Orpheus in the New World: Poetry and Landscape in Australia and Chile

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Australia and Chile both constitute large and extremely diverse environments, with ecosystems ranging from some of the driest to some of the wettest in the world. They are also relatively isolated: Australia, of course, an island, while Chile is bordered by dramatic mountain ranges and coastlines. Nevertheless, their common geological heritage means that they share a surprising number of species of flora. They also share histories of colonization by European powers. This essay will involve a discussion of four poets and their relationships to these two colonized landscapes: Butcher Joe Nangan and Judith Wright from Australia, and Pablo Neruda and Paulo Huirimilla from Chile. What brings these poets together into this discussion is how their work raises questions about the relationship between poetry and colonized ecologies. In a variety of ways, each poet strives to give a voice to—or allow for a voice in—the wider human and non-human worlds. What I aim to show, however, is that the Orphic notion of poetry granting some kind of being to things, while strong in the work of Wright and Neruda, is irrelevant in interesting and important ways in the poetry of the two Indigenous poets. What we will find in the contemporary work of Huirimilla is a speaker in a colonized landscape who does not aim to assign or come to terms with this landscape, but who is instead fighting to differentiate this landscape sufficiently so that his voice, and the voices of his people, might be heard. In this brief comparison of Australian and Chilean poetics we can see emerge a rhizomatic relationship between colonized landscapes in two countries otherwise profoundly separated by language and geography.

A universal claim, presented by Greek and Roman poets as an undisputed fact, is that while Orpheus sang, the trees and mountaintops bowed to him as if he were a god. It is hardly surprising, therefore, when, at the end of Vicente Huidobro’s poem “Arte poética,” we find his definition of the poet: “El poeta es un pequeño Dios (The poet is a small god).” It is clear, writes Elisabeth Henry, that Orpheus’ power had nothing to do with enchantments or magical spells: in all versions of his story he isn’t controlling the world by magic. Rather, his music is so expressive that all creation cannot help but respond to it (Henry 1). For the relationship between poiesis, a word rooted in the Greek and referring to the power of creation, and the act of being poetic is tinged with the divine. Rainer Maria Rilke writes in the third of his sonnets to Orpheus that “singing is being,” which is to say that the world is poetry, for it is only upon the ground of the poetic word that the world can become real or meaningful (Bruns 264). This feature permeates across cultures and national territories, too. From the various stories of Orpheus, to the ancestral beings in Aboriginal song-cycles, poetic figures are not only praised for their depictions of the natural world but also for making sense of it—for making it appeal to the senses.

With his lyre, Orpheus wandered through the world and sung of the names and features of things, thereby bringing them into existence. In “Poetry as Reality,” Gerald Bruns charts a brief history of the presence of the Orpheus Myth in Western literature, exploring the idea that poetry is not simply a form of signification but is an activity that, by providing us with a world, makes signification possible. This is a conception of poetry as a genuinely creative activity, where “creation” is meant in its purest sense: here it is the poem that creates, and then subsequently maintains, the world. The Orphic poem is an act of genesis. In Australian contexts, we may be tempted to draw connections between the power of the Orphic poem and various Aboriginal song cycles. For in a song cycle like The Two Men, the two men concerned—ancestral brothers who travelled through what is now the Western Kimberley—also sing for the first time of the world around them. Everything, from geographical features and the names for flora and fauna, to religious objects and rituals and the song cycles themselves, is sung into being during their journey (Keogh, “The Two Men” 41). While Orpheus carries his lyre, the Two Men carry sacred boards and headdresses. An early researcher in the area went so far as to propose that before these two brothers there was nothing at all—no trees, water, people or animals—so that the Two Men, in the manner, we might think, of Orpheus, granted each of these things its being (Piddington in Keogh, “The Two Men” 42).

