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McCredden, Lyn 2015, Poetry and the limits of language, *Language and semiotic studies*, vol. 1, no. 4, Winter, pp. 95-107.

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# Poetry and the Limits of Language

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## *Abstract*

This essay argues that poetic language offers the possibility of meaning and value, and simultaneously points beyond itself, to the limits of language, to a space differently configured as erasure, silence, the unsignifiable. What does it suggest, epistemologically and ontologically, if we acknowledge this double action of poetic language? What might this space beyond language be, and what difference does it make if we acknowledge this space? The essay examines four poems and the different ways in which they acknowledge such a space, drawing on the historically distinct approaches of Meister Eckhart and Jacques Derrida in order to ask what the space beyond language might be. The argument of the essay is that in acknowledging such a space something opens up for writers and readers of poetry: a different approach to knowing, and a potentially humbled ontological position.

*Keywords: poetry, poetic language, meaning-making, limits of language*

## **1. Introduction**

As literary critics, translators and cultural studies scholars, we understand literary language has many guises: playful, and highly ambiguous; or, as seeking exactness and precision; as obscurantist; and as defeated or inadequate, referents running behind or astray from authorial desires or conscious strategies. By “defeated” I am suggesting that human agents often want or need more from language than it seems able to supply. Conversely, language sometimes runs away with itself and offers multiple possible meanings, becoming dangerous, or too unstable a medium for human agents to trust. Of course it’s always an open question as to whether it is the language “itself”, or the users of language—authors, readers, translators—who generate the traits and functions of language. In this essay I will explore the ways in which literary language beckons us towards understanding and meaning, and simultaneously makes us its playthings, refusing to offer up meanings or

values. In relation to four poems by Australian authors, the essay will examine the poems' deployment of poetic language, and their simultaneous *acknowledgement of the limits of language*. Finally, the essay will pose the question of what consequences, ontological and epistemological, are produced by an acknowledgement of the limits of language.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the theoretical field of *Poststructuralism* found multiple ways to be suspicious of the word. Literary critics learned that language—words, discourse, signs, signification, writing, speaking, representation, translation—was endless play, and/or was fallible, inadequate, partial, forever separated from any dreamed fullness or presence, any coincidence with “the thing”. While poststructuralism may be waning as the queen of critical disciplines, contemporary literary critical scholarship is still deeply influenced by its opening up of questions about the nature of literary language. This essay's focus on the limits of language, and claims about language as the bearer of meaning, are provoked by Derridean ideas around the claim which was seeded in Derrida's early pronouncement that “Il n'y a pas de hors-texte” (there is no outside-text; or more controversially, there is nothing outside or beyond text, there is no beyond of language) (Derrida, 1976, pp. 158-159).

Perhaps, for all the crafting and mastering by authors, and the careful, “evidence” of semioticians or literary critics in their interpretations, literary language can be figured as a fox entering a hen house. Yes, there is planning, stealth, a desired goal on the fox's part, but there is also an awful lot of feathers and squawking, lunging and biting, with varying effects. Alternatively, the fox here might represent the author, or the literary critic on their stealthy quest to make meaning; but equally it might represent the anarchic elements of language, the ever-present possibility of feathers and failure. But why a fox? Several months ago I sat in front of a little boy, about eight years old, on a flight from London. Just before take-off we saw a small animal dash across the runway into a grassy area. It was a fox, I thought, but the little boy piped up with “Daddy, I just saw a red squirrel!” “I think it was a fox,” said the father. “No, it was a red squirrel. I've seen a red squirrel before.” There was a brief silence and the father wisely replied: “Maybe it *was* a squirrel disguised as a fox.” “Or a fox disguised as a red squirrel,” immediately trumped the little boy. Things, and their descriptors, and what human agents make of these elements, are our endless delight, aren't they? The little boy had the final word in this instance. But sometimes it's the frustrations and the *failure* of language that seems to get the upper hand. I'm sure the translators amongst us have often experienced all elements of this scenario—the delight at the multiple possibilities, the joy of getting it “right”, and the frustration as meaning escapes out of the hen-house.

