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Honour the Single Soul: Homage to Randolph Stow (1936-2010)

Martin Leer

‘Honour the single soul’ are the last words of Tom Spring in *Tourmaline* – and as close as one gets to a moral, or perhaps more truly, a political imperative in Randolph Stow’s work. After the demise of the diviner’s cult of collective hope (of striking water in the waste land, where instead he strikes gold), Kestrel the publican has returned to take over, and in the middle of a dust storm he walks across to the Springs’ store to gather their support for his new regime:

‘What will you do, Kes?’ Mary was wondering.
‘Carry on where he left off.’
‘And the church?’
‘The same. It can survive without him.’
‘And you’ll be high priest,’ said Tom, contemptuously.
‘Someone will. That – power – is worth having.’
‘That “power”,’ said Tom.
‘Will you join us, Tom?’
‘No,’ said Tom. ‘I’m an old man. Let me sleep.’
‘You’re the only weak link.’
‘And proud of it,’ said Tom. ‘Leave me to die in peace ...’
‘And you, Mary?’
‘Yes,’ she said, looking at Tom, hesitantly. ‘I will.’
‘That’s good to hear,’ Kestrel said. ‘That’s all I wanted.’ And he turned, lifting his hand to the door.
‘Kes,’ said Tom, still intent on the whirling dust.
‘What?’
‘Honour the single soul.’
‘I think in thousands,’ Kestrel said, ‘and tens of thousands.’ (Stow, *Tourmaline* 171–72)

Tom is found dead by the Law, the intrusive narrator of the novel, a page later. It is significant, of course, that Tom Spring does not have the last word in this discussion, even if he has often been seen as a sort of authorial spokesman. Had 'Honour the single soul' been allowed to stand, it might have been in danger of slipping into superficial liberal humanism. Gainsaid by Kestrel in terms out of both Laozi's *Dao De Qing* and the Satan of St Matthew's Gospel, for both of whom the 'ten thousand things' are precisely what works in opposition to the Way (of St Matthew's radical Jesus) or *Dao*, it gains a deeper and darker and more pessimistic meaning: a Daoist anarchism, that is, an anarchism of non-action (not incompatible with the Sermon on the Mount), which can hardly be expressed politically, but only existentially and poetically.

In this essay I wish to honour the single soul who was Randolph Stow – and explore how the idea of the single soul informs his writing. The two are of course not the same. The first time I visited Stow in Old Harwich in the 1980s, he said, 'My friends call me Mick. Other writers have pseudonyms for writing. I have a pseudonym for living'. The *single soul* is not *the individual*, that necessary, but also abstract, triumphalist legal fiction on which political democracy and human (or at least civil) rights are based. Nor is it *identity*: either in the Lockean sense of an essential core that keeps together disparate sensations – or in the contemporary consumerist sense where, as a young friend of mine brilliantly put it in a recent conversation, 'in expressing yourself you end up with another man's name on your underwear'. The *single soul* is probably closest to – and the best translation of – Søren Kierkegaard's concept of *hiin Enkelte*: the essential loneliness through which our selfhood is experienced. In Kierkegaard's theological conception this singularity is a consequence of our fall from God, but also by inherent paradox the existential core through which our longing for God finds form (this is Kierkegaard's version of the 'fortunate fall').

Stow's writings and life, I would argue, form a deep investigation of this single soul, positively and negatively, in existential, geographical, psychological, philosophical, cultural and aesthetic, but also religious terms. Such an investigation is of course a radical version of seeing the world *à travers un tempérament*, as Zola put it (and Stow saw his own writing as 'fanatically realist'). The temperament of the single soul is that of extreme shyness and *introversion* (as it used to be called) at the opposite extreme of what the contemporary world sees as its ideal type of human being: the psychopath endowed with all the virtues of the *homo economicus*.

First the life. Julian Randolph Stow was born in 1936 in Geraldton,

Western Australia. He grew up in Geraldton and on stations in the surrounding district belonging to his mother's family, the Sewells, who were a prominent pioneering family of the area, thinly disguised as the fictional Maplesteads in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*. The Stows, like the Sewells, were originally Suffolk gentry (John Stow, the seventeenth-century topographer, is an ancestor), whose South and Western Australian branch descends from Thomas Quinton Stow, a Congregationalist minister. Thomas Stow migrated from Suffolk to Adelaide with his wife Elizabeth Randolph, a scion of the prominent and sometimes eccentric Virginia family, who were cousins of Thomas Jefferson and claimed descent from Pocahontas. The later family history in Australia includes the minor nineteenth-century explorer Jefferson Stow, who provides the epigraph for *To the Islands*, and John Jefferson Bray, the poet and Chief Justice of South Australia in the 1960s and 70s.

