

‘Sorry, above all, that I can make nothing right’: Public Apology in Judith Wright

I

Since the middle of the twentieth century, the phenomenon of public apology has become increasingly prevalent and visible, enacted in contexts ranging from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission to the Australian government’s apology to the Stolen Generation, to the iconic genuflection of Willy Brandt before the Warsaw Ghetto Monument. While research surrounding public apology (particularly in the context of work on trauma, memory and reconciliation) has also become increasingly prevalent, literary representations of public apology remain under-researched. Works like J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999) present something of a scholarly conundrum. In the final historical and cultural assessment of public apologies, how are imaginative representations of apologies to be understood? Do they participate in the apologising process, or do they simply describe it? What implications does a judgement either way hold for scholarship on the larger relations between art and civic life? This paper finds a way into some of these large questions by considering the specific case of Judith Wright and the forms of literary redress she made to Indigenous Australians.¹

The apology is one of the forms of communication identified by linguist J.L. Austin as a performative gesture or speech act—a phrase which, in being spoken, does not constitute utterance alone but performs actions in the real social world. Austin gives the following examples: to utter the phrase ‘I promise’ is to perform the act of promising; to say ‘I bequeath’ is to perform the act of bequeathing; and, in a wedding, the phrase ‘I do’ is the act which marries the couple (5). Similarly, the act of apology is performed through the articulation of the phrase ‘I apologise’. Importantly, in setting out his definition of performative speech, Austin explicitly excludes aesthetic works. He argues that if any of the phrases above are spoken, for instance, on stage, they do not count as performatives—the audience understands an actor’s promise as an artistic representation rather than as a genuine act with genuine consequences.

Austin claims that speech acts ‘do not count’ when uttered in an artistic context. He writes: ‘a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy ... All this we are *excluding* from consideration’ (22). Many theorists and writers, most notably Derrida, Hillis Miller, de Gaynesford, Sedgewick and Hill, have challenged Austin’s exclusion of literary language from the category of the speech act. It makes intuitive sense that if someone is pronouncing a couple married on stage, the two actors are not really being married. The question then becomes: how to give an account of the acts that artistic speech acts *do* perform? Austin gives the example of the performative phrase in a marriage ceremony as an example of a speech act which loses its performative force in artistic contexts. This ceremony, however, provides especially salient counterexamples to his blanket excision. In a play with a wedding scene, the performative phrase marrying the couple may not bind the two actors in real life, but it may nonetheless constitute some kind of social intervention, especially if the representation is at odds with the political realities of the time and place of

¹ Wright makes an explicit prose apology at the end of her memoir titled *Half a Lifetime*.

performance (as in a representation of a mixed-race marriage in nineteenth-century America, or a same-sex marriage in, for instance, parts of the modern Caribbean). The question then becomes: what *does* a performative on stage do? What *is* the act in an artistic speech act? And how is giving an answer to this different from giving a general account of the social powers of literature?

More specifically, it is necessary to ask how the literary speech's act's status as an echo of an actual speech act shapes the nature of its social intervention. The act that a work of literature performs on the world is not the same as the speech act designated within it: nonetheless, the presence of the speech act within the literary work may shape the work's larger social action in unique ways.

The act of public apology offers a particularly significant test case for work on the relationship between performative speech and literary language. In literary representations of public apology, which can involve the same audience and occur at the same time as the real apology (and potentially be bound up with its impetus or its aftermath), questions surrounding the connection between actual performatives and their artistic counterparts become particularly acute. While considerable attention has been paid to fictional representations of apology, the equivalent utterances in poetry remain underexplored. The writing around apology by poets like Judith Wright, Adrienne Rich and Geoffrey Hill merits substantial examination in this context, as it opens up important questions about literary voice and social agency in acts of public apology.