## 2. Judith Wright's Poetic Meaning-Making

Poets and poetic language are entangled—entangle themselves perhaps—in this web of meaning-making, so often pressing towards meaning in words, but also questioning at a profound level the efficacy of words. Australian Judith Wright was an extraordinary

poet, cultural commentator and activist of environmental and racial issues. She sought to use language precisely, to pierce Australian consciences in regard to the many injustices perpetrated on Indigenous Australia, and in relation to the land, writing in her 1991 critical volume *Born of the Conquerors*:

Those two strands—the love of the land we have invaded and the guilt of the invasion—have become part of me. It is a haunted country. We owe it repentance and such amends as we can make, and one last chance of making those amends is to keep as much of it as we can, in the closest state to its original beauty. (Wright, 1991, p. 30)

There is an activist's (or a preacher's) urgency here—in the sharp, declarative sentences, the direct moral statements. She speaks up, and seeks to speak truly, an authentic understanding of history, both personal and national. However, as a poet Wright simultaneously understood language as ephemeral, as sliding and vanishing, as driven into history and forgotten. In her famous early poem “South of My Days”, which appeared in her 1946 volume *The Moving Image*, Wright wrote:

South of my days' circle, part of my blood's country,  
rises that tableland, high delicate outline  
of bony slopes wincing under the winter,  
low trees, blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite—  
clean, lean, hungry country. The creek's leaf-silenced,  
willow choked, the slope a tangle of medlar and crabapple  
branching over and under, blotched with a green lichen;  
and the old cottage lurches in for shelter.

O cold the black-frost night. The walls draw in to the warmth  
and the old roof cracks its joints; the slung kettle  
hisses a leak on the fire. Hardly to be believed that summer will turn up  
again some day in a wave of rambler-roses,  
thrust its hot face in here to tell another yarn—  
a story old Dan can spin into a blanket against the winter.  
Seventy years of stories he clutches round his bones.  
Seventy years are hived in him like old honey. (Wright, 1971, p. 20)

Old Dan is a storyteller, a colonial figure created by White to tell the stories of early white settlers in Australia. The poetry creates old Dan, gives him an Australian vernacular mode of addressing his audience, seeing his tales as able to “spin a blanket against the winter”. We hear about settler experiences: droving and drought, blizzards and Thunderbolt the outlaw. The listener, a child who would become a poet and who is also the narrator, is remembering her childhood in her blood's country, learning about the old days *and* about the uses of

language. Dan's tale carries a desire to remember the material realities of his life:

Droving that year, Charleville to the Hunter,  
nineteen-one it was, and the drought beginning;  
sixty head left at the McIntyre, the mud round them  
hardened like iron; and the yellow boy died  
in the sulky ahead with the gear, but the horse went on,  
stopped at Sandy Camp and waited in the evening.  
It was the flies we seen first, swarming like bees.  
Came to the Hunter, three hundred head of a thousand—  
cruel to keep them alive—and the river was dust.

Or mustering up in the Bogongs in the autumn  
when the blizzards came early. Brought them down; we  
brought them down, what aren't there yet. Or driving for Cobb's on the run  
up from Tamworth-Thunderbolt at the top of Hungry Hill,  
and I give him a wink. I wouldn't wait long, Fred,  
not if I was you. The troopers are just behind,  
coming for that job at the Hillgrove.  
He went like a luny, him on his big black horse.

Oh, they slide and they vanish  
as he shuffles the years like a pack of conjuror's cards.  
True or not, it's all the same; and the frost on the roof  
cracks like a whip, and the back-log break into ash.  
Wake, old man. This is winter, and the yarns are over.  
No-one is listening.  
South of my days' circle  
I know it dark against the stars, the high lean country  
full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep. (Wright, 1971, p. 20)

While we as listeners, along with the child, might be caught up in the narrative push to remember, to retain, we become aware too that the poem oscillates amongst many different functions of language: as comfort and memory; its telling of tall-stories; but also its acknowledgement that “the yarns are over/No-one is listening”. It twists and turns between conceptions of language as powerful and haunting, and as *ultimately ephemeral, ghostly*. The poet's language *desires* to join with the thing it seeks to define. Word and place and observer are posited as one, “part of my blood's country,/...that tableland, high delicate outline/of bony slopes wincing under the winter”. Author and reader are in part seduced by this sense of unity, as alliteration, and sensuous recall, and narrative drive align with passion and memory. But there is something different to come. Old Dan spins

his stories “against the winter”, “Seventy years of stories [clutched] round his bones./ Seventy years ...hived in him like old honey.”, but the poem ends with a call to the old man to wake, for “This is winter, and the yarns are over./No-one is listening.” While the last line suggests the stories will live on—“old stories that still go walking in my sleep.”—and in *our* reading of them, the poet tells us they are still *sliding and vanishing*, as “the back-log breaks into ash.” Language is steeped in desire to convey meanings, memories, values, but it is equally aware of the limits of language—“True or not, it’s all the same”—and the ways *poetic* language cannot forget its own ephemerality.