Randolph Stow was educated at Guildford Grammar and the University of Western Australia. An extraordinarily precocious writer, he published two novels *A Haunted Land* and *The Bystander* while still in his teens, novels which he later repressed, though they had made him into somewhat of an international celebrity as an Australian equivalent of the French teenage novelist Françoise Sagan. Work on an Aboriginal mission in the Kimberleys gave the inspiration for *To the Islands*, possibly still his best-known novel, published on his twenty-second birthday in 1958, and an interest in anthropology, which led to a job as assistant to the Government Anthropologist in the Trobriand Islands, off the coast of New Guinea. A gifted linguist, Stow learned Biga-Kiriwina, the local language, and later impressed me with his knowledge not only of French and Portuguese, but Indonesian, Dutch, Scots Gaelic and Danish.

In the Trobriands Stow caught cerebral malaria, attempted suicide and was invalided out, an experience that gave rise to *Visitants* (1978), which along with *Tourmaline* (1963) counts as his major achievement, though neither of these dark, tragic novels would be quite the same without their pastoral counterparts *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965) and *The Girl Green as Elderflower* (1980). *Visitants* stands as a truly haunting descendant of Joseph Conrad's colonial fictions of tropical anguish and one of the last great testaments to the period of colonialism in the proper sense. *Tourmaline* remains controversial: denounced and ridiculed for its 'Symbolism and High Modernism' by the Australian cultural commissars of both right and left, its reception, termed by A.D. Hope in a partial retraction of his earlier criticism 'the *Tourmaline* affair', was probably the major impetus for Stow's self-exile. Much gossip that has come my way saw him as a kind of reverse

remittance man because of his sexual orientation, though Stow himself said to me: 'Gossip made me a homosexual before I was one' (which is probably the case for most of us). Neglected by most these days, seen as comprehensible only to advanced students of Daoism, and passing in and out of print like much great literature of the 1950s, 60s and 70s (White, Stead, Astley, etc.), *Tourmaline* is still, to a certain small group among an older generation of Australians, as important or more important than Patrick White. It is also admired by outsiders like the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris, who sees it as a major work of the postcolonial imagination, which began to reshape the ways of looking at the world, literature and existence in the 1950s and 60s. To my Swiss students it seems like a continuation of the French *nouveau roman*; to me as a Danish student (and it was the novel that first stirred my interest in Australian literature) it was a counterpart to the major Danish novel of the post-war era, Martin A. Hansen's Kierkegaardian *The Liar*. But all of these comparisons just go to show what a unique writer Stow was, always off on a different tangent to others, however much his work was inspired by a wide range of other literature. *Tourmaline* is perhaps the strangest of his books. It is as haunting an evocation of the Australian desert as anything by White or the Australian Expressionist painters like Sidney Nolan, whose *Pretty Polly Mine* graced the original dust-jacket. But the real revelation of *Tourmaline's* impact to me was a performance of the dialogue as a radio play in broad Strine on ABC Radio in the mid-1980s. The modulations of dourness and wryness into insecurity, spite and sadism mixed with poetry and wisdom was a chilling ear-opener as to how the cacophony of a nation must always sound to the single soul, and why the love of such a deeply attuned ear cannot be reciprocated by a nation still in the hold of a 'cultural cringe'.

After travelling extensively in Europe, Asia and North America, Stow took up residence in England, first in London and Leeds and then in East Bergholt, the Suffolk birthplace of John Constable, and finally in the harbour town of Old Harwich, Essex, where he died on 29 May 2010. On my visits there he had become one with the jeans-clad and sailor-capped crowd passing from pub to pub and was highly prized as a team-member in pub quizzes. After the 1960s he only returned to Australia to take up a Whitlam era grant in 1974; he quickly left and paid the grant back. *Visitants* and *The Girl Green as Elderflower* appeared at the end of the 1970s and *The Suburbs of Hell* in 1984. And then silence, except for the occasional review in the *TLS* or *ALS*. The silence has been variously explained: as the logical extension of the recluse's pessimism, as a descent into loneliness and alcoholism, as an inability to reinvent himself as a British writer, as