The actual content of the song cycle is restricted so I can’t provide examples here, but a summative discussion of Ray Keogh’s transcription highlights a number of significant features. Immediately, the reader sees that most of the world was extant before the Two Men journeyed through it. Before they embark on their travels they spend a great deal of time exam-
ining the animals and plants already present in their home country. The Two Men are ascribing qualities and traits to various things—they are differentiating the world—but they aren’t bringing into being entirely new forms. Furthermore, most versions of Orpheus describe the forming of a pacific order in the natural world: animals join together in groups; species habitually hostile to one another become tame and friendly; trees and rocks also form various patterns. In Ovid’s version, trees come together to provide Orpheus with shade. In Latin the trees are called nemus, which is a grove of planted trees as opposed to a wild forest (Henry 2). In The Two Men, however, everything seems to be continuing quite chaotically—including hunting, killing and cheating—and of its own accord. The Two Men are simply participants in a highly charged, dynamic universe.

The notion of a dynamic universe, or a large, complex system, is extremely important here. The Two Men are participants in, rather than creators of, what we might think of in contemporary scientific discourse as a complex, differentiating or evolving system. Indeed, they are themselves so much a part of these dynamic processes that after each song they each undergo a physical transformation: the stouter man becomes lean while the leaner man becomes stout (Keogh, “The Two Men” 58). There is no transcendent source of order or control; the Two Men, as components of a larger system, are certainly able to exert considerable influence on the wider environment, but the environment, on the other hand, is equally able to influence them. At this point it is also necessary to distinguish the notion of an “unworld,” or a “nothing” which, due to someone’s Orphic powers, then becomes “something,” and the world we see in The Two Men. A world brought into being by language rests, always precariously, on the silent emptiness that preceded it. Consequently, the existence of language, because it did not come from the world but instead houses it, rests on this same emptiness. In The Two Men, however, the world is already there and there is never any absence of it. Consequently, language comes from this same world, and does not create it or sing it into being, but merely differentiates it. In this markedly different conception, language is but one of many agents of multiplicity, in the same way that genetic codes are agents of biodiversity. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Butcher Joe Nangan, who sang the cycle for Keogh, was at times uncertain about the causes of certain events in the series. Simple, direct links between causes and effects are always eroded by an increase in complexity (Prigogine 41).

We can contrast this with Friedrich Hölderlin who, for Martin Heidegger, was a more recent version of an Orphic poet. Casting himself into that Between between the gods and his fellow mortals it was Hölderlin who named the “holy,” or gave worldly weight to what he was shown by the gods (Brock 170–1). In the process, a poet like Hölderlin spoke to mortals on behalf of the gods, thus gathering these mortals into a great conversation. Ultimately, this led to our communal existence. We might note two very clear focal points in this process: first, there are the gods, who are transcendent beholders of the truth; this divine information is then passed down to the second point, the solitary poet, who, in the manner of a god, unifies the mortal populations by virtue of his pivotal presence. What we have, in other words, is a European model of urban development at play: we have the town center, source of abstracted authority and knowledge, radiating out from which are the plebeians or peasants (depending on the era) who live and work according to the dictates of that authority. Clearly, the powers such a model grants the poet are enormous but they are fanciful for Australian and Chilean poets, dispersed as they are across such incredibly large and sparsely populated spaces. In Australian and Chilean contexts, speech and knowledge have smaller efficacies relative to the far larger areas of non-human landscapes. While Heidegger’s Hölderlin is aware of the sacred treasure of the landscape with an intensity and depth of realization not shared by anyone else (Heidegger 196), in post-colonial contexts an intense awareness of landscape can only be so deep before the non-Indigenous poet begins to participate in further acts of historical colonization.

The Orphic poet-magus derives his power from a solitary unity of word and being. Word is not being in The Two Men, but a function of it. Like everything else in the West Kimberley, it was always “there,” and there are correct times and places for its use. Those rituals, songs, place names, and features of which the Two Men sing are the results of very direct encounters between themselves and other people and animals. Unlike Orpheus, who wandered alone and brought fresh, new objects to life, the Two Men were with company (for, even at the very beginning, there are two of them), and the changes they wrought were more like modifications of pre-existing conditions. The names and characteristics they assign each part of the landscape are results of conversational exchanges with already-present things. Often the course of their journey is altered because of a desire to follow a particular animal or another ancestral being. The divine power of the two deities, therefore, is dispersed into the wider fabric of the place in which they sing.

