



ON READING *CARPENTARIA*

A REVIEW OF ALEXIS WRIGHT'S
MILES FRANKLIN AWARD-WINNING NOVEL

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ORIENTATION NOTE

This review of *Carpentaria* is a response to suggestions made in conversation with the author and her publishers, Giramondo. My intent was to write an orientation to *Carpentaria* which might place it for northern hemisphere readers who may be unfamiliar with the (contemporary) Australian indigenous situation, and who may also be looking for some local guidance in approaching Alexis Wright's style of narrative, her unique elemental poetic and her indigenous geographic attunement.

It represents my contribution to the ANZSJA 'Uses of Subjective Experience' Conference panel session on Sunday 21 October on indigenous themes/myth/nature/Jung's contribution to psychological working. D.W. Winnicott's phrase, 'maturation and the facilitating environment', the title of one of his books, suggests the direction of my thoughts here. For over twenty years, ever since returning from London in 1986, having graduated as a Jungian analyst, I have been concerned with the project of acknowledging the Australian psychosocial and geographic ecosystem as the maturational 'facilitating environment' for my therapeutic imagination. This may be a strange thing to say - but

it is not all that easy to accept 'the place where we live' as the active location of maturation as a human and as a professional psychoanalyst.

Psychoanalysis is a Euro-centred activity and the measures of success and recognition are mostly determined by the natural interests and intents of the European attunement. I feel that most psychotherapists unconsciously repeat Euro-psyche patternings in the consulting room alchemia. If this is so, then the psychological use of the indigenous state is probably a bit dodgy. The desire to rediscover an Australia that works for myself (psychologically) has led me into isolated and neglected situations. I have deliberately resisted swallowing the comfort/collusion/certainties of a British/ French/ North American psychoanalytic ethos. I have caught myself at specific moments in a session deflecting the urge to colonise Australian patients with the formulae of a Northern interpretation repertoire, as though any couch anywhere in the world could be forever England.

Paradoxically, I also draw happily upon the richness of the Euro-Asian cultural lineage, mythos and sensibility; as any Jungian does, accepting the received wisdom, elegance and complexity of one's own gene pool. I have neither spat it out nor swallowed it whole. And I know I have missed out on certain things, but I have found myself saying over and over again, 'there is something else here, of a psychic nature, to be found or created - of itself; and there is an urgency to that project - lest we discover ourselves too late'. In this project I have found an unlikely mentor in Rafael Lopez Pedraza (*Cultural Anxiety* and *Dionysos in Exile*) who has insisted that the South American nations and the souls of the ugly and underdeveloped have a right to be heard and counted as psychological beings, as legitimate theorists and as healers of the wounded world - as much, or even more so, than any elegant psycho-crat of Belsize Lane or Zurich.

I make the suggestion to you here today (as part of this panel) that there are only a handful of people in our profession, in Australia, who have mindfully

developed a mature acknowledgment of the psychological value and vitality of the indigenous faculty of imagination - that is to say, imagination alive in the specific context of the local environment - in 'country'. These handful tend to acknowledge *personal* relationships with specific indigenous Australians as being significant in the development of their appreciation and comprehension of imaginative Australia - the animating place where we live. This place which we have found (and created) together and have not, as yet, totally destroyed?

Some of that handful of people are present at this conference and each of you has contributed to the strength of mind of the other. (Many of the people of whom I speak are represented as authors in John Cameron's book, *Changing Places: Re-Imagining Australia*.) These are personal associations, subjectively nuanced. We have made use of each other's subjective experience. Many of us have met repeatedly in specific environmental settings - including the various 'Sense of Place' gatherings. We have pooled experiences which are not confined to the objective reading of journals and citing of distant texts. To my mind, Alexis Wright is one of those persons of affinity. I have been associated with Alexis, now closely, now at a distance, in some demanding activities in the Aboriginal domain. Her three books, *The Grog War*, *Plains of Promise*, *Carpentaria*, her politically-oriented activities (Kalkaringi Constitutional Meetings), her essay 'On Writing *Carpentaria*'¹ (Heat, 2007) and the PEN lecture, July 4, 2007, 'On Fear', all display Alexis Wright's advocacy of a specifically located indigenous imagination. On this subject I prefer to keep quiet and let her speak.

Alexis connects ancestral themes, nature experienced, contemporary fact. For this reason I offer the conference this review as an acknowledgment of her work, which is, I believe, a companion piece to our endeavour.

ON READING *CARPENTARIA*

'... wherever they found the going good on those well known tracks. Meanwhile a thane of the king's household, a carrier of tales, a traditional singer deeply schooled in the lore of the past, linked a new theme to a strict metre.' (Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf*, p.59)

Illuminated fish

The opening lines of *Carpentaria* go thus:

'The white dove bearing an olive branch never lands. Little girls who come back home after church on Sunday, who look around themselves at the human fallout and announce matter of factly, Armageddon begins here.'

I have not yet brought myself to the final lines of this novel. I read forward reluctant to come upon the finale. I read the same passage again and again, reading *Carpentaria* back and forward and back. This becomes a vitalising experience. It holds me in a position of self-recognition. (I will explain this later.) Certain passages I repeat, as, when young, I repeated *sotto voce* Rimbaud's paragraphic hypnotic, *Illuminations*, and fragments of *A Season in Hell* - but then, in those days, I was beginning and looking for navigation. Now I am an older man and I read with pleasure those books which hold the maturation of a culture steeped within them. I take pleasure in deep down simple things. I take pleasure in feeding chooks. And the illuminated fish of Norm Phantom.

