman is said to have “muttered a string of undecipherables into his beard” (137); the insults are not inaudible but “undecipherable” and the adjective is turned into a noun, turning the qualification of the adjective into a principle,

conceptualized by a substantive. The narrative voice here calls our attention to the way insults are written rather than proffered, the transcription of the elliptic payback writing it up to a sense of greater permanence than what any oral outburst might have conveyed. The use of “undecipherables” as a noun also carries a greater impact than its common usage as an adjective, and furthers the mysterious impact of the unsaid. With a great deal of humor, the narrator manages to frustrate readers by depriving them of the expected vulgarity, while suggesting great linguistic creativity, with a power comparable to Girlie’s insulting energy, but in a covert manner which relies on a greater sense of sharing between the implied reader and the narrator, bouncing off the characters’ determination in fighting back racism with linguistic aggression.

- 27 Finally, a few memorable passages use archaic diction, inscribing the register in a high literary tradition, but without any hiatus between the vernacular and a more poetic, archaic-sounding phrasing. The a-ing circumfix is one such usage, a heritage from Middle and Old English, still to be found in some regional dialects overseas. In the novel, it can be used either in derision, to describe the “jaws atrembling” of snobbish matrons (Wright 2009, 64), or in poetic glorification of Norm’s sea journey on “the murky grey waters aswelling” in a passage whose rhythm sounds like a distant echo of the second part of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, describing the doldrums in negative terms: “Otherwise in the stillness and quiet, he looked like he had died; no fish tugged on the dead lines. No surface waves rose for the absence of localised winds. He saw nothing through the murky grey waters aswelling” (249). After the Ancient Mariner has killed the albatross, the ship gets mired in a “silent sea” and the negation “ne” (archaic for “nor”) takes over the lines, in “We stuck, ne breath ne motion” and in the striking opposition between the abundance of sea water and the want of soft water for the sailors: “Water, water, every where / Ne any drop to drink” (Coleridge 1969, 11).
- 28 A passage best exemplifying Wright’s new epic diction, mixing high and low, is the description, through Will’s eyes, of Father Danny’s car, when the priest is seen approaching the lagoon. The car is perceived as swearing, in response to Danny’s vociferations over religious music in the car: “In return, the black Valiant’s souped-up engine roared profanities throughout the pristine neighbourhood” (Wright 2009, 176). The colloquial participle “souped-up” blends along with the more refined adjective “pristine” and inaugurates a passage of highly poetic diction in the next paragraph, which openly brings together the car and the ancestral serpent in their joint progress through the red earth: “As he watched the car edging closer, shimmering through the sacredness of the flowing water snake, gathering storm clouds, the divine nature of red earth, what came was a holy car from the pale blue yonder, as though sent from heaven to commence the journey of taking Elias home” (176). The sentence displays archaic diction (“yonder”) and solemn, Latinate vocabulary (“to commence”) in majestic rhythm, making a godly vehicle (“a holy car”) of the old Chrysler-Australia car of an actual brand of a mock-epic-sounding name (“Valiant”), whereas it looks like a ridiculous Rocinante-like mode of transportation. At once comical and holistic, realistic and mythical, the clumsy car encapsulates the double reading contract of the novel from its beginning, and its new, all-encompassing epic diction. Just as the followers of the Indigenous preacher Mozzie Fishman are said to be “shaken up and down from travelling every inch of corrugation of outback roads” (137), in a strong use of the word “corrugation” (rather than the expected descriptive adjective “corrugated outback

roads”), Father Danny’s vehicle serves an abstract, disinterested purpose when travelling the roads that offer contact with the land and its people.

- 29 Invoking the ancestral spirits of the red earth as well as the spiritual energy of Father Danny, and including crowds of characters from the Gulf of Carpentaria, the novel sings Country in a celebration of life, facing the Apocalypse of climate-change and the wrongs of history with hope. Such passages are brought together in the final sentence of the novel, when Norm and his grandson Bala walk home together: “It was a mystery, but there was so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh as they walked hand in hand out of town, down the road, Westside, to home” (Wright 2009, 499). Here, as elsewhere, the sentence uses alliteration (wafting off the watery, walked), archaic-sounding diction (singing the country afresh), as reminders of the travels of many characters in the novel, to define journeying as a spiritual progress with strong physical grounding. This glorifies the gathering which has completed a full circle between the first word of the novel, “A Nation,” and the final “home,” defining a new sense of belonging and togetherness, and writing a new epic for the “universal local.”

Conclusion

- 30 In her blending of English and Waanyi language, high and low diction, concrete and abstract elements, humorous and poetic expression, often in alliterative prose which sounds on the verge of scansion, Wright manages to compose a wide-ranging epic novel, reminiscent of the songlines of her ancestors, but inscribed in an exogenous literary heritage in English, and written in a creative, hybrid style. The joint tradition she thus inscribes in *Carpentaria* extolls the union of opposites, not in erasure of any characteristic idiosyncrasies, but in celebration of the long-standing, abundant and boisterous generosity of life, and simultaneously in condemnation of death-pandering individualism and short-term profit-seeking. As epic as the plagues upon Egypt (*Exodus* 12, 13), the waters of retribution leave debris in their wake when they “pass over” the land: “All passed over the flooded land groaning with the remains of buildings, boats, cars, trees, rocks, electricity poles, fences, cargo from fallen ships, plastic consignments scrambled like licorice allsorts and dead animals” (Wright 2009, 469). Reminding everyone that the culture of consumption and materialism may not be all there is to life, that it may even destroy life as we know it, the list of such an apocalyptic destruction calls for a renewed sense of hope to write a collective and responsible epic anew from the wreckage, with an ear attuned to the “groaning” of the land. This new epic sings a common narrative on different terms and in a different language than the previous oral or written traditions combined, keeping the memory of the loop of iniquity and destruction to avoid such pitfalls in the present, as well as in the future.

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NOTES

1. The main difference between the European tradition and Wright's epic is that she does not sing the glory of a hero, but the imbricated, joint action of many characters in a group. The main features of an epic are the cultural assertion of a group through the narration of a tutelary hero's actions and the invocation to the muse(s) calling for their benevolent inspiration. I am using a

synthesis which Stephanie Schäfer elaborated in her article “American Epic(s)? A Reflection on Genre and the Making of Heroes” (2012).

ABSTRACTS

While G.S. Fraser sees good free verse as “verse which does not scan regularly but seems always on the verge of scanning regularly” (1970, 74), I argue that Alexis Wright’s epic prose in *Carpentaria* sounds as if it were verging on poetry from the English tradition, blended with a local Indigenous oral tradition and Waanyi language. Using structuring devices occasionally borrowed from the English poetic tradition as well as from Waanyi, her prose achieves mnemonic functions, inscribing the novel as a memorial epic in a new epic diction, and glorifying the act of writing, as well as the use of orality.

INDEX

Keywords: epic, Alexis Wright, poetry, *Carpentaria*, re-enchanting, narratee, Waanyi, memory

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