This concept of a dispersed power or agency is dramatically different to Orphic models of poetic creation. Orpheus received his lyre from Apollo and his poetic instruction from his divine mother, a Muse. His magic, in other words, came in a clear, uninterrupted channel from a deity “above” (or detached from) the earth. His body, then, is the earthly origin of the poem. Later, Romantic interpretations of this circumstance claimed that poetry originated within the self, for the human imagination had replaced God’s. When the poem originates within the landscape, however, and in its speaking is to be given back to the landscape, what we have, rather than a development of self-reflexivity (where the subject initiates, then orients, moments of perception) is a country-reflexivity. This is a characteristic common to an enormous number of genres of Aboriginal song, particularly in the northwest, and has emerged in some of the more interesting Australian non-Indigenous poetry of recent decades, particularly in the work of Jennifer Rankin.
Looking briefly at the song-poetry of the late Butcher Joe Nangan will here be useful. Butcher Joe is widely known to many scholars because of his appearance in Reading the Country. The following is part of his nurlu song-cycle, which was transcribed by Keogh in the 1980s:

guya guya-ni
mum’s sister
yi-ma-mida-nydya-na-yan
she threw herself from the grave
mamanungu larra yin-di-n
she’s on the other side of that waterhole now

(Keogh: Butcher Joe’s mother’s sister left the grave and is now a balangan. She is walking around; now she’s on the other side of the Mamunan waterhole.)

(Keogh, “Nurlu Songs” 5)

Butcher Joe attributed his nurlu, mainly composed in the 1930s, to the spirit of his mother’s sister, which resided in the Roebuck Plains, southeast of Broome. This spirit appeared in his dreams as a balangan (spirit of the dead) to give him the songs (Benterrak, Muecke, and Roe 55). Butcher Joe’s songs were manifestations of his mother’s sister’s voice, then. Rather than a purely creative individual, he was more properly a vehicle; when he woke in the night with a tune in his head he had become a conduit in a circular system whereby music was channeled through him in order to be channeled back out again. This isn’t self-reflexive but country-reflexive. Here, country—rather than the perceiving subject—has initiated a series of lateral reactions; the discrete body of Butcher Joe only has a function in the wider historical and physical processes of Broome country.

The performance of the song poems is also extremely significant in this context. A performance of The Two Men, for example, will involve the progression, song by song, along a particular track in country. When there is a chorus, or a group of “back-up” singers, it will follow the main singer and repeat his verses, rising in song after his voice has faded, and fading as his voice rises again. This song-dialogue is known around Broome as tracking (Benterrak, Muecke, and Roe 55). In this way, the first singer’s relationship with the surrounding world (something so prominent in Romanticism) is dispersed across the ensemble. The emphasis on any particular subject’s response to the world is in turn dispersed across multiple subjectivities (balangan—songwriter—singers—country). A new emphasis might be found on the exchange between bodies, on the tracking, rather than on a particular body. Indeed, one might argue that the specific content of the songs themselves—the poetry—is beside the point: it is the manner in which they are conveyed that signifies something of their importance. Multiple interpretations of a song’s meaning are common, as are confusions and emissions. As the example above suggests, skeletal lyrics necessitate an intimate experiential knowledge of the country in which they originated in order to get a rich sense of any particular song. Word groups have a fixed relationship with rhythmic units but float freely alongside the melodic contours so that the singer will contort the shapes of specific words to conform to the underlying rhythm. The word group itself will be repeated several times in any one performance (Keogh, “Nurlu Songs” 3-6). This, therefore, is a poetic of indeterminacy, of repetitions, of lines of flight shooting off in multiple directions. As I descend into the language of Gilles Deleuze, I should also point out that there is never an overriding meaning to be grasped, never a concrete, unifying “nature” to be recovered. There are only images of movement or travel.