a writer who had lost his inspiration. It was not for a lack of ideas, which I suppose I can now reveal that Stow mentioned to me over the years: a novel on the *Batavia* disaster in 1629 in the Abrolhos Islands off the coast of Geraldton was long expected; a historical novel set in Suffolk managed to acquire an ISBN no. and lives a shadow life on Amazon; other projects included an ending to Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*; a novel entitled *Our Daffodil* about the poet John Clare, based on Hazlitt's nickname for Clare, who had only one highly unfashionable suit for his London visits, consisting of a bright yellow jacket and green trousers; and a novel inspired by the early history of the Danish colony of Tranquebar in South India. None seems to have reached fruition, though posthumous publications may be possible. All projects point away from Australia and the present, and a problem may have been the great historical-imaginative exigencies Stow placed on himself as a 'fanatical realist'. All his novels and poems are fully imagined in a sensuous way in time and place, each has an integrity, a single soul. Each of his novels may be placed in a different genre, and each deals in a deep anthropological way with a different 'model world': the Aboriginal mission, the almost ghost-town in the Outback, the extended family, the Melanesian and English village, the harbour town. But all are observed from the point of view of the embedded participant observer who is the single soul.

Consider the opening of *To the Islands*:

A child dragged a stick along the corrugated-iron wall of the hut and Heriot woke. His eyes, not yet broken to the light, rested on the mudbrick beside his bed, drifted slowly upwards to the grass-thatched roof. From a rafter an organ-grinder lizard peered sidelong over its pulsing throat.

Oppressed by its thatch, the hot square room had a mustiness of the tropics. On the shelves of the rough-hewn bookcase Heriot's learning was mouldering away, in Oxford Books of this and that, and old-fashioned dictionaries, all showing more or less the visitations of insects and mildew.

Collecting himself from sleep, returning to his life, he said to the lizard: 'The sixty-seventh year of my age. *Rien n'égale en longueur les boíteuses journées* -' (1)

This *mise en abyme* of the single soul's sense of being in the world is a recurrent feature, growing almost to a trope, in Stow's novels: the Law's 'tower' in *Tourmaline*; the merry-go-round and the family properties in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*; the different conceptions of houses and their relationship to the body among islanders and Dimdins in *Visitants*; the Suffolk cottage into which Crispin Clare emerges from tropical break-

down in *The Girl Green as Elderflower*; the houses and lighthouse of the harbour town in *The Suburbs of Hell*. These houses and huts are significant on many levels. To Derrideans they would reveal the intertextual nature of Stow's art: how his works refer to each other almost relentlessly in motifs, characterisation, symbolism; but also how they refer to other literature. In the above quotation Heriot wakes up a little too self-consciously with Baudelaire on his brain, but readers may also notice how Heriot's eyes open to and from the novel's first epigraph, taken from Marston's *The Malcontent*:

My cell 'tis, lady, where instead of masks,
Music, tilts, tourneys and such courtlike shows,
The hollow murmur of the checkless winds
Shall groan again, whilst the unquiet sea
Shakes the whole world with foamy battery ...
... A rocky barrenness shall pierce your eyes
Where all at once one reaches where he stands,
With brows the roof, both walls with both his hands

The single soul looks out from a cave-like cell or, more obviously in *Tourmaline*, a *camera obscura*, where a certain interior distance of darkness gives a strange disturbing clarity to the pictures of the surrounding world registering at the back of the mind. An interior architecture, largely composed of cultural and individual memory, resonates and reverberates with the images on the retina. This gives rise to the overwhelming sentiment of *mal du pays* in the symbolic geography of Stow's work, which I have dealt with in a previous essay in this journal. But this *camera obscura* architecture of the single soul also changes the usual delimitation of self and world as a subject/object distinction. Through the *mise-en-abîme* of *The Malcontent's* cell, Heriot's hut at the Mission is linked with the ledge from which he overlooks the sea at the end of the novel:

The old man kneeled among the bones and stared into the light. His carved lips were firm in the white beard, his hands were steady, his ancient blue eyes, neither hoping or fearing, searched sun and sea for the least dark hint of a landfall.

'My soul,' he whispered, over the sea-surge, 'my soul is a strange country.'
(*To the Islands* 125–26).