In a second way, readers can see the locus of meaning-making in Judith Wright’s poem as situated both in language, but also as occurring beyond the power of language. A postcolonial reading here helps us to see both the so-called Australianness of Wright’s “days”, and the colonial heritage she struggles with. Reading the first stanza through a postcolonial frame, the unconscious elements of Wright’s poetry emerge. Readers, looking back from 2015 to *The Moving Image* published in 1946, are driven to ask: Is this an *Australian* scene? You might say yes, noting its landscape of bony slopes and blue-leaved trees, this “clean, lean, hungry country”. But equally, it is recognizable as a scene not of authentic “Australianness” but as mimicked from one of Wordsworth’s English Romantic poems, with its mad old hermit, its medlar and crabapple and rambler roses, its lichened old cottage. Wright’s artistic trajectory after this volume was towards a postcolonial understanding of the land, and her own role as “born of the conquerors”. Understanding this in retrospect we can read “South of my Days” as a poem in transition from colonial to postcolonial understanding. And with this growing ideological understanding, the limits of language, its shifting frames and its ephemerality, become more evident. The authority of an author, and the authenticity of the representation, are seen as constantly and necessarily shifting.

In her awareness of poetic language and its limits, Wright, as early as 1946, is seeking to populate the country with old stories, but she is beginning to realize that it is a *white* history she is promulgating—of droving, and outlaws and troopers—together with a dawning knowledge that “the yarns are over./No-one is listening.”, that language exposes its own inadequacies, as it must.

In the same 1946 volume we find “Nigger’s Leap”, a poem in which she asks of herself, and of all white colonisers of the land, in regard to the massacres of so many Indigenous peoples that took place across Australia: “Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers,/and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?” (Wright, 1971, p. 15). In “Niggers Leap” a poem about the seemingly not uncommon practice of driving Aboriginal people over cliffs to their deaths, the white narrator cries out in anguish: “O lonely air./Make a cold quilt across the bone and skull/that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff/and then were silent, waiting for the flies.” There is horror and bitterly hopeless regret, as the narrator cries out for “a cold quilt” to cover the bone and skull, an image which can be read as both a gesture of guilt, or as an impossible desire to comfort.

The eastward spurs tip backward from the sun.  
Night runs an obscure tide round cape and bay  
and beats with boats of cloud up from the sea  
against this sheer and limelit granite head.  
Swallow the spine of range; be dark, O lonely air.  
Make a cold quilt across the bone and skull  
that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff  
and then were silent, waiting for the flies.

Here is the symbol, and climbing dark  
a time for synthesis. Night buoys no warning  
over the rocks that wait our keels; no bells  
sound for the mariners. Now must we measure  
our days by nights, our tropics by their poles,  
love by its end and all our speech by silence.  
See in the gulfs, how small the light of home. (Wright, 1971, p. 15)

The poet calls for “a time of synthesis”, for symbol and reality to coincide, for language to demonstrate its power. But she also paradoxically acknowledges the absence of signs—no warning, no bells—and the need, now, to measure “all our speech by silence.” The final two stanzas can be seen, in their heightened moral appeal to her contemporary audience, as attempts to reach out beyond the poem’s words, to exhort and illuminate her fellow Australians as “suddenly as history”. History, night, a common awareness that “all men are one man at last” should, the poem declares, flood us with knowledge: “there they lie that were ourselves writ strange.” The poem narrates an alternative foundation of white Australia—settler atrocities, massacres of Aboriginal people, and the contemporary repression of these facts – that exists beyond the power of language and the sanctioned myths of the nation, in the material reality of blood and rivers, cliffs and dust, and the irretrievable existence of “thin black children dancing like the shadows.”

Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers,  
and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?  
O all men are one man at last. We should have known  
the night that tidied up the cliffs and hid them  
had the same question on its tongue for us.  
And there they lie that were ourselves writ strange.