The 'lyric I' is not the same kind of 'I' as a narratorial or dramatic one, and this difference inflects the lyric speaker's relationship to the apology and to the original wrong. In scenes of public apology, a gap is often observable between the individual responsible for the apology and the individual or individuals responsible for the harm (the gap registered in the difference between 'sorry-for' and 'sorry-that'). This mismatch in agency finds a formal parallel in the identity of poetic speakers, even those whose utterances have nothing to do with apology. Like the politician speaking on behalf of a national community, the poetic speaker, in accounts both ancient and modern of the lyric voice, is frequently figured as speaking on behalf of others. To give one example, Hazlitt, as Hugh Haughton has observed, claims poetry 'puts the individual for the species, the one above the infinite many' (139). Even in the twentieth century, poetic speakers are still associated with (indeed, accused of) one-for-many representation. Particularly relevant in its colonial echoes is the suggestion by critics Li and Saiz (cited by Mark Jeffreys) that poetic speech constitutes no less than the 'imperial assertion of self' (197). Further, the civic authority being claimed when a writer takes on the burden of apology manifests itself differently for poets: the particular set of bardic, oracular associations around poetic authority shape the act of poetic apology itself and the formation of its audience.

One of the canonical contemporary discussions of vicarious speech and its hazards is Linda Alcoff's anthropological 'The Problem of Speaking for Others'. She writes: 'a speaker's location (which I take here to refer to their social location, or social identity) has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one's speech' (7). In light of this, she asks, "Is the discursive practice of speaking for others ever a valid practice, and, if so, what are the criteria for

validity?" (7). Vicariousness involves speaking *on behalf of others*, but the category of 'others' is complicated by Judith Wright's particular status in the group she represents. Wright is guilty by virtue of her membership of a group which has collectively committed wrongs, rather than by virtue of committing them herself. A question remains in this intergenerational context, however, as to whether the category of the wrongdoer can be bounded in this way, or is necessarily more diffuse—whether wrongdoers can be separated out from other members of the national group. Certain acts have definite responsible agents, but the inheritors of the advantage gained as a result of these earlier acts occupy an ambiguous position in relation to the wrong. As Wright suggests, on some level she too is guilty by virtue of inheriting and inhabiting property gained through earlier acts of murder and dispossession. If, then, the agency attached to this wrong is diffuse rather than individually allocated, then the concept of 'speaking for others' (in vicarious apology and vicarious poetic utterance alike) cannot operate in the same way: there is no clear set of 'others'.

Judith Wright's work, then, is especially well placed to shed light on the complex and underexamined interrelations of voice, form, agency and responsibility in literary forms of public apology. Wright's poetry disrupts J.L. Austin's understanding of speech acts, in particular, apology, on a number of levels, helping to reveal the need for more nuanced accounts of literary performatives. Most obviously, in the absence of an official apology to Indigenous Australians before the Rudd years, Wright explicitly offers her own apology at the end of *Half a Lifetime*. This document uses the formulation proposed by Austin, in the sense that she writes in the first person present indicative, and uses the words characteristically associated with this speech act ('I say sorry', 'I plead forgiveness'):

To all the peoples of the old and true Australia on whose land I have trespassed and whom, by being part of my own people, I have wronged, I plead forgiveness. To all of them I owe that overwhelming debt of life itself, and to all of them I now bend my head and say Sorry. Sorry, above all, that I can make nothing right (296).

Wright is here disrupting Austin's categories already in that the literary form in which she makes this apology is at once artistic and non-artistic (according to Austin's definition which emphasises fictionality rather than aesthetic merit): a memoir is a type of literary writing but at the same time is defined by its element of the non-fictional. Further, the audience Wright gains for her apology was earned in part through her literary work, raising the question of whether, in this case and more broadly, Austin's artistic/non-artistic division is defined solely by the genre in which the writer is working, or by the speaker's identity as an artistic figure. While some of Wright's most important statements of public apology were made in prose form, it was her civic authority as a socially-conscious poet which earned an audience for her ideas.