I spent my childhood in a desiccated Australian country town like that of Desperance in *Carpentaria*. I have lived in the Northern Territory, in Central Australia, in and around the town of Alice Springs. A town like that; tacked on the fringes of Aboriginal country. Alice Springs is where Alexis Wright passed her time (feeding her own hens and rooster) and wringing out this novel.

Alice Springs has more inflicted murders, per capita, than almost any other place in the country. The Australian Institute of Criminology notes that the N.T. has a rate of 8 in a 1000, as against 1.5 per 1000 for the rest of Australia (ABC, 2007). We live in murderous times and I am writing this account because I want what is happening within Alexis' story to be appreciated by those of you whose remnant family and forbears foundered upon these coasts and made of it what you willed. This Aboriginal country has attracted mingled peoples, Chinese, Macassans, Pacific islanders, Lutherans, Greek islanders, Italian builders, Catholic Irish dissidents, Anglican woolgatherers, merchant brokers, cattle breeders and sundry refugees from the holocausts of the world, each with a suitcase and a story. Alexis, being herself a mingled woman with a strong story line from an indigenous ancestry, carries a true tale told in several strict and loose metres at once. Like the human brain, Australia is composed of many interconnecting parts, and a tale told from within this primal country can speak with many tongues, some very old and serpentine, some very new and paradoxical.

'A Different Kind of Courage' is the title Charles Taylor uses for his review of Jonathon Lear's insightful book, *Ethics in The Face of Cultural Devastation* (on the fate of the Crow tribe of Western USA). Charles Taylor (in the *New York Review of Books*, April 2007) points up that the consequences of the 'closing down of a culture' are rather bad for one, despite the proffered opportunities. Taylor and Lear, among others, notice that narratives of the 'end times' of all world indigenous populations are configured with drunkenness and murderous violence. Lear acknowledges the despair of the indigenous Armageddon. The coming of the 'pale riders' did matter in America, just as it did in Australia, yet Lear also recounts imaginative survival activities by Crow and Sioux visionary leaders who, variously, invented ways to combine practical expediency with will; with hope. In such a way 'human beings can find the resources to come back from a virtual dead end and invent a new way: ... in creative continuity with the one that has been condemned...' (Taylor, p. 8). The writer of *Carpentaria* lives in our antipodean 'end times'. Her history

shows that she has collaborated in efforts to redress indigenous injury and constitutional law. It is totally necessary that we attend to the precise detail of improving Aboriginal chances of health and survival in Australia. Well and good. Jonathon Lear and Alexis Wright might add that indigenous survival depends upon mustering and focussing the faculty of imagination (not fantasy). This novel reveals focussed mental strength illumining images of chaos. But there has to be a way out of this present bitter chaos. Can you imagine a way? I wonder, says Alexis; and so she begins.

The bruising truth is that Australasia and Oceania are locations of ‘end times’ for many, and ‘new times’ for others. *Carpentaria* is a narrative of maybe, end times, maybe not. It may be a narrative from the time of grief, and thus the sharply shaped truth of that state may be difficult to swallow. Fish bones.

I have said that I haven’t finished the book, and you may think it audacious to admit this fact. Why am I so far reluctant to come to the end of *Carpentaria*? Why has it taken nine months so far? Why didn’t I gut it in one go, as some friends have been able to do? Maybe it is not the ending which counts, not a revelatory finale, whatever that might turn out to be. What counts is the marination of oneself in the psychic ecosystem of the Queensland Gulf Country, that country which Alexis Wright’s lucid words mirror in a glass; now darkly - now light.

Death in the time of *Carpentaria*

The end of a man in Gabriel Marquez’ *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is enfolded into an Hispanic ceremonial poetic of death which you may recognise - machismo, crucifixo-fado, Madonna-pieta, tango-lamentation-blade, magical red blood - white feather rooster - white lamb - black goat - black bull - wrecked body on the sand - kitchen floor. The iconography fits in the mythology of the Americas - sorcery thought, voodoo ceremonial, sacrificial payback, suffering Jesus, redemption heroic; maybe, maybe not.

'...They were sitting down to breakfast when they saw Santiago Nasar enter, soaked in blood and carrying the roots of his entrails in his hands... "Santiago, my son", she shouted at him, "what has happened to you?" "They've killed me, Wene child", he said. He stumbled on the last step, but he got up at once. "He even took care to brush the dirt that was stuck to his guts", my aunt Wene told me. Then he went into his house through the back door that had been open since six and fell on his face in the kitchen.' (p.122)

Chronicle of a Death Foretold ends thus, upon yet another unnecessary annihilation in borderline Amazon river country, among a country people like so many others who have navigated the violence of indigenous Armageddon, danced the conceptions and abortions of erotic despotic cross-ocean meetings. Stories of American colonisation have a place in world literature. Melancholia and romance. Conrad and Marquez. South American colonismo exists. Australasia has hardly achieved such a recognised existence, with a desirable literary genre and panache of its own, even though a most striking ethnography comes from this region. Perhaps it is felt that nothing has happened here; or perhaps because there is no template in the European mind which can recognise what happens, what passes, what lives in the psychic system of Oceanic indigenous peoples flooded now by myths and ambitions from the North.