Never from earth again the coolamon  
or thin black children dancing like the shadows  
of saplings in the wind. Night lips the harsh  
scarp of the tableland and cools its granite.

Night floods us suddenly as history  
that has sunk many islands in its good time. (Wright, 1971, p. 15)

Wright is a poet who understood the power of language, drawing on it to convey historical trauma, to rewrite white Australian myths of origin. But a careful reading of this poem reveals the equal need to acknowledge the limits of language. Such limits are drawn here in lines such as “Here is the symbol, and climbing dark”, “Night lips the harsh scarp of the tableland and cools its granite.”, “And there they lie that were ourselves writ strange”. All are metaphors of speech and writing, but all are also expressions of *a poetic attempt to establish extra-textual meaning*, to understand what it is that presses on us *beyond* the writing, to acknowledge the translation into the phenomenal, the other side of symbols and their putatively graspable meanings. “Night floods us as suddenly as history” gestures towards a place beyond writing, art, poetry, language, a place where the truths beyond language are operating. But what might this “beyond” of language be? How is it that poets are both extreme wordsmiths, and, consequently, hyper-aware of the *limits of language*?

### 3. Les Murray and the Space Beyond Words

Another highly original figure in the Australian poetry landscape is Les Murray. In his 1969 poem “An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow” Murray gives us a very different sense of the limits of language, the space beyond words.

The word goes round Repins,  
the murmur goes round Lorenzini,  
at Tattersalls, men look up from sheets of numbers,  
the Stock Exchange scribblers forget the chalk in their hands  
and men with bread in their pockets leave the Greek Club:  
There’s a fellow crying in Martin Place. They can’t stop him.  
The traffic in George Street is banked up for half a mile  
and drained of motion. The crowds are edgy with talk  
and more crowds come hurrying. Many run in the back streets  
which minutes ago were busy main streets, pointing:  
There’s a fellow weeping down there. No one can stop him. (Murray, 1991, pp. 24-25)

The figure of “a fellow crying in Martin Place” gestures towards a space beyond words, of meaning ungraspable by the passersby. Out of the world of work and entertainment, meals and money-making, traffic, and crowds “edgy with talk”, the poem contemplates the possibility of meaning and value which cannot be trapped by words, cannot be declaimed or approached:

The man we surround, the man no one approaches

simply weeps, and does not cover it, weeps  
not like a child, not like the wind, like a man  
and does not declaim it, nor beat his breast, nor even  
sob very loudly—yet the dignity of his weeping

holds us back from his space, the hollow he makes about him  
in the midday light, in his pentagram of sorrow,  
and uniforms back in the crowd who tried to seize him  
stare out at him, and feel, with amazement, their minds  
longing for tears as children for a rainbow.

Some will say, in the years to come, a halo  
or force stood around him. There is no such thing.  
Some will say they were shocked and would have stopped him  
but they will not have been there. The fiercest manhood,  
the toughest reserve, the slickest wit amongst us

trembles with silence, and burns with unexpected  
judgements of peace. Some in the concourse scream  
who thought themselves happy. Only the smallest children  
and such as look out of Paradise come near him  
and sit at his feet, with dogs and dusty pigeons. (Murray, 1991, pp. 24-25)

This space beyond words is figured as a pentagram of sorrow, haloed, silent. But it is also an ontologically rich place, a place from which gifts issue:

Ridiculous, says a man near me, and stops  
his mouth with his hands, as if it uttered vomit—  
and I see a woman, shining, stretch her hand  
and shake as she receives the gift of weeping;  
as many as follow her also receive it

and many weep for sheer acceptance, and more  
refuse to weep for fear of all acceptance,  
but the weeping man, like the earth, requires nothing,  
the man who weeps ignores us, and cries out  
of his writhen face and ordinary body

not words, but grief, not messages, but sorrow,  
hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea—  
and when he stops, he simply walks between us

mopping his face with the dignity of one  
man who has wept, and now has finished weeping.