There is a double meaning here: both that Heriot as a European is not at home in Australia, but also that the soul always belongs somewhere else. This is of course good Christian theology: Heriot the missionary's journey is that of the *homo viator*, the standard figure for the soul-in-this-world in modern theology. It is also a journey of expiation for Heriot's imagined sin of killing the young Aboriginal named Rex – and Anthony Hassall in

his book-length study of Stow, precisely entitled *Strange Country*, reminds us that 'heriot' in Anglo-Saxon meant the vassal's restitution of the king's gifts before death. But the book places an existential dimension beyond the theological or moral geography of sin and its consequences, which reaches back to the Onmalmeri massacre, the establishment of the mission, the stone Heriot threw at Rex in anger and the stone he throws from the rock-ledge at the end:

He turned, blinded, away, and saw on the ledge beside him a block of stone fallen from the cliff. And he stooped, straining and lifted it in his arms. He knew suddenly the momentousness of his strength, his power to alter the world at will, to give to the sea what the sea through an eternity of destruction was waiting to engulf, this broken rock. Truly he would work a change in the world before it blinded him. (*To the Islands* 125)

To the Islands shows the relationship between the single soul and the world in a youthful, romantic, exasperated form. Even Heriot is half-aware of the futility of his gesture, if not of the stone-throwing as a repercussion of previous unexpiated sins. He has not managed to free his soul from the ego's will to effect change in the world, of which expiation is part. And yet his soul has noted the stunning beauty of the Kimberley landscapes he has passed through and the care of his Aboriginal guide Justin on a journey towards the Aboriginal islands of the dead. On the ledge under the watchful eyes of the mouthless *wandjinas* painted on the rock, his bones will become one with the Aboriginals who have come here to die before him. This is ambiguous as a 'sectarian' Christian ending, and Heriot has already been composing 'a wild corroboree song about himself':

Ali! Bungundja bugurga, nandaba brambun?

Worai! Heriot ngarang, nawuru morong nangga.

And he asked: 'Where are you going, old ghost? Going to the islands, are you? Going to Bundalmeri? He is your lord. His country is outside – outside. (*To the Islands* 124)

The country of the soul being outside, the single soul at some point has to pass over into this realm, very often both geographically, culturally and linguistically. In *Visitants* this takes a truly tragic form. In *The Suburbs of Hell* it takes a narratorial form, as the disembodied voice of death remarks about his victims:

How fluid they are, their characters all potential, veering between virtue and vice, charity and atrocity, begetting and laying waste ...

But I am the end of all potential. Where change is finished, there I am inside. By me these shifting shapes are fixed. After me they may be judged at last. (*Suburbs of Hell* 164)

And yet, ambiguously, Death himself is 'fixed' in the image which ends the book, the thirteenth Tarot card. If 'characters' are 'all potential', and life is change, which ends in death, the single soul may be a different matter, more of the substance of *shamatha* (the calm abiding) and *vipashyana* (the deeper insight) of Buddhist meditation.

The single soul is everywhere the 'bystander' of the title of Stow's second novel. Death is the active part, a fact of geography, as in the poem 'The Singing Bones':

Out there, beyond the boundary fence, beyond
the scrub-dark flat horizon that the crows
returned from, evenings, days of rusty wind
raised from the bones a stiff lament, whose sound
netted my childhood round, and even here still blows.

My country's heart is ash in the market-place,
is aftermath of martyrdom. Out there
its sand-enshrined lay saints lie piece by piece,
Leichhardt by Gibson, stealing the wind's voice
And Lawson's tramps, by choice made mummia and air.

No pilgrims leave, no holy-days are kept
for these who died of landscape ...

Out there their place is, where the charts are gapped,
unreachable, unmapped, and mainly in the mind ... (*Selected Poems* 52)

Perhaps Randolph Stow will chiefly be remembered for his evocation of the Australian landscape, as Dennis Haskell noted in his interview on ABC Radio. It has no doubt had a profound influence especially on Western Australian writers: Dorothy Hewett, Tim Winton and John Kinsella, though strangely *Tourmaline*, despite its reception, has also influenced at least two Queensland novelists in rather deep ways: quite overtly, Janette Turner Hospital's *Oyster* (1996), and very subtly, Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006).

It is notable how Stow's metaphysics of the Australian landscape never resolves itself into an orchestration of nationalist ideology, as nearly everybody else's (with the possible exception of Patrick White) does at some level, positive or negative. There is a note of irony, even parody; the bones sing 'a glum Victorian strain', though immediately the colonial ethos, a past still present, is given its due: 'A ritual manliness, embracing pain / to know; to taste terrain their heirs need not draw near' (no easy postcolonial disdain for colonialism here). Stow more than any other writer I can think of brings out the deeper implications of the traditional gendering of the Australian desert (like deserts everywhere) as masculine, unlike most other

forms of landscape and wilderness, from meadow grasslands to the jungle, which tend toward the feminine in traditional conceptions. This is not just a matter of a certain homoerotic strain, but rather that the single self in its relationship to the world and the Other finds a resonance, a double base that is never merely reflexive or reciprocal. Thus in 'The Land's Meaning', homosexuality, Christian *caritas* and mateship resonate off each other:

The love of man is a weed of the waste places.
One may think of it as the spinifex of dry souls.