Death in the time of *Carpentaria* has its very own ceremonial, its poetic iconography and tone. It may take some time and some effort to recognise the mode, the forms of Aboriginal mentality abounding amid the Arafura islands and the Gulf coasts of *Carpentaria*. Here, blood, death, burial, silence (or the meaning of silence), fish, fluid passion, sexual nature, storm cloud, lightning, southern cross, morning star and the giving of oneself for others is, after all, perhaps not of an order familiar enough to connect with the brain configurations of northern life, northern geography, northern meaning. The Gulf people might seem a bit strangely located somewhere in a borderless disorder.

The world view of the white Desperance population, the activity of ‘rubbish-tip Aborigines’, and the oblique defiance in their resistant coexistence might be a bit unexpected. The Gulf might seem just a little bit too insane. The novel itself shifts in structure, in dream elements, in poetic style, narrative words slip, dipping and diving... all this, perhaps, enigmatic content and breathtaking style may whisper that reading *Carpentaria* requires a special kind of work. Well this might be true. The people of high Papua, the Arafura and the deserts of Australia do mental work, and they do a lot of it, upon the objects, activities and myths of Christian Europe and diverse Asia. They have to truly work to make sense of what we, the white people do - and say we do - and think we do. It takes considerable intellectual effort to interpret the fantasies of the West. It also takes considerable intellectual effort on the part of an indigenous writer to render that which is known and familiar (in Oceania) into a form that can be apprehended and appreciated by persons (such as myself) whose conceptions of love, death, hate, knowledge, truth and continuity are enfolded into a European grid system. My point is that Alexis has said that she had to work really hard to get this novel to do what she intuited that she had to do with it - in order to make it a work of contemporary insight and ancestral integrity. It is, as a consequence, a beautiful book. And because it is such a book, and the author did the work, you the reader can relax.

The story does move; it does sweep cinematically. It is operatic; it does hang cliffs. There are rescues and meetings of triumph, there is a full show of apocalyptic humours, cathartic moments, tristesse tropique, duress, divine comedy; she does, after all, want to be read and she has, after all, won a prize or two. Nevertheless, it is not a conventional novel and not a conventional structure and in the reading of *Carpentaria* one may find opportunity to unlearn habitual literary signatures, one may enjoy the practice of suspension of judgement without irritably reaching out for certainty or resolution. Aboriginal existential reality is like that; that is to say, there isn't much certainty and resolution if you are black and Australian and alive. But there is a sense of composi-

tion, there is a connectivity, there are layers of meaning, there is a real mind inside the Aboriginal body. The composition of the human presence around the township and the big bastard mine of *Carpentaria* is enfolded between the breasts of two mythologies, that of the black and that of the white. It is ambivalent and destructive - the interfolding of the two worlds, two laws, two states of being. The interfold also generates something creative and it's the creative impulse that's worth looking for, even if the pre-existing dark-skinned poetic pragmatic way of life is disoriented now by predatory blonde-beast ravage. This much is probably true. The pillage I mean. But it goes the other way also. The heroic settlers (the mayors of Desperance, the policeman, the wives, the vicars, the mine managers and, of course, people like myself) are maddened incrementally by the climate of Aboriginal logic. This is a peculiarity of Aboriginal psychic resistance. Alexis depicts it.

The intersection of all these currents produces the kind of cognitive dissonance which generates a true poetry, a sung beauty or a paranoid self-torture. Alexis writes from that strange intersection. A poetic dissonant? Well, maybe, maybe not, but anyhow, the indigenous force carries on regardless, in primal cyclonic wilfulness and the force is carried deliberately, vehemently on by the Tribunes of *Carpentaria*, the three muddy Magi - Phantom senior, Phantom junior and the Prophet Fishman - accompanied by cavalcades, angelic white Falcons, black Valiant vehicles, young and old spirits wearing shorts, football beanies, scales, fins, feathers and so forth. Familiar contemporary figures, who guard and guide, off-handedly. Familiar figures to anyone who dwells in Australian Aboriginal company, that is.

Ten burials or so

'Once upon a time, not even so long ago, while voyaging in the blackest of midnights, a strong sea man... had his memory stolen by thieving sea monsters...' (*Carpentaria*, p. 43)

There are, in *Carpentaria*, ten, maybe nine, specified annihilations of bodily life. Nine murders - suicides - what you will. Ten or more deceased bodies are disposed of in unusual manner. At least this is my count so far - up to Chapter 13. I am not counting the fish, the bats, the dogs and unspecified victims of cyclone, explosion and road carnage.

You may have seen the film *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, the Tommy Lee Jones/ Guillermo Arriaga eulogy for a singular wet-back Mexican who crosses into Texas, works as a cowboy and is stupidly shot by a masturbating border patroller. The body of Melquiades is carried on horseback to Mexico by the border patroller under duress as punishment by the Lee Jones character, a Texan friend of Melquiades. Lee Jones undertakes this impossible task simply because of a promise made by Jones in a moment of intimacy with the Mexican. It is a quixotic journey. While reading *Carpentaria* you may find yourself unexpectedly watching this elegiac film as counterpoint to the several inconceivably difficult journeys of the body of Elias Smith in a tin boat.

Nine/ten murders and perhaps one life saved. And yet this is no pizza western, no 'Wolf Creek' outback Falconio fantasy. It is, I have heard, for some readers, a shock to be reading something so relentlessly revealing of the death (wish), so elemental, so exact a display of Australia's white brute, oh yes that, and the undertone of sorcery and the unfathomable paradox of indigenous mentalities. This sad, sad tropic. This paradise, which naïve northern hemisphericals conspire to invade and inhabit as a comforting investment.