Evading believers, he hurries off down Pitt Street. (Murray, 1991, pp. 24-25)

“not words, but grief, not messages, but sorrow,/hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea—” Here, the poet surrounds his crying man with wordy explainers who, “edgy with talk,” lose their capacity for words. Even “the slickest wit amongst us/trembles with silence.” Meaning is experienced, but even the receivers are not clear about the nature of the meaning they receive. The beyond of words emerges as sacred, charismatic, silent, a place of “not words, but grief, not messages, but sorrow,/hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea.” The place to which the crying man points is sacred in the sense that it *transforms* the knowers, the believers, the warmongers, the controllers, the ridiculers. It’s never stated—can’t be stated in words—what these transformed ones have become, but they have been witnesses to human grief—“with amazement, their minds/longing for tears”—which has closed down their words, their ready judgements and their self-certainty. Some critics have jumped in with words—that’s what we do, we literary critics, isn’t it?—to *explain* who or what the man is: he is Christ, he is a version of the author, he is an Everyman figure, he is the private man in a public world. But the poem does its best not to *explain* what or who the weeping man might be. It is the grace of the poem to point beyond itself.

#### 4. Sam Wagan Watson and the Poetic Construction of Silence

A third poem that gestures towards silence, the beyond of words, is “kangaroo crossing”, published in 2005 by Indigenous poet Sam Wagan Watson.

I know this stretch in my blood

this is where the *Megaleia rufa* song  
cries louder than any car stereo

the dreaming that suddenly crawls onto the road  
and takes it  
out of the living—  
the ones who fantasised constantly on their own immortality  
behind the wheel

but this stretch of road...*this stretch*  
is where the extroverted angels turn their heads  
as the flash that is stronger than steel  
launches onto the highway

and brings those of the present  
forward to their own judgement day

refraction of light  
from split seconds

to eternity. (Watson, 2005, p. 88)

Watson's construction of silence carries a heavy freight. At a realistic level the poem narrates one of the most common of Australian accidents, a collision with a kangaroo, *Megaleia rufa*, the Red Kangaroo, seen in great numbers in inland NSW, Queensland and Central Australia. But the poem works at both a realistic and a hyperreal level. The gap between these two modes of writing creates the space to which the poem obliquely gestures. The speaker's identity remains mysterious, but it is someone who knows intimately this place and the kangaroo, as well as the indigenous "dreaming" and its power to speak from the ancient past into the present moment, on "*this stretch*", this length of road. Indigenous people's "dreaming" is captured in Australia by an English word that is increasingly being seen as an inadequate translation of a complex set of Indigenous practices and beliefs across history. The Australian Museum website declares:

The Dreaming has different meanings for different Aboriginal people. It is a complex network of knowledge, faith and practices that derive from stories of creation, and it dominates all spiritual and physical aspects of Aboriginal life. The Dreaming sets out the structures of society, the rules for social behaviour and the ceremonies performed in order to maintain the life of the land. (Australian Museum, n.d.)

So Aboriginal dreaming encompasses sacred and ethical dimensions, the spiritual and the material of land and peoples yoked together. It is still a live and powerful system of beliefs for Indigenous peoples, and is being acknowledged in legal processes. In Watson's poem the dreaming is figured as a sudden, wordless, non-human stroke of power, in the materiality of a kangaroo and a particular stretch of land. It delivers a primal lesson for "the ones who fantasised constantly on their own immortality." Time is telescoped in the poem, from the dreaming, across the present moment, to eternity, as "judgement" falls on those who are ignorant of their own ultimate powerlessness. In Watson's poem, language is recognized as not powerful enough to fully comprehend or even acknowledge what lies beyond words—the dreaming that pre-exists the human, the power greater than human arrogance, captured momentarily, apocalyptically, in "refraction of light/from split seconds/to eternity."

## 5. The Double Action of Poetic Language

Jacques Derrida expressed the power *and* the impotence of language in this way: "It

is thus simultaneously true that things come into existence and lose their existence by being named.” (Derrida, 1978, p. 70). Characteristically having his cake and eating it too, Derrida, the master of linguistic play, employed endless tropes, placing them under erasure, and continuing to write about them—turning them over, probing them, playing in words as he constantly sought the limit of words. For some, this notion of language as forever becoming, never arriving, always eluding or being eluded by meaning, is *hopeful*, simultaneously a victory against fundamentalist or fascistic human tendencies which seek to fix meaning and language, creating an eternal field of play without final meaning.