It is not only this direct statement which gives Wright's work its relevance for debates around literary representations of public apology: much of her poetry is concerned with making some kind of amends for the wrongs committed by her ancestors and fellow non-Indigenous Australians. The relationship between the explicit statement of apology in *Half a Lifetime* and the broader reparative project of this poetry ultimately helps to show how the performative gesture of apology in literature can encompass writing

which does not conform to the grammatical criteria set out by Austin. I will argue that in the context of Australian indigenous dispossession, in which part of the wrong has been silence itself (a lack of apology but also a lack of legal recognition and a lack of historical recognition) the gesture of speaking out can in itself constitute a form of speech act. By challenging Austin's definition of performative language, in which syntactical and grammatical formulations must be present in order for the speech act to 'count', reading Wright's work in this way calls into question not only Austin's exclusion of artistic works from his definition of speech acts but also his emphasis on the grammatical specificity of their formulation.

This article will conclude by reflecting on a further dimension of importance Wright holds for debates about literary incarnations of performative language: her self-awareness about the ethical risks entailed in her reparative gestures. If literary speech acts are not, as Austin would have them, denatured reflections but active interventions, then the ethical caveats attending them take on new urgencies, urgencies for which Wright's work offers an illuminating rehearsal.

II

As has been widely acknowledged, one of the many forms of wrong done to Aboriginal people involves language itself—in particular, an *absence* of language: the lack of opportunity for Aboriginal people to be heard, and a lack of adequate acknowledgement and discussion by white Australians. Given this, it is worth asking if and how the recounting of injustices done to Aboriginal people constitutes a form of reparative gesture in itself, which is different from but lies on a continuum with, the explicit speech act of apology. Could narration and truth-telling here function as its own form of performative, in which the gesture of speaking in itself becomes an act, regardless of the particularities of the formulation? If, under these circumstances, the very act of speaking is positioned as a form of redress, it would help mount a new angle of challenge to Austin's emphasis on a strict formulation (first person present indicative) in his definition of the speech act. What Wright's work ultimately shows is the blurred line that distinguishes the category of the speech act and the act of speaking out under certain historical circumstances.

Part of the wrong that many of Wright's poems acknowledge is not only the original and ongoing acts of violence and dispossession but also the lack of record and acknowledgement. Many commentators' responses to *Bringing them Home* highlight the injustice of the silence that preceded it. As Susan Barrett observes, citing John Frow, 'it was the first official report to "give a voice to those who have not been listened to, or who have had the language in which to tell a story taken away from them"' (2). As Kay Schaffer argues in 'Narrative Lives and Human Rights: Stolen Generation Narratives and the Ethics of Recognition';

Some of the most painful passages for many readers of *Bringing them Home* were those in which narrators testified to being abused, and then shamed, when they tried to tell their stories to officials who rebuked them. Not being heard is part of the process by which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been erased and effaced in the nation's history (9)

Wright acknowledges this lack of recognition in her own consciousness when she writes to Odgeroo Noonucul: 'late I began to know / they hadn't told me the land I loved / was taken out of your hands' (*Collected* 318). Language becomes all the more important when it is recognised that the wrongs for which Wright is helping to apologise were, in part, verbal ones: failed or unattempted treaties, historical narratives' blind spots.

Wright explicitly positions her books as a contribution to reparations for the wrong of silence. *Born of the Conquerors* is characterised by a consistent burring indignation about the 'suppression of the real story of the great pastoral invasions of inland Australia' (ix). After describing early efforts to advance a treaty, she describes the book as 'a further token of that promise' that 'we would do individually what we could to keep the issue [of a treaty and broader acknowledgement at large] alive' (*Conquerors* xii). In *We Call for a Treaty*, as elsewhere, she places explicit emphasis on the lack of historical discussion about displacement: 'The story of the overrunning of the continent, without any attempt at compensation, agreement or even bargaining by the landtakers, was hushed by most early historians' (2). *We Call for a Treaty* shows how speech has always been a battleground for, rather than simply the report of, Indigenous rights. Accordingly, whenever *We Call for a Treaty* describes gains made, the language used on the official documents is quoted in careful detail, as, for instance, in her description of the Gurindju lease handover in 1972: Prime Minister Whitlam handed them their deeds, saying 'these lands belong to the Gurindji people and ... we restore them to you and your children forever' (Wright, *Treaty*, 22).