The metaphysical conceit here obliterates the subject/object distinction, as is necessary in comprehending a love of sameness (in its Christian or sexual sense), a love which moreover grows like the oxymoron of a weed in the desert in existential extremes, while in more 'normal' circumstances (in the poem seen in the image of the pub) it tends towards despair. But obliterating subject/object and self/other distinctions in man-to-man relations (again with that double meaning brought out in Stow's later uncollected poem 'Him', surely with a pun on 'hymn') also has deep implications for the relationship to language and the conception of God:

... And certain of our young men,
who turned in despair from the bar, upsetting a glass,
and swore: 'No more' (for the tin rooms stank of flyspray)
are sending word that the mastery of silence
alone is empire. What is God, they say,
but a man unwounded in his loneliness?

The single soul not only lives in a constant longing for God, at least in the sense of the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth's conception of God as '*der ganz Andere*' (the completely Other); it *is* God, at least in its full potential, which human beings may never reach, because loneliness to us is always a wound. And because we live in language, whose subject/object distinctions are very hard to avoid, except perhaps in certain forms of poetry. Stow entitled his selected poems *A Counterfeit Silence* to emphasise the impossible necessity of the search for silence in language. 'The Land's Meaning' ends, for me at least, on an ominous note:

'And I came to a bloke all alone like a kurrajong tree.
And I said to him: 'Mate – I don't need to know your name –
Let me camp in your shade, let me sleep, till the sun goes down.' (*Selected Poems* 36)

The answer blows in the desert, but is hinted at by the end of *Tourmaline*:

There is no sin but cruelty. Only one. And that original sin, that began
when a man first cried to another, in his matted hair: Take charge of my
life, I am close to breaking. (174)

The answer is that given by the failed diviner to Byrne, the terribly burnt town drunk, when Byrne declares his love:

'Let me help you,' Byrne pleaded.

'Why?'

'Because I reckon I love you, mate,' Byrne whispered. And he waited, with his terrible secret (he thought it a secret) at last confessed, to be struck by lightning.

'Oh God,' said the diviner, laughing. 'Oh God.'

'I haven't sinned,' Byrne said. 'I was damned without that.'

And the diviner went on laughing.

'Stay here,' Byrne said, from the depths. 'Stay here, Mike.'

'What,' said the diviner, 'to be equal with you? God forbid.' (*Tourmaline* 170)

No wonder, if that is the reference for the single soul in its interaction with others (and presumably this is how 'original sin' functions) that *Tourmaline* begins so hauntingly:

I say we have a bitter heritage, but that is not to run it down. Tourmaline is the estate, and if I call it heritage I do not mean that we are free in it. More truly we are tenants; tenants of shanties rented from the wind, tenants of the sun-struck miles. Nevertheless I do not scorn Tourmaline. Even here there is something to be learned; even groping through the red wind, after the blinds of dust have clattered down, we discover the taste of perfunctory acts of brotherhood: warm, acidic, undemanding, fitting a derelict independence. (7)

In his reaction against what he saw as the straitjacket of social realism in Australian literature and its concern with 'statistically average man' (*To the Islands* ix), Stow wanted to explore what, in an early programmatic essay entitled 'Raw Material', he called the *sentimiento* of Australia, the feeling of the country – which is how it appears, sensuously, to the single soul. Statistically the average man and the abstract individual can only interact with preconceived representations of the country and nation. The single soul *feels* and is puzzled. *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* and *Tourmaline* present different versions of this: that of the child discovering selfhood, the world around him and the preconceived representations of society – and that of the superannuated, self-designated Law and memory of a community. Rob Coram in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* has no sense of living in Australia, which is something that comes to him from school, from patriotic songs and the reports of the War:

Gradually Australia formed itself for the boy: bare, melancholy, littered with gallant bones. He had a clear idea where Australia began. Its border with his world was somewhere near his uncle Paul's farm, in the dry red

country. Once past the boundary fence the bones would start. He built in his mind a vision of Australia, brave and sad, which was both what soldiers went away to die for and the mood in which they died. Deep inside him he yearned towards Australia; but he did not expect ever to go there. (*The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* 68–69)