Carpentaria is both loved and avoided. The idea of Wright's book has inspired some of our most comprehending writers to recognise her, Tom Keneally for instance, and that most intelligent national media commentator, Kerry O'Brien, acknowledge the depth and challenge of Wright's status as a powerful artist of indigenous descent. (Interview ABC radio July 5, 2007.) At the same time you may feel yourself not quite knowing - perhaps - how to get

your teeth into this elusively spun yarn. This slow grown yam. This true story about a part of the world that is indeed ‘very far away from everything else’.

‘It was in those precise moments when Elias Smith was fighting hopelessly to save his identity, when his loss became absolute, that another unusual thing happened in this part of the world, that was far away from everything else...’ (Carpentaria, p. 43)

Swan songs for an endlessly un-landed dove

‘Every time you go into that town, close your ears to those white people who might not even be human, who may be, maybe not...’ (Carpentaria, p. 321)

‘They found they could not communicate anything of how they felt after a few words, so they sat there in silence, pondering who did this to him...’ (Carpentaria, p. 347)

I confess to you that I am a psychoanalyst. This is my profession. I am sometimes introduced as an anthropologist, though I am not. Today I write this section while pausing in the preparation of a seminar for remote area mental health practitioners. The seminar draws upon D.W. Winnicott’s ideas on the management of chaos and the ‘development of the capacity for concern’, with reference to Australian Aboriginal circumstances and the Pitjantjatjara/Pintubi concept of *Kanyini*... ‘care for others’ (Hogan/Randall, 2007). You will know perhaps that there is a crisis of care/*kanyinjaku* within (indigenous) Australia. On 20th June, 2007, the Australian Federal government dramatically declared an Emergency Intervention into the Northern Territory, the Prime Minister personally affirming that serious money and effort would be put in place to manage the interpersonal chaos. The relevant ministers have affirmed government intent to break the grip of alcoholic violence, child sexual abuse, welfare dependency, indigenous care-less-ness.

This is my field: petrol sniffing, youth suicide, annihilation of the self. For more than fifteen years I have been among those who have cajoled the Federal government to apply mind and resourcefulness to this, our local apocalypse (as has Alexis Wright). The Emergency Intervention has been a long time in the coming and it came in a sudden pre-election wave. This is why reading Alexis Wright during this period gives me quiet delight, such 'shock of recognition'. Steadily, page by page, she holds my attention in the position where the appalling condition of the black health and the bewildering condition of white mind and the agitated relationship between black and white can be felt, and thought, again and again. It helps to have a long, long rhythmic story to hold ones' wavering attention, while the surge of stunned feelings and catastrophic thoughts can swim out of the ennui and disorder. This is a book for those who have suffered Australian Aboriginal Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. AAPTSD? This is a condition which is formally undiagnosed but exists; although for the life of me I can't figure out where the 'post' is. The war is not over. The peculiar dreamlike states of trauma reaction are constant and present. I do not know how this novel would be understood by persons who have not experienced the psychic pain and mingled humour of a country such as this. Perhaps because the narrator's voice is so beguilingly hypnotic one could simply love it and follow. The voice which speaks in *Carpentaria* slides right to the liver of things, right through kidney to amygdala. It brings you to elementary limbic system experiences of what it is to dwell in a country such as this - a numinous, sun-drowned, exhausted chagrin of a country.

My friend says that reading *Carpentaria* is like breathing. "You breathe it", she says, "that's why I read only a little at a time. Breathe too much of it; I might drown." She can say this because it is so familiar to her, so close, and, like drowning, reading brings back a life passing before her - a life lived in Aboriginal company.

Normal feelings - grief and suchlike

'Behold the sight of welcome home, embedded in the never-ending rattling corrugated-iron shanty fortress, built from the sprinklings of holy water, charms, spirits, lures acquired from packets of hair dye, and discarded materials pinched from the rubbish dump across the road.

This was Number One house. Normal Phantom's house was the first black-fella place built on the edge of Desperance... The house was a hornet's nest, like Angel Day...'. (Carpentaria, p.12)

I have inhabited corrugated tin sheds with a 'Norm Phantom'. The hornet's nest of his wife and the rubbish dump, I know, and I have witnessed the meticulous detailed attention to small beauties. My version of Phantom did not paint fish; he managed bonsai trees as his other occupation when he wasn't driving trucks, taking care of drunks and dodging insults. Imagine that; diminutive Japanese bonsai trees nurtured in a shade shelter in 40 degree heat in arid Australia. Meticulous loving water-sprayed care, oh, and yes, there were the fish, now I remember, the goldfish he kept in a tank pressed up near the air conditioner to keep the fish cool. Iridescent, cantankerous old men wedded to reverent, irreverent Mrs Angel Days who rule the roosters. Mrs Angel Day, that utterly narcissistic remnant of a once noble family, regal, cankered Missus Days demanding their pound of flesh. When an Angel Day is in front of you with a hardwood hunting stick poised, you too would politely stoop to tie your shoe lace. And then an hour later lovingly bring her a mug of tea and too much sugar as though nothing untoward had happened. And that night she and other women benevolently patrol the settlement streets sorting out petrol sniffers, drunks and family violence. And the Fishman's caravan of single men? This too is true.