'Nigger's Leap, New England' (*Collected* 15) is one of the key poems reflecting this interest in restorative truth-telling. Given that the wrong constituted in part a lack of record, the poem's act of telling the stories forms part of her effort to make amends, an effort which lies on a continuum with her larger project of public apology. The wrong recorded in the poem involves both the massacre itself and the fact that it was covered up and ignored: 'Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers / and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?' (lines 16-7). The lack of knowledge to which the poem refers encompasses not only the facts of the mass murders committed at this landmark, but a moral and emotional acknowledgement of the tragedy's depth, which would entail a recognition of common humanity and its attendant profound guilt: 'we should have known / the night that tidied up the cliffs and hid them / had the same question on its tongue for us' (lines 18-20).

In this and other poems, silence-breaking takes places through representations of natural phenomena which are figured as witnesses, silent storehouses of testimony which the poet helps to make speak. Wright's poems consistently cast forensic light on the landscape, peeling back the surface layers of the earth in order to show the past acts they concealed and preserved. For instance, after describing a bullock driver's habitual routines and specific moments, the 'Bullocky' (*Collected* 17) opens out on the present, in which the signs of the past are buried:

Grass is across the wagon-tracks,
and plough strikes bone beneath the grass,
and vineyards cover all the slopes
where the dead teams were used to pass. (Lines 21-4)

In 'At Cooloola' (*Collected* 140-1), she counterpoises the surface level of the present with the historical memory underneath: 'walking on clean sand among the prints / of bird and animal, I am challenged by a driftwood spear / thrust from the water (line 21-3). The imagined spear preserved in the water echoes the description in 'Bora Ring:' (*Collected* 8) 'the hunter is gone; the spear is splintered underground' (line 9). 'At Cooloola' equates the earth with an historical record most explicitly in its description of the ghost of a 'warrior armed for fighting, / who sank into bare plain, as now into time past' (line 15-6). In several of the poems, this uncovering of the strata of history recorded in the land expressly emphasise that dispossession was a condition for the growing of European crops which fed the invading population. This awareness manifests itself in the grim irony of the ending to 'Bullocky', with its ironic reflection on religious entitlement: 'The prophet Moses feeds the grape, / and fruitful in the Promised Land' (lines 27-8). In 'Nigger's Leap, New England', this is figured as especially obscene: 'the black dust our crops ate was their dust' (line 17).

'Nigger's Leap, New England', is particularly clear in its casting natural elements as witnesses which hid horror and preserved it for belated acknowledgement. By emphasising this process of concealment via the extended metaphor of the night, the poem presents the land as a silent arbiter of justice, and her own poetic speech as an act of silence-breaking. The night, in particular, is presented as covering up but also *storing* up the memory of the killings, and standing as a reproach: 'the night that tidied up the cliffs and hid them / had the same question on its tongue for us' (lines 19-20). Specifically, the night is repeatedly represented as an ocean which, in harbouring the guilt of the past, becomes treacherous in the present: 'night runs an obscure tide round cape and bay' (line 2); 'night buoys no warning / over the rocks that wait our keels; no bells / sound for the mariners' (lines 10-2); 'night floods us suddenly as history / that has sunk many islands in its good time' (lines 25-6).

The poem at once writes about the menace of the night in the third person and addresses itself to it, bidding this covering movement to offer belated protection and comfort to the victims as well as reproach to the perpetrators— 'swallow the spine of range; be dark. O lonely air. / Make a cold quilt across the bone and skull / that screamed ...' (lines 5-7). In this phrase in particular, part of the poem's uncovering involves seeing, retrospectively, physical bodies in the landscape's own formations where before the presence of the dead was ignored—the poem refers to 'the spine of range' (line 5) and the 'lipped cliff' (line 7), and even uses this body part as a verb: 'night lips the harsh / scarp' (line 24-5). These descriptions form a kind of readout of the landscape which has stored up and concealed the country's horrific past. To what extent might the very act of speaking out in the context of such concealment constitute its own form of speech act? Austin famously and controversially ties his definition of the speech act to specific formulations, but what poems like these help to suggest is that the line between the specific speech act of apology and a poet's broader apologetic project may not be so distinct.