However, we continue to associate language with meaning in our ordinary, daylight thinking. “What I *mean* is...” But what is meaning-making in *literary* language? Mark Turner in *The Literary Mind* argues:

Meanings are not mental objects bounded in conceptual places but rather complex operations of projection, binding, linking, blending and integration over multiple spaces...meaning is parabolic and literary. (Turner, 1996, p. 13)

Turner’s understanding of the processes of meaning-making, and its literariness, is suggestive here. It considers authorial and readerly approaches, and the *contexts* into which language falls, or is pushed. The restless, seemingly infinite *activity* of literary language is what makes it so manipulable and playful; equally, it cannot help but acknowledge and ponder its own limits.

Once we acknowledge this space beyond words, gestured towards by multiple poetic texts, it becomes possible to ponder what the *ontological* consequences of this double action of poetic language might be. In his discussion of German Christian mystic Meister Eckhart, in relation to contemporary theorist Jacques Derrida, Ian Almond analyzes the repercussions for both writers of what he describes as the overlapping love and suspicion of language. He sees these two historically distant thinkers, Eckhart and Derrida, as different, but analogous, writing: “Whereas Derrida’s project wishes to reach a new understanding of words, without considering some of them more ‘originary’ than others, Eckhart’s desire is to reach a place where one can ultimately abandon them altogether.” (Almond, 1999, p. 161). Almond continues:

In Derrida, words are placed under erasure because of a restless play within language, and not because of some linguistic incapacity to express an elusive signified ‘out-there’. Semantic instability—that is, radical indeterminacy within finite parameters of play—makes such *Durchkreuzung* (erasure) necessary, not the presence of some ineffable unsignifiable which constantly makes us lament how ‘finite’ and ‘imperfect’ our language is. (Almond, 1999, p. 160)

The intellectual alternatives of working with such a poststructural, Derridean set of concepts about language are outlined by Almond here as either unlamenting play in a field of semantic instability (Derrida), and/or longing to reach the unsignifiable, possibly

leading us to lamentation at the imperfections or inadequacy of language. Some writers and literary critics *do lament* the finite and imperfect nature of language, but recognizing the inadequacy or limits of language does not necessarily lead to lamentation. Nor does such a recognition necessarily lead us to postulate “some ineffable unsignifiable” beyond language. Beyond Almond’s argument, there is a middle path between play and a (lamenting) recognition of limit. Accepting such aspects of literary language may lead us to consider not just the nature of language, but the *finitude* of the player in the field. As language animals, and particularly as writers and readers of poetic language, we have our own finitude revealed to us, at the same time as we continue to reach for meaning, again and again, through the ephemeral structures and forms of language.

Almond argues that for Eckhart, silence beyond all words (for him, the place of what he calls the Godhead) is what is desired: “The most beautiful thing which man can express about God is found in the fact that, out of the wisdom of inner treasures, he is able to keep silent about God.” (Eckhart qtd. in Davies, 1994, p. 236). There are many similarities here between Eckhart’s silence and Buddhist meditation, for example. Eckhart in his sermons and writings turned, rapt, towards what might lie beyond language, practicing obedience to the silence beyond the clamor of words and human knowledges. Derrida remained absorbed in his fort-da game, putting words under erasure as quickly as they leapt from his mouth, or off the end of his pen, declaring their inescapable logocentricity, but acknowledging that in the end that is all we have. Nothing, beyond text.

But how, in response to the recognition of the limits of language, and Eckhart’s “finitude of thought”, does one continue to write, think, act, believe? Does such a belief about the final powerlessness of words lead to lamentation? Some will not even bother to countenance such a premise, exalting Art and the many forms of literary language not as limited but as connected to truth or beauty, or meaning. Others will indeed lament the fallibility and finitude of language. Some, (like Derrida?) will acknowledge this premise of language’s inadequacy, but continuing to use language playfully, joyously, productively, not concerned with the final telos, because it does not exist. Yet others (like Meister Eckhart?) will embrace such limits, and will seek a silence beyond all human chatter and form.

So many poems, like the four examined in this essay, point beyond themselves, to silence, recognizing the finitude of language and the language animal, even as they practice the play, the *jouissance* of language. This essay has argued that there is a need to question the limits of words and their power, recognizing that language takes us so far; but that simultaneously, inevitably, language (particularly poetic language) raises the question of what is beyond language. Poetic language is arguably the form of language-use that most relentlessly strives towards meaning, and which most powerfully and paradoxically points beyond words, a humbling experience for human agency.

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