The characters in *Carpentaria* are real enough; they are not stereotypes, not mere figurines. They are ordinary enough Australians going about their native business. Even Bruiser the Mayor of Desperance and Truthful the policeman have recognisable archetypal authenticity. Though, I guess it's true that they

resemble larger than life characters of operatic scale. Alexis, knowing such country people from the inside, does not squeeze their feeling states into vegemite jars as Conventional Consumable Australian National Products. *Carpentaria* is a nail in the fantasy about the emotional life of Australia's indigenous people. This idea deserves a seminar on its own and all I can suggest here is that the indigenous sector of the brain of *Carpentaria's* writer is releasing forms for feelings which you may never know she/we had. She is a most incisive cultural analyst, perhaps an authentic psychoanalytic practitioner, because she brings that which is unconscious to conscious formulation. Familiar, wryly ironic Aboriginal humour flickers throughout the pages and in this way she penetrates into an essence of being and releases the fragrance of a hidden country for the guidance and benefit of others.

I could also say that the text of *Carpentaria* is Australian anthropology. T.G.H. Strehlow in *Songs of Central Australia* collected and translated sung ontopoetic indigenous verses of central Australia in such a way that the gravity of indigenous mind could be felt, heard, appreciated. Eminent W.E.H. Stanner, in his eloquently humble *White Man Got No Dreaming*, asked that a just recognition be given to the reality and romance of the Tjukurrpa - the dreaming state of native country. The Aboriginal kinaesthetic mind and intelligent body apprehends the power; 'the push'; the force of the creation. The poetic form of the Dreaming songs probably follow and evoke the implicit order of a 'poetic structure of being', a subtle matter which philosopher Freya Mathews is beginning to articulate (Mathews, 2007). Perhaps slowly more and more settled Australians allow themselves to be kinaesthetically, intelligently touched by the graciousness of these creatures of the 'Dreaming', larger than storm clouds, who move in the symmetry of the country mind? Consider then, the interpreters of the poets of Australiana, among them Strehlow, Stanner and, shyly, Alexis. Each in their time, each with a tune, 'deeply schooled in the lore of the past', these ethnographic translators help hold connections to our original poets. You could not go wrong to give that schooling to your children.

'...a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity. It moved graciously...' (*Carpentaria*, p. 1)

The Fisherman's Hotel

'It was unfortunate for them that they were incoherently high on petrol, glue, metho or whatever cocktail had been their last meal, when Truthful and Bruiser found them.' (*Carpentaria*, p. 333)

The bodies again, the bodies keep coming back like Shakespeare's ghosts, the foul doings of *Macbeth*, and the ancient archetypal horrors of northern countries, the rhythmic nightfire tales of Anglo-Saxon Beowulf, Grendel's dismemberment and Grendel's mother, rampant in revenge. I recall Beowulf's heroic descent into watery caverns. Will Phantom and the flood, Norm Phantom and the gropers, underground undersea, Elias and the severed helicopter, claw and arm of Grendel. Revenge, payback, cycles of time. Witches. Sycorax, Ariel, *The Tempest* and the Mediterranean *Metamorphosis* - Ovid, Apuleius - the imaginative convention of transformations of human bodies, animals, plants. Transformations so appreciated by a magical European sensibility which knows how to slide from shape-to-shape, nightmare-to-nightmare; Myrrha plotting sex in the dark with her unsuspecting father. Orpheus dismembered in manic female jealousy, bodies flung from cliff tops, insane emperors, poets crucified, story woven into story, endless reams of unbroken threads from the beginning of time right down to the present. Tell me why, while reading this book I keep slipping into Milk Wood moods, into *Finnegan's Wake*, *Ulysses* - in Irish and Greek pigment; intricate flowing cadence and the beginning spring of all our tales?

Reading this book, I gather clusters of word; words of knowledge, words of hate, words of love. The words are so well cohered that I can cast them as a bait is cast, or weigh them like handfuls of earth, holding them as one holds a handful of red earth by a graveside, mourning and melancholy scattering as

earth scatters on a wooden coffin. Friends, boys, countrymen, who have died wrapped in Australian sand. Aboriginal boys who forgot their weight, lost gravity, forgot their geometry.

Reading this book at a slow pace I can gather parables and memory and know that someone is writing about movements in remote places which I know. An inner country which nevertheless appears on the surface. I will not be locked out of this country and here are words from a dark person who refuses also to be locked out. I can read all this and sleep in it, if I wish, and spit out anything I want.

I do not treat this book like a work of literature. I do not read it as a thriller is read, in tension for the finale. I do not bother to finish it even. It neither begins nor ends anyway. The Phantom Fishman *saga* rolls like Dreaming rolls from place-to-place, event-to-event. Follow a bit now and then, visit it like visiting favoured sites. Take it camping on the coast for a month and put it under your pillow. Sit in a hotel bar for a week in a town like Derby, Western Australia or Normanton, Queensland. A week should do. Leave the book by your left elbow and read a paragraph and watch what happens around you. Don't bother to open it even. But - lest you forget - this is one of the most eloquently written and most kindly books ever yet produced from the antipodes.