Childhood is the period of our lives where the single soul is at its most active, absorbing and poetically condensing the world. *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* is such a brilliant evocation of this process that it is for me one of the best books about childhood ever written and for that reason perhaps my favourite Stow novel:

In the boy's memory his own past took on the enchantment of poems, so that already his uncle Paul's bleak farm at Dartmoor was transformed, was a poem, a piercing nostalgia. Anything might bring it back to him: the smell of yeast or of a certain soap, a smell of petals like the big New Guinea beanflowers sweetly wilting. He remembered a century, a whole era that he had spent with Aunt Molly, teasing wool, picking burrs from wool and teasing it for a quilt. He remembered the ark-ark of the crows from the ringbarked trees, the kangaroo dog he used to ride, the savage turkey gobbler he had humiliated and tamed by stripping it of a tailfeather. The farm was a smell of chaff, a taste of saltbush, a sound of water swishing in square tanks on the back of a truck. The farm was summed up in one perfect image, like a poem: a morning of mist, himself in the door, saying: 'What, look at what?' and then seeing and sighing: 'Oh.' Sighing: 'Dawn's got a foal. Oh.' (*The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* 37)

The Law of Tourmaline is long past this kind of wonder. He is after all a policeman, and as Stow once said to me (it has become one of my few abiding political principles): 'When a society needs a police-force, there is no longer any hope for it.' Which is not to say that the Law does not merit our sympathy – or that he has lost feelings. In fact, he is nothing but feelings. These are not new feelings, however, like the boy's discovery of the world, whose poetry has a morning-dew freshness, but remembered feelings, long since rehearsed into discourse, a sententious sentimentality which has long since become as habitual as the Law's morning walk to the war memorial. But there is a problem with the Law's memory: not because he is losing it with age, though that may be part of it, but because of the tenuous hold of human memory in the Australian desert, summed up in the novel's epigraph from St John Perse's *Anabase* (which seems to have dropped out of more recent reprintings of the book): 'Ô gens de peu de poids dans la mémoire de ces lieux ...' People are certainly of little weight in the ghost towns of Cue and the Murchison goldfields, which Stow the fanatical realist used as a setting for the novel. Equally evidently their memory is there. Whole cities with road and sewer systems are eroding away in the

Western Australian interior after the minerals have been extracted. This may indeed be one of the most poignant features of Western Australian – and much wider Australian – history.

It is this tenuousness and at the same time tenaciousness of memory which gives rise to the peculiar *desert narration* of *Tourmaline*, where memory and imagination merge in mirages and tricks of light, the sun in the daytime makes life almost unbearable ('If you look at Tourmaline, shade your eyes'), and the limited colour-scheme becomes almost naturally symbolic: the red of the soil, the blue of the sky and the distant hills. The desolation of the landscape is the reality against which the Law must contend – and where he becomes one of the signal examples of that *self-doubting narrator*, who becomes characteristic – and a highly interesting, if largely unnoticed feature – of postcolonial literatures in the period from the late 50s to the early 80s: from Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock* and Denis Williams's *Other Leopards* to Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* and J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The Law describes his own project:

There is much I must invent, much I have not seen. Guesses, hints, like pockets of dust in the crevices of conversation. And Tourmaline will not believe me.

But (dear God) what is Tourmaline and where? I am alone. I write my testament for myself to read. I will prove to myself there has been life on this planet.

The cells are unroofed, the bars are gone. Records of intriguing crimes and acts of justice blow in the yard. In other places, it is believed that Tourmaline is dead.

There is no law in Tourmaline: this is known there. The gaol abandoned, the gaoler dead. So all must assume.

Yet I live on, prisoner of my ruined tower; my keys turned on myself now all the locks are gone.

The Law of Tourmaline. Guessing, inventing. Ghost of a house furnished and inhabited, tormented by the persistence of the living. (*Tourmaline* 10)

As with much of Stow's prose, this is of course poetry. Indeed Bruce Clunies Ross in an article has scanned much of the first chapter of *Tourmaline* into the partly ruined iambic pentameter of Eliot's *Waste Land*, which echoes in the lines above: 'each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison / Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours / Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus' (Eliot 74). The Law's ruined tower is an extreme outpost of Eliot's ruined civilisation, but he shares the Fisher King poetics: a memory

of feelings and words waiting to be revived. This is a version of the single soul veering between solipsism and sentimental communalism: one of the Law's favourite terms is in fact '*esprit de corps*', which he sees as being revived with the arrival of the diviner. One characteristic of the Fisher King poetics is that neither the Law nor the diviner have problems with language: 'The old words came easily. But I felt them as new', says the Law about his annual speech at the war memorial (*Tourmaline* 119). Opposed to the Fisher King poetics stands the *via negativa* of Tom Spring:

He unveiled his God to me, and his God had names like the nameless,
the sum of all, the ground of being. He spoke of the unity of opposites,
and of the overwhelming power of inaction. He talked of becoming a
stream, to carve out canyons without ceasing always to yield; of being a
tree to grow without thinking; of being a rock to be shaped by winds and
tides. He said I must become empty in order to be filled, must unlearn
everything, must accept the role of fool. And with curious fumbling
passion he told me of a gate leading into darkness, which was both a
valley and a woman, the source and sap of life, the centre of revelation.
At moments I thought I glimpsed, through the inept words, something
of his vision of fullness and peace; the power and the darkness. Then
it was hidden again, obscured behind his battles with language, and I
understood nothing at all; and I let my mind wander away from him to
the diviner, at the altar, brilliant by flamelight, praising a familiar God,
through the voice of a ritual bell. (148)

Helen Tiffin has argued that both *Tourmaline* and *Visitants* carry an indictment of Western Christian Messianic Millenarianism, which is the basis of imperialism, and that these are countered by Eastern contemplative traditions and other aspects of non-Western cultures. There is a lot of truth in this, but it is not quite so dualistic and less about contrasting cultures than about a relationship to language, the land and the single soul. It is a question of levels as much as of dichotomies. 'The Testament of *Tourmaline*: Variations on the *Tao Tè Ching*' makes this explicit in terms of poetics and the land:

The loved land breaks into beauties and men must love them
with tongues, with words. Their names are sweet in the mouth.

But the lover of Tao is wordless, for Tao is nameless:
Tao is a sound in time for a timeless silence.

Loving the land I deliver my mind to joy;
but the love of Tao is passionless, unspoken.

Nevertheless, the land and the Tao are one.
In the love of the land I worship the manifest Tao.

To move from love into lovelessness is wisdom.

The land's roots lie in emptiness. There is Tao. (*Selected Poems* 71)

The answer to how to love and live in the Australian – and the modern existential – desert is given by Tom Spring's down-to-earth ally Dave Speed: 'We've got to the bare bones of the country, and I reckon we're getting to the bones of ourselves. If the water comes, it'll be when we've stopped needing it. We're coming true, mate' (*Tourmaline* 70).

The single soul, however, is deceptively double-bottomed, and though Tom and Dave have the answers they do not carry the drama or the emotional heart of the novel. While Tom and Dave can survive on their own, because they live with their single souls open to the land and the great emptiness, the others reflect off each other, not least the Law and the diviner. The diviner accuses the Law of having destroyed Tourmaline in the past 'by your emptiness' (133), but it is the diviner's own emptiness which allows the *esprit de corps* (which takes on a double meaning here) of Tourmaline to infuse him with all their confused feelings of despair and hope. This culminates in the scene at the church, where the Aboriginal and White inhabitants of Tourmaline come together for the first time, and a song without words grows to a feeling of unity, which however more than anything confirms everyone's loneliness:

I began to sing, also, clapping my hands. I began to feel my oneness with them; with Deborah, on one side of me, with Rock, on the other. The strength of my love for them, for Deborah, for Rock, swelled my throat. Like them; I began to cry, I began to weep for sheer love, singing no words, singing of my passion. Love choked me: for Deborah, for Rock, for the light of the fire and the cold stars, for Byrne, for Charlie, for the clanging bell, for Tourmaline.

That was what he, the diviner, had done for us. There was never before this strength of unity, this power, this tremendous power. What was said, year after year, at the obelisk, on the day of the dead – what was said and felt there was only a shadow of this. It was he, it was our faith in him (faith which I, astoundingly, now found myself to share) that bound us, in love and passion, together.

Through my tears I saw the white stars. They too were singing. My brothers.