In the beginning, Heidegger argues, Logos signified a gathering of the flux of the world into “unity and permanence” (Bruns 274). It is by virtue of such permanence that the world first emerged into the light of being. It is light that provides us with vision and it is vision, of course, with which we are able to categorize and define. For Heidegger it is poetry that performs this act of disclosure; it is the perceptive role of poetry, therefore, to create the world. It is clear, however, that when human language is less significant than this, when it is more fragile relative to other animals’ sounds, relative to other performative modes, and relative to the various layers of a place, many of which require initiation in order to gain entry, this same creative power is not demanded of poetry. Might we aspire instead to a language that is less about a complete “lighting” of the world? Might we not, in turn, veer away from any attempts to gather the world into some kind of “unity and permanence” and encounter it instead in its constant, entropic fluctuations? As The Two Men demonstrates, Indigenous Australian poetry emerged as a part of this flux, not as some kind of container for it.

While Orpheus gave life to the landscape, the displaced Romantic poet, which settler Australia has more properly inherited, yearned for a complete, divine return to this landscape. William Wordsworth’s “Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree” was intended to combat the morbid allure of the cities by affirming, as Geoffrey Hartman writes, that thoughts of nature “should aid us to go out of ourselves, to broaden our feelings by meditation, and to recover original joy” (220). In the later Australian Romanticism of Judith Wright, however, observation of the natural world does nothing of the sort. What the land signifies is an absence: not only is it foreign, distant, and foreboding but it is also, for a poet with as keen an awareness of history as Wright’s, a place of almost unfathomable cultural and ecological destruction.

It was Wright’s contention—much inspired by her husband, philosopher Jack McKinney—that the poetic, intuitive, and emotional side of human nature must complement Western thought’s excessive emphasis on rationality in order to reunite the human with the natural world (Clarke and McKinney 275). The problem, however, was that Wright could not reunite the human with a world she insisted was no longer there. A world brought into being by the startling magic of language had since been steadily destroyed, and it was only this same language that could rescue it. Wright’s Romantic belief in the artistic capacity to bring forth an otherwise absent divine was strained at the one end by an
Australia which was overwhelmingly absent, and on the other by a decidedly Orphic role that she assigned herself. For Orpheus, music had a divine origin but required human discipline for its realization (Henry 6). In Wright’s poem “Interplay” (141), for example, the poet is a channeling instrument of a primal, creative energy. She is its “voice and focus” and, with the power of her word, she channels the energy into light, “and all creation [stirs].”

Nowhere is Wright’s tension more evident than in her first book of poems, The Moving Image, first published in 1946. A sense of absence pervades much of the volume. In “Nigger’s Leap: New England,” “the climbing dark” is as inevitable as the tides: colonial expansion has erased the presence of the “thin black children,” it has flooded the landscape “suddenly as history” (Wright 11). And despite Wright’s careful attention to the flourishing of parts of the natural world, underlying much of The Moving Image is the fear of an unavoidable decay into the silence of death. While the surfer, for example, might “thrust his joy against the weight of the sea” and revel in the full sensuality of the ocean, as the sun goes down what he must do is go home, for the sea will become a snarling “grey-wolf” (16). Dingoes are trapped (as opposed to moving freely through the landscape) and Aboriginal tribes have vanished (as opposed to having survived, despite tremendous hardships). The Moving Image laments these absences as if the poems themselves were somehow complicit in the destruction, which is to say that the poems lament because they can identify, but have failed to recover, these silences. Such a conundrum is irreconcilable because, as I mentioned, it was Wright’s intention, with the help of poetic language, to bring those silences to life, to give them meaning in wider histories of colonization and environmental degradation. In The Moving Image, however, singing is not being, but being-no-longer.

Instead of identifying an Orphic unity of poetry and reality, the speaker’s relationships are mimetic: the poet is not within the world, but is established against it as a cautious, uncertain onlooker.

Perhaps the best, single example of this situation is the well-known “Bora Ring”:

The song is gone; the dance
is secret with the dancers in the earth,
the ritual useless, and the tribal story
lost in an alien tale.