Hope and concern

'Gulf people have something to say about fish: their Norm Phantom was the big man of the sea. Regardless of the isolation of country people, because talk reaches out and grabs peoples attention everywhere, all nature of people strolled into the Fisherman's Hotel just to clap eyes on the sea man of Carpentaria. In sea men's circles, yarns of Norm Phantom of Desperance were imagined far more than the truth...' (Carpentaria, p. 95)

Why did I bother to introduce psychoanalysis, a traditional craft now on the rim of exile? Well, because this activity, on the rim of exile, is concerned with the urge to consciousness, with criminality, with the roots of aggression, the role of 'destruction as a cause of coming into being'. The craft is concerned with the cultivation of imagination as a source of human creativity. It is an occupation which allows feeling and thought to marry across the brain. The secret of the conjunction is image. It is possible to relieve suffering and desolation. The secret taught is the secret Fishman follows, Phantom follows and later Hope follows - which is to hold with dedication to an order, a thread - a line deeply set. The profession of fisherman and hunter and analyst is a profession which listens out - as Will Phantom listens out. Will Phantom becomes a man of 'constant vigil'. Each of our skin cultures, the white, the yellow, the red and the black, have a profession which is concerned with the development of the capacity for concern and the holding of the line. In each of these cultures now, in this age of political expediency, much is done to harry and harass bearers of this responsibility. Bearers of long memory. Much is done to obliterate. In *Carpentaria*, Will Phantom's wife, Hope, is jettisoned from a helicopter. Hope falls into the sea.

Once a year, with Dr. Anne Noonan, who also works in indigenous affairs, I present a seminar for the local Institute of Psychiatry on working in Aboriginal settings. This year the seminar comes round while I am reading the chapter on the fate of Hope and her small son. The seminar will be on this theme of 'falling hope'. I will reiterate the need for the development of the capacity for concern for others in a time of devastation. *Carpentaria* is my 'recommended text' mainly because it is a direct counterpoint to Freud's *Totem and Taboo* which draws extensively upon Australian Aboriginal material. No, I am not going to criticise Freud's nineteenth century understanding of the Australian 'primitive' mind, nor will I argue with his use of Baldwin and Spencer to support his Oedipus Law and Primal Father/ Horde theorem. No, I will mention it because at certain hours of his late nights Freud (whose name means 'Joy') set down great stories from the fantasy and pain of his own particular horde.

Freud took seriously the inner world of humans, the content of minds, and he spoke out about the broken children of Vienna. *Carpentaria* is a psychiatric cultural text. In Oceania, there are many lost thoughts wandering like spirits looking for a thinker. I will say this to the psychiatrists. I will say, Alexis is your model. Learn to think like her. One day in the future, Wright will be recognised as a profound receiver of thoughts about her times... By then, she will be an old woman in a woollen beanie, deafly wondering if anyone remembers her story, her Will, her Gulf.

This book is, of course, a major artistic text. It has potential energy. Remember how the Joyce texts puzzled then inspired. I don't know why those texts worked at that time. But one can learn from their example in finding a satisfying orientation to Alexis' potential energy. The point is that *Carpentaria* is a dreaming text; let it seep in sleep as water seeps in a leaky boat. Let it suck as fertile mud sucks at the roots of mangrove. Recall how Joyce handles his Dublin-in-the-mind. Recall how Seamus Heaney cracks open the granite language of ancient Anglo-Saxon, and remember that Alexis' narrator' mind lives in tidal mud flats, sinuous rivers and long storm-troubled sea horizons; recall the seamless dreaming of Milk Wood village and the Welsh voice and recall that Alexis' ear is attuned to language based on the rhythms of onomatopoeic song lines. Why not rest on oars and listen in much the same way as you might with *Ulysses* or the *Wake*. You can dream into it again and again, as we happily do with Shakespeare, even though we know how every drama ends.

The inherent skeleton of the dreaming

Dreams come and go, or come to a halt, as had the crickets, as though a certain shocking vibration had simultaneously struck their antennae... Norm looked around him, convinced something terrible had happened, and knew in an instant that there was someone in the room looking at him. This was when he saw Elias, recognising him straightaway, profoundly ghostly, enveloping them both in death, then disconnecting, as his heart cried out loudly

with the pain of being torn apart. His friend sat slumped against the wall. Norm cried from the pit of his stomach, like a lost creature of the earth, until the end of all things roared from his mouth.' (*Carpentaria*, p. 215)

Alexis' cadence is bedded in the conversations of dark men on long car journeys and fishing trips. It is the cadence of stories told by granny women, perhaps playing cards. It is a brusque kind of running language that tracks alongside the repetitive rhythms of the violently cathected lore stories known variously as Tjukurrpa, Altjere or maybe Wanggala in Wright's mothers' family region. (These are only three among many linguistic group terms for Australian indigenous forms of law and poetic lore.)

I assume that most European language readers will have no trouble appreciating the value of and the way in which European mythopoetic lore is put together, or any of the foundation mythologies of world cultures. You will appreciate the formative influence of Middle Eastern texts, Inanna, Gilgamesh, Genesis, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Lamentations, Psalms, Revelations and the simple Nazarene gospels. These are cultural navigational constellations. Some even foster love and directed compassion in the midst of conditions of turmoil and destruction. With this appreciation it will not be difficult to contemplate likely sources which form the net, the matrices of symbolisation into which any author is drawn, consciously or unconsciously. So that said, I think that the felt structure and the known structure of the Dreaming matrix is what gives *Carpentaria* its secret seamless inner skeleton. The story told flows with subtlety from the deep structure patterns of the sung poetry of Oceania and Australasia. The Dreaming patterns influence Alexis's poetic mind, I think.