Haig Khatchadourian's analysis of how silences affect meaning is especially relevant to this view of silence-breaking as a form of performative. Khatchadourian proposes that 'silence, like speech and action, "initiated" by a human being, whether by being silent, becoming silent, or breaking silence is frequently if not always significant or meaningful

in some sense' (9). Similarly, bell hooks argues that silence-breaking constitutes an act in the context of historical oppression:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice (9)

In this context of a liberatory politics, the conception of silence-breaking as an act is well established, but this is not quite the same as seeing silence-breaking's status as an *act* as deriving in part from its status as a *speech act* (before its status as a *literary* speech act is even considered). Dennis Curzon, in his *Discourses of Silence*, has made the suggestion that silence can in particular cases constitute a speech act, basing himself in part of Searle's criteria of intention (25). As in Searle's account of indirect speech acts, Wright's speech acts of silence-breaking are defined more by context than by constitutive grammar. Reflecting on the performative status of silence-breaking not only helps to challenge Austin's definition which binds grammar with context: it also sheds light on this chapter's central conundrum: the continuities between Wright's direct form of public apology at the end of *Half a Lifetime* and the cognate gestures of reparation she makes in many of the poems. In order to understand the performative force of Wright's prose apology, it is necessary to ask how it is shaped by those earlier poems which acknowledge wrongs, as the prose apology would have much less force without them. Ultimately, if in the context of a lack of acknowledgement, the very gesture of speaking out might become a speech act in itself, what is the relationship between the speech act of apologetic silence-breaking and *Half a Lifetime's* explicit act of apology?

Alexis Wright, Kay Schaffer and Susan Barrett offer useful insights into the importance of the *form* of silence-breaking speech. Barrett argues that there are risks which attend those forms of speaking out which distil personal stories into a collective narrative: 'it ignores the experiences of individuals, something which *Bringing them Home* had established as both desirable and necessary' (7). However, as Barrett has suggested, the play of individual empathy in 'micro-history as opposed to macro-history' holds ethical dangers of its own: 'the story of an individual is undoubtedly an excellent way of arousing white interest in the country's shameful past. At the same time, too much empathy can lead to a blurring of the realities of the historical situation and a failure to see the political implications of the subject's story ...' (11). Schaffer argues that this 'empathetic identification' 'enacts an imagined participation in the suffering of others, what Dominic La Capra calls a "surrogate victimage" (La Capra 182) that engages the listener's feelings in ways that might actually short circuit the distance required for the respondent to register the legitimate claims of the other' (12). Presenting these individual stories in *fictional* form, Susan Barrett argues, becomes especially valuable and important in this context, as it introduces a 'a third person narrative voice' (9), and 'these shifts in point of view remove the dangers of unconditional empathy and identification with one single character and force the reader to reflect on the question of responsibility and where the blame really lies' (10). Judith Wright's poetry, I hope to have shown, might open the way to cognate claims being made for poetic form.

III

Wright's poetry is such a fertile source for discussions of performative language in poetry (and apology in particular) in part because she is especially self-aware about the ethical compromises her endeavour entails. She doesn't so much show how speech acts like public apology might fail when they are uttered in the context of a literary work: rather, she suggests that they risk being dangerously successful, that literature can be a space for making reparative gestures but that this process has its own morally questionable dimensions. In Wright's case, then, the question becomes: to what extent are the moral hazards inherent in the process of apologising specific to *poetic* apologies? Are there risks, for her, in the very process of expressing guilt, and then further forms of risk associated with the specific kinds of artifice in poetic apologies?

The multiple associations of the words 'guilty' and 'righteous', two recurring words in Wright, are especially significant in this context. Both these terms can designate a state of being and an emotion at once: indeed, the lack of a connection between state and emotion lies at the core of the problem. Not all of those who are guilty feel guilt, and conversely, not all of those who feel righteous are righteous in their acts. The phrase 'oppressed by arrogant guilt' (line 20) from 'At Cooloola' suggests both the actions that were enabled by the arrogance of her ancestors and concomitantly the guilt that arises from it. The phrase 'arrogant guilt', however, also acknowledges the dimension of hubris potentially involved in guilt itself—including, perhaps, Wright's own literary expression of it. As she says wryly in 'Two Dreamtimes' (*Collected* 318), a poem very much about wanting to make amends and knowing the words to be insufficient, 'trust none – not even poets' (line 84).