Only the grass stands up
to mark the dancing-ring; the apple-gums
posture and mime a past corroboree,
murmur a broken chant.

The hunter is gone; the spear
is splintered underground, the painted bodies
a dream the world breathed sleeping and forgot.
The nomad feet are still.
[.] (3)

Like Wordsworth’s Yew Tree poem, “Bora Ring” is written in the mode of a nature-inscription. Not only is the Wordsworthian inscription conscious of the place in which it was written, but it also commemorates any feelings the poet might have had for the place, thereby opening the reader’s eyes to yet a further, generally beautiful, feature of the landscape (Hartman 207–10). Orpheus could descend to the world of the dead and restore the un-living to life (Henry 3). The “Bora Ring” poem, however, is not a vehicle with which Wright recovers something of the vitality the ring once had in ceremony, in what would have been an attempt to regenerate an otherwise non-descript, grassy mound. Rather, rhythms are constrained and unable to gain momentum; the “song is gone” and the dancer’s ritual is “useless,” the painted bodies of the dancers are nothing more than “a dream the world breathed sleeping and forgot.” If Wright is Orphic it is only because she is standing back into Hades, her true love already gone.

Because her assumed responsibility was so much greater than Butcher Joe’s, because her Orphic powers had to come from her own intellect and not from a spirit in the country itself, we might suspect that Wright’s failure was almost inevitable. For the nascent language of her settler-Australian poetic was based upon a grave fallacy: that the world, in all its complexity, could be recovered and regenerated by the lone poet of Heidegger’s Between. To paraphrase Muecke, “Not even the wildest European imagination could produce such a reading of the country: the words we’re just not there” (Benterrak, Muecke, and Roe 12). It was inconceivable that the lush colors and sounds of a form as personal as the traditional lyric—however much it was influenced by Wright’s late-modern theory—was going to articulate a land as fragmented and dynamic as the one that first found voice in the complicated, skeletal structures of Indigenous song-poetry. For the failure to meet her own, lofty standards, Wright, who wanted all Australians to feel so keenly the various textures of this land, would eventually become exhausted with, and even dismiss, her poetry.

At much the same time that Wright was composing the poems for The Moving Image, on the other side of the Pacific, Pablo Neruda, only nine years her senior, had begun to envisage an enormous cluster of poems in which he explored, and revealed, how Latin America had come into being. It is commonly thought that the vision for such an undertaking came when he made a pilgrimage to Macchu Picchu, an Incan city in the high Andes (Reid 5).

Aquí los pies del hombre descansaron de noche
junto a los pies del águila, en las altas guardias
carniceras, y en la aurora
pisaron con los pies del trueo la niebla enrecedida,
y tocaron las tierras y las piedras
hasta reconocerlas en la noche o la muerte.

Miro las vestiduras y las manos,
el vestido del agua en la oquedad sonora,
la pared suavizada por el tacto de un rostro
que miro con mis ojos las lámparas terrestres,
que aceitó con mis manos las desaparecidas maderas: porque todo, ropaje, piel, vasijas, palabras, vino, panes, se fué, cayó a la tierra. (Neruda 36)

[Here the feet of men rested at night together with the feet of eagles in the high meat-stuffed lairs, and in the dawn they trod the thinning mists with feet of thunder, and they touched the earth and the stones until they recognised them in darkness or in death.

The poems that became of the pilgrimage, “Alturas de Macchu Picchu,” or “The Heights of Macchu Piccu,” formed a clear and resounding centerpiece in what would become Chile’s grandest Orphic song—literally, a general song, a song for everyone and everything, the Canto general. In the grand sweep of this poem, Neruda affirmed his new role as a poet: to become, in Alastair Reid’s words, “a voice, a voice for the dead past, for the stones themselves, for the inanimate world of objects, for the natural world, for the continent in all its myriad forms, and, above all, for those in the present who lack a voice” (Reid 5).