I am not saying that she is using traditional indigenous stories and characters in exactly the same way that traditional Homeric and Olympian myth permeated the content of Sophocles, Aeschylus, Aristophanes and Euripides. They did versions of great and known mythic themes and they put their plays

together knowing the audience could surf the associations. They were also aware that they could not knowingly, in theatre, reveal sacred Mysteries. I do not say that Alexis recalls a specific ceremony and updates it, she is far more subtle and careful than that, knowing her place perhaps. However, when I read *Carpentaria*, the skeleton appears, it kind of leads my mind because, I confess, that I do appreciate something about the way in which the sung poetic of Australia is put together, and this is why I suggest, here, that Alexis 'poetic genius', as revealed in *Carpentaria*, is, in truth, a contemporary incarnation of a very ancient thing. The structure of the Dreaming (Tjukurrpa/Altjere/Wanggala) is what gives the flotation and buoyancy to her story.

(It might be worth noting in passing that, on the one hand, some people insist that the traditional stories and ceremonial events be recalled, consolidated and repeated as an antidote to despair and as a medicine of hope. Others say, the old ways are better let go. Some add that the 'old ways' and the stories which uphold those practices are too cruel and hard anyway. In any case, the argument goes, survival depends on carefully strategic adaptation to new conditions. Old time cultural myths, if they are going to be repeated at all, must hold or emphasise ideas which carry purpose without sentimental, nostalgic illusion. Active survival is the keynote, not passive fantasy. Some say an old dreaming story is only useful if it tells you where the fish are biting. Others say, that after you've caught fish you need something for a mind to feed upon. Why split realities? The circulation is the thing, from stomach to brain.)

So, having made the point that *Carpentaria* floats on deeper waters, one can therefore enjoy it thus and float rather than worrying about getting to a spell-binding ending, revelatory conclusion - or not. One can simply visit sites in this chapter or that, and hum this fragment of feeling and image or that - for this is how the song lines or Tjukurrpa tracks are constructed. Both in lines and in recurring circulations. There is a linear pattern which follows the precise line across specific country, water or sky constellation of this creation being, or that. So, yes the linear travelling structure is there, as one needs in

any novel or film. A Progression. And, at the same time, those who know the whole epic song can pick up a fragment, a verse and let it flow out from this remembered site and this recalled creation being in action. Here is the place where Elias came ashore. Here is the place where Fishman dismembered the 'Go-for-it' mine. Here is the place where Norm met the Gropers. Here is where Angel Day disappeared. Here is the lagoon where Elias rested. Here is where Hope fell. And here where Bala found his grandfather. Each is a verse. Many such places are generative and many are destructive; involving the rip and tear and fearsome paranoia of a hunting life lived in awesome conditions.

Once one knows the whole cycle the sections can mix and match. An entire ceremony or song line can flow, like a grand tide, or it can splash up like little fish now and then. There is nothing unusual about this non-linear circulation through a set text. Expert actors of Shakespeare can mix and match, combine and evoke, in brilliant combinations, differing elements of the dramatic repertoire. So, no, such a procedure is not unusual, but I do feel like mentioning it as possible clue to how to read *Carpentaria* and go back again with pleasure. The fact that you can do this with this story is an indication of its richness and internal integrity.

I think this is where I begin to leave you because the purpose of this article is only to reassure that it is worth owning the book. It will surely grow in stature, in cultural value. It is worth possessing (not borrowing) so that, every now and then, you can surprise yourself holding a page, waiting until the tale gives itself up to you, in the tradition of traditional men and women, stroking a sacred object a little tenderly. This object is put together by Alexis in her state as a Waanyi woman, mindful of her grandmothers, and mindful of the girls who will come after her generation. She is composing, at the same time, inside the maturely experienced contemporary state of an Alexis (city woman) Wright. This dual composition, part novel part sacred story might really be a 'sacred object' and sometimes, as with sacred objects, you go and

visit them sometimes. You sit cradling such an object, as I have seen desert men do, singing to those old bits of carved rock and carved wood which also cradles them. Maybe one I saw was six hundred years old or older, encraved with an indecipherable story. The men sat and wept, smoke seemed to fill the cavernous air, stories came alive and were talked lovingly, with a tenderness in eyes which most white people never ever see.

The mystery of *Carpentaria*

“No police! No one, hear me, go calling the fucking police up here. Don’t talk about this to anyone. Fucking media can piss off. Remember we are mining men and mining men look after their own and mining men keep their bloody mouths shut. We are going to catch these bastards ourselves.” He said this, word for word, after the orders had come all the way from New York, from the very top of a skyscraper, to Graham standing in a muddy lagoon surrounded by a cloud of flies. The mobile phone screamed instructions into Graham’s ear and his face whitened. Strange how a skyscraper in New York could cast spells like magic...’ (Carpentaria, p. 444)

New York based, African-American Michael Meyer, at a congress in Cape York sponsored by *The Australian* newspaper and Noel Pearson’s group is quoted thus: *‘Mr. Meyers, president and executive director of the New York Civil Rights Coalition said indigenous cultures were an antiquated concept in the 21st Century. “People have to move out of their ghettoised attitudes, get away from the idea that people belong in certain lands”.’ (The Australian, front page, June 26, 2007).*

You get a lot of this conflict of idea in Wright’s mine conflict saga. The antiquated are destined for the ghetto. The advanced are destined for the mine?