At various points in her poems dealing with historical guilt there is a suggestion that the very language she uses to describe the land carries its own dimension of cultural dislocation. The opening of 'At Cooloola' juxtaposes her foreign ways of understanding land against an ancient bird's ways of interacting with it:

The blue crane fishing in Cooloola's twilight
Has fished there longer than our centuries.
He is the certain heir of lake and evening,
And he will wear their colour till he dies,

But I'm a stranger, come of a conquering people.
I cannot share his calm, who watch his lake,
Being unloved by all my eyes delight in,
And made uneasy, for an old murderer's sake.(Lines 1-8)

When she describes her own feeling of unease in the land she loves in 'At Cooloola', the prosodic features of the poem are key to the poem's communication of the lack of fit she feels in the landscape. The first two lines of the stanza register the inappropriateness of human divisions of time: 'the blue crane fishing in Cooloola's twilight has fished there longer than our centuries'. The stress patterns in the lines put the emphasis on the word 'our'—the pronouns that stresses the relative, subjective status of these human thought structures. While the first half of the line sets up a strong iambic pattern ('has fished there longer') which would lead the 'our' to be unstressed, especially given the

strong stress at the start of 'centuries'. However, it would be quite unnatural to stress 'than' in these circumstances, which means that the word 'your' ends up receiving if not all, at least some of the emphasis.

The inappropriateness of human categories is registered in the third line's disjunct between the societal notion of the 'heir' and the bird's way of belonging to the landscape. The phrase 'certain heir' crystallises this ambivalence. It describes the certainty felt by a human observer about the crane, functioning as a transferred epithet, but the phrase also presents this certainty as the crane's own, suggesting perhaps that it has a dimension of certainty to its manner, befitting the landscape's natural 'heir'. This line is a rich manifestation of the poem's central problem because it both disavows and manifests the imposition of human ways of understanding onto nature. These moments in which Wright acknowledges her own lack of right to the land, which form part of her larger project of apology and amends making, are self-abnegating and point to their own limits, and they are *especially* ambivalent because they achieve this self-undermining by leaning on the prosodic structures of introduced poetic traditions.

In 'At Cooloola', this prosodic manifestation of the English imposition become clearest when the poetic speaker is herself introduced. The introduction of the speaker herself is jarring in part because it, even grammatically, feels like an unnecessary addition. The first stanza sounds very complete on its own until the awkward last comma which then leads into the next stanza's 'but I'm'. The first two lines form a sentence with a full stop at the end of the second line, and in the other half of the stanza, and end of the second two lines, the thought is similarly complete, setting up the same expectation of closure: 'He is the certain heir of lake and evening, and he will wear their colour till he dies.' The sense of completion is solidified by the eye-rhyme between 'centuries' and 'dies' and by the relatively stable metrical pattern in the stanza (an 11 syllable line of loose but recognisable iambic pentameter with an additional unstressed syllable is followed by a similarly loose 10 syllable lines of iambic pentameter). Together they create a sense that the line has finished on 'dies'. This means that the comma at the end of the line which ushers in the speaker's own persona comes as a surprise, and the line that introduces the "I" is a contrast in its unprecedented length and irregularity. Indeed, throughout the poem's descriptions of Wright's own uneasy place, there is a concomitant instability in the rhythm. The eighth line, similarly, describing this unease explicitly, ends with a phrase which feels unstably excessive with its three unstressed syllables in row and its longer length: 'and made uneasy, for an old murderer's sake'.

As this example from 'At Cooloola' helps to show, then, Wright registers her ambivalence about her own project of poetic atonement in and through her deployment of the specific resources of English prosody. In raising both the possibility of specifically poetic speech acts— specifically the act of apology and atonement, but acknowledging the moral limits of this project, she offers a particularly valuable point of reference in debates about the status of speech acts in literary writing.

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