There is also little about “Macchu Picchu” that fails to resonate with the Romantic tradition. Everything, from the scaling of a mountain, to the sense of absence in the form of a sublime revelation, to the loving re-inscription of the landscape with a meaning we might assume has otherwise been lost, is as prominent here as it is in “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey.” Yet while in the “fair river” Wordsworth finds his “dearest Friend [. . .] the language of [his] former heart”—while he finds, in other words, a source for his own emotional or spiritual replenishment—Neruda sinks into Macchu Picchu in order to regenerate it rather than his own self: it is his own eyes, now embedded in the walls, that can see the hands, the pots, and the loaves of bread. Wordsworth finds atop his mountain a catalyst for his “purest thoughts”; Neruda, however, taps into an energy that he uses to bring an ancient city back from the dead. As if this were not Orphic enough, what then takes place after his ascent to Macchu Picchu—that is, his subsequent descent into the hellish depths of Latin American colonial history—surely confirms his Orphic intentions.

Indeed, Neruda had always harbored a deep faith in the power of his words to name and bring life to things. In his first known poem—a small verse written on the back of a postcard for his stepmother when he was ten—he performs two significant Orphic functions. First, he creates a natural land-
acter in the second stanza, their existence in the past tense, is powerfully suggestive of this. Still, while it is true that in the Canto Neruda was as passionate in his lamentations for Indigenous peoples’ deaths as was Wright in her work, and would even proceed to speak on behalf of their “dead mouths” in a later section of “Macchu Picchu,” he also neglected the fact that over one million of this particular city’s descendants alone were very much alive in the surrounding Andean region, many of whom were probably far better placed to restore to Macchu Picchu something of its former grandeur (Brotherson 51). They were the living evidence of the city’s continued evolution. It is not that they lacked voices, but that Neruda had taken the step of incorporating them all into his own. Here, singing is being, but there is only one singer.

With Neruda of Canto General and Wright of The Moving Image, therefore, we encounter late-modern examples of the problems associated with poets assuming Orphic powers in colonized landscapes. Wright, frustrated by a reliance on the capacity for poetry to channel and feed from the energies of a divine creativity, was unable to grant the living systems around her a language because these systems were, if not already dead, on a steep decline into death’s silence. As a consequence, her early landscapes are shrouded in a terse, lyrical form that glimmers before inevitably retreating into this abyss. Neruda, on the other hand, springing from the ruptures of a reinvented Spanish American poetry, enjoyed a more lateral relationship between his own being and the world around it, an experience of interconnection that was profoundly enriching. His belief in the power of poetry was almost boundless—nurtured, without doubt, by his unrivalled popularity. Yet his bustling, thriving, rapturous creativity could quite easily drown out sounds coming from elsewhere. Here we might theorize that it was the extremely supportive communities of poets, readers, and political activists by which Neruda’s first books were received throughout the Spanish-speaking world, as opposed to the relatively limited reception of all but a few of Wright’s poems, which led to the divergence in their Orphic sensibilities. The Australian poet in the mould of Wright, who feels isolated not only by the enormity of the landscape but by wider Australian society, returns to the figure of the lone individual who singlehandedly re-carves the world’s shape. The Nerudian poet, on the other hand, buoyed by centuries of civil war and left-wing collective action across the Americas and in Spain, is interested in a subject to unify all subjects, or a unity consisting of a tremendous diversity.

To return to Neruda’s ignorance of Indigenous Americans, his blinkered vision is even more surprising if we remember that he grew up in Temuco, the capital of Chile’s southern region, Araucanía. It is here that Indigenous Chileans, los Mapuche (in Mapuzungun, mapu = earth; che = people), have been most successful at resisting colonial influence and at defining a collective sense of purpose. Since 1553, the Mapuche people have been in almost constant conflict with European colonial powers, one of the more positive results of which is a strong, collective identity and sense of nationhood, or anti-nationhood. Nevertheless, five centuries of relentless coloni-
constant slippage and a-grammaticality also has an extremely potent political efficacy aimed at further eroding any claims to a totality of vision. For it is as much in reaction against the totalitarian visions of a colonial state as within the cultural currents that flow from it that Huirimilla is positioned. A landscape that endlessly deforms into further memories is one that is as much densely layered with historical presence as it is mercurial and evasive. There is no source to this landscape, no nodal point that can be isolated and destroyed. Huirimilla’s subject undergoes a complex series of becomings in relation to the complex system of which it is a part, and in order to resist the State system to which it refuses to be subservient. The “Song of War” is itself a machine of war:

The war machine is always exterior to the State, even when the State uses it, appropriates it. The man of war has an entire becoming that implies multiplicity, celerity, ubiquity, metamorphosis and treason, the power of affect. Wolf-men, bear-men, wildcat-men, men of every animality, secret brotherhoods, animate the battlefields. But so do the animal packs used by men in battle, or which trail the battles and take advantage of them. And together they spread contagion. There is a complex aggregate: the becoming-animal of men, packs of animals, elephants and rats, winds and tempests, bacteria sowing contagion. (Deleuze and Guattari 268)

Two important issues arise in this passage from A Thousand Plateaus. The first concerns the notion already flagged, that Huirimilla, as a poet at war against the totalitarian vision of the State, is both within and without its apparatus, his poems slipping easily through the cracks in its walls. This is evident in the above extract in the way it shifts smoothly through a variety of images while leaving slight “gaps” in the discourse. These gaps ensure that a poem like “Song of War” can never be grasped by the reader—its path is always broken, its destination unclear. This speaks of a larger concern in Huirimilla’s work, which is the incorporation of Mapuche wínka (non-Indigenous Chilean) and non-Chilean elements into a many-sided or hybrid “intercultural universe” absent of a center or primary foundation (García, Carrasco, and Contreras 84). This sense of elusiveness also recalls The Two Men, in which Butcher Joe’s patchy explanations often ignored numerous words or entire phrases in almost every song in the cycle. Thus, even the privileged white, male reader like me is “held back” from grasping the direction of the entire text. This in turn imposes necessary limits on any one body’s gaze: I will never see The Two Men in its entirely because of a real limit in my knowledge—not because this knowledge is held from me by some transcendent, always-absent entity, but because it has been withheld by another earthly agent.

The final issue, and the one that relates most pertinently to the concept of a poetic agency dispersed through a territory, of a form of creativity that increases rather than decreases complexity, is to do with what follows Huirimilla’s subject—the traces of other beings implicated in his multiple becomings, in other words. For following closely behind we find the same animal packs to which Neruda refers us—the same flora and fauna of Araucanía—but all is comingling into a “complex aggregate.” Due to the recent resurgence in Mapuche poetry, of which Huirimilla has been at the forefront, Mapuche presence is spreading throughout Chilean literature and barriers are falling while new subjectivities are allowed to emerge. With Huirimilla and what is a burgeoning generation of Mapuche poets firmly in the center of our thoughts, we might make a tentative conclusion. In order to sing up the new world—to engage, that is, in a process of ecopoesis, in which the connections between cultures human and non-human are strengthened—the settler poet should be encouraged to delimit his or her Orphic intentions for the sake of a larger biota of poetic diversity. A skeletal, fragmented poetic that utilizes multiple grammatical strains, as opposed to the tightly-woven threads of the Romantic lyric or the exultant chorus of a general song, is a sure sign of a poem’s phenomenal smallness relative to the vastness of Australian and Chilean spaces.

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Diane Fahey

This Life

You rest a wall away. Often I hear your softly staggered yawn, like small steps into the day; even your silences; and sometimes I’m called by a voice like yours only to find you in deep asleep, breathing as your mended, imperfect heart dictates.

We work at what will make the difference. No need now to think of endings: at this threshold, we think only of life— feast on nectar and cakes, stroll the garden, blessed by rain-cleansed air, magpies caroling. Once we were as trees in drought, locked from the source. Now, we replenish, know peace, contemplate time’s mercy.

Diane Fahey has won various awards for her poetry, including the ACT Government’s Judith Wright Prize. Her tenth book, The Wing Collection: New and Selected Poems, will be published by Puncher & Wattmann in 2011.