Carpentaria is full of suppressed paradox and violence against the people who believe (whimsically) that they belong in certain lands, a fact which is rejected

and accepted and rejected simultaneously. The sticking point of the Federal Intervention has been the issue of revoking the permits to enter Aboriginal land. The argument given is similar to Myers. Such conflict over ownership and right of entry allows one to glimpse a certain familiar brand of Australian madness or, as Alexis puts it, '*Will Phantom ... glimpsed the town's psychosis twinkling in the sunshine...*' (p. 461).

The psychosis of this country is a big issue and is beyond description here but, indeed any persons who work in the pain of Australia might read *Carpentaria* profitably, for indication of the psychic reality of this strange and contrary land, hung on the line of Capricorn - concrete thinking, magical thinking, cargo cults, sorcery; all twinkling in the sunshine - in any fringe camp, in any Desperance; in any country bar, in any displaced hotel, in any parliament house.

Attuned intelligent persons who inhabit a northern hemisphere could, with profit, read *Carpentaria* as a dream of the Antipodes; a Gondwanaland *Tempest*; a tale indicating what might have happened on an island a long time ago; a version of a sinking kingdom. Perhaps the original Prospero actually landed on the shores of northern Australia.

The end

"I reckon we will go home then", he said. So, they walked in mud away from the town left to the dogs... Neither spoke, because neither could have heard the other. It was much better to listen to the mass choir of frogs - green, grey, speckled, striped, big and small, dozens of species all assembled around the two seafarers, as they walked...' (*Carpentaria*, p. 519)

This brings me back to Beowulf, that other saga of seafaring men and female creatures who wait in deep waters. I placed Alexis in the company of a 'king's household... a traditional singer deeply schooled in the lore of the past' and

I have suggested that she has linked a new theme to an old and strict metre, or perhaps found a new measure for an old and strict theme. But a theme of what? What is the metre and measure of Alexis Wright?

Well, today I have come upon this. Had I not spent succinct time in the company of certain distinguished aboriginal men, in particular Paddy Sims, Paddy Stewart, Larry Jungarai and Darby Ross, I would have nought to say, but having taken the trouble to do this, to listen with attention to some authentic ordinary thanes of the desert country I might just be able to recognise what Alexis is up to. And thank God someone like her has worked thoroughly enough at the job to set something down in print.

The intent of this novel is to create and sustain an experience of ‘re-singing the country’. An indigenous Australian sensibility requires of humans persistent recall of country into mind. A circulation is created and preserved. The effect of the circulation of singing country and being sung in return is Self-placement. Social and emotional well-being. Maybe.

Without the re-call to singing the country – to keeping the line of being, holding the tune – *Carpentaria* would be a tragedy, a saga of carrying bodies about the place, wondering where to dispose of the dead, settle spirits and distribute blame. Yet another revenge cycle – a rage against the dying of the light.

Listening to Alexis’ narrator, I discover myself asked to seek out the true significance of the ‘singing of the country’. Exactly why ‘singing the country’ might be a necessity and not a useless desire might be taken up in another article. What exactly ‘singing country’ means can be analysed. There are questions. Where in the brain is animal/ human geographic facility located, processed and linked with what? Why do fishermen sit for hours with a line in their hands? The manner of speaking about this is probably best left to certain sober indigenous people and Taoist philosophers. Those old yellow

people have ways of describing the fluency of natural force and are mindful of the mind of the world moving in humans. They do it in their way and I am coming upon it here in Alexis' way – in her mood, measure, metre, and mode. In her way, this may be a mother's way, in empathy marvelling at her child's intricate and stubborn being and becoming. Poetry and lullaby is composed between people, feeling for and feeling with each other. There is a poetic structure to the country and a poetic structure to the 'singing' of it which is felt and developed while in the factual actual relationship. Fishermen do it. There is no such thing as country without a human and no such thing as a human if he/ she cannot articulate and mesmerise the country. Our orders are to keep the line of being.

Somehow or other, Alexis does it, she has worked at it, she has brought some change of mind about, turned something round in her head probably.

It is a long book, 519 pages double spaced. You need that length and space for the fact of the matter to sink in. You need the time. The measure of time which she uses is the long singing of the country which has been practised for a long, long time. She doesn't talk about it much - it's not a book *about* indigenous poetics. It is the thing itself. Simple, matter of fact, down to earthly magic and throwaway humour. Slowly, the sense of this accomplishment settles in a knot, in a ball, in a hum and I am thankful that I was born to live in this country in the time before 'too late', while there is still time for 'so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh'.

NOTES

1. Those with a special interest in Sung Poetry and the more technical aspects of oral traditions may find the website for the *Journal of Oral Tradition* now available online and free of charge at <http://journal.oraltradition.org/>. Note from Lila San Roque ANU.
2. The political, cultural, historical significance of the Dreaming and the current reformations in indigenous affairs advocated by Noel Pearson et al. is succinctly addressed by Robert Manne in his article in the August 2007 edition of the Australian cultural journal, *The Monthly*.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Xavier Herbert's novel *Capricornia*, first published in 1938, can be placed as an acknowledged ancestor and precedent to *Carpentaria*. Readers may enjoy comparing the two novels. Herbert's *Capricornia* went through 23 reprints between 1938 and 1990. Those familiar with this 500 page classic, set in much the same territory, though at an earlier time, will recognise the associative links and perhaps the wry resonance with this earlier chronicle of Gulf times. They add to each other, yet can exist independently.

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