And yet, united as we were, we had never been so alone. Each on his small island, crying to be with the others, to be whole. The bell and the guitar and the meandering voices could not effect that reunion. There remained some act to be done, some act, and what could it be? Great pain, to be in love, and powerless. (*Tourmaline* 136–37)

A similar scene is repeated at the heart of the cargo cult in *Visitants*:

Through the bodies came a quick, loud, confusing music, that was made, you knew, by people not listening to one another, but hearing only themselves, their own finger-drums; their own pan-pipes, or moaning to themselves the very old songs whose words nobody understands. It was a sound like I had never heard before, of very hungry, very lonely people. Now and again there was a sound of a conch, hollow and low. (155)

Every man *is* an island, one is tempted to say, surrounded by the sound of the surf as echoed in a conch. What most unites us is our loneliness, which we are ashamed of and think is unique. It is tempting to see this as the result of Messianic-Millennarian religion, like the diviner's cult in *Tourmaline*, which will be continued in an even darker form by Kestrel, or the cargo cult in *Visitants*, which is such a striking mirage of capitalism. But it is also an existential given in Stow's world-view, to which there are certainly answers and palliatives: the wisdom of Tom and Dave in *Tourmaline*, the kindness of Mary Spring in *Tourmaline* and of Saliba in *Visitants*, the competence of Benoni and the wisdom and magic of Naibusi in *Visitants*, maybe even faith as practised by Gloria and Agnes Day in *Tourmaline*. But there is no transcendence, and all of these characters fall victim to the existential given at some point or other, if not to the extent of the diviner or Alistair Cawdor in *Visitants*, who is of course in some ways Stow's hauntingly externalised view of himself.

Cawdor is an heir to the sense of doom described by Joseph Conrad in *Lord Jim*, of a creature trapped in his fate, a trap set by his own imagination, 'a directing spirit of perdition that dwelt within, like a malevolent soul in a detestable body' (Conrad 31). Cerebral malaria becomes the metaphor for colonialism, with its sense of an intruder in the mind, intruding on and destroying not so much the colonised, who are used to malaria, if not immune to it, but the imagination of those colonisers who are susceptible, and have nowhere else to go. It is striking how it is the sense of the invasion of the mind by another and not the loneliness that leads to breakdown here. The recurrent figure for this invasion in *Visitants* is the house, which in its various forms and conceptions is the cover and refuge for the single soul.

The book begins and ends with the image of 'the house is bleeding', the blood from Cawdor's wrists and arms and throat dripping on his houseboy Kailusa, who has been sleeping under the house. At the beginning this modulates to Saliba's meditation on the different attitudes to houses among islanders and Dimdims:

Thinking of this house, and the far rooms that voices go into and then you hear nothing, but still they are there.

When I first came from Wayouyo I said to Naibus: This house is too hollow, too loud. Because a house among palms is like a house at sea, and the leaves are in it all around you, night and day. A house should be like a cave, I said, closed and dark. But Naibus said: No, that is not the Dimdim custom. They like the wind in their houses, and to look out on the sea, and I think he listens to the palms, because he planted them in the time when he was strong and young. (*Visitants* 7)

There is no facile distinction between Western culture as individualistic and the Melanesian culture as collectivist, though the Melanesian culture is evidently more at home. Both types of houses, open and closed, are shells of the single soul and that soul's memories and fears, colonial conquest or protection from sorcery. Cawdor, on the faultline of cultures, is moving from the Western towards the Melanesian, at a moment when historically the move was the other way. Such a transgression leads to death, in a turning of the body and the mind inside out. In death Misa Kodo, covered in blood, becomes 'a black man true'. There is transcendence in this moment: 'I saw. Timi, I saw. Down the tunnel. My body. Atoms. Stars' (*Visitants* 185). But there is also the takeover, which like Cawdor's last communications comes to us translated from Biga-Kiriwina:

'It is like my body is a house, and some visitor has come, and attacked the person who lived there.' He said: 'O Naibus. O my mother. My house is echoing with the footsteps of the visitor, and the person who lived there before is dying. That person is bleeding. My house is bleeding to death.'
(189)

Cerebral malaria is the clinical explanation, but the images resonate with too many others and grow to a whole cosmology of the single soul in relation to the body. There is the scene in which Dalwood in his do-gooding mood wants to provide a new shell for a hermit crab, but it turns out there is already another hermit-crab inside. And there is the height of the cargo cult, where Metusela emerges from the little hut constructed for him at the church, under the crucifix which is an aeroplane with the black pilot Christ, and speaks in the voice of 'Taudoga, a man of the stars' (157), so convincingly that it frightens even Dipapa, who thought he was in charge of this little happening. Transcendence, for the mad Metusela as well as the mad Cawdor, comes by absorption in what Kenelm Burridge, the anthropologist of cargo-cults, called 'the myth-dream', whether of cargo or flying saucers.

The other side of this transcendence, however, is the emergence for Crispin Clare in *The Girl Green as Elderflower* as for the persona of the poem 'Kàpisím! O Kiriwina' into a new birth 'of fear and trembling'. Emerging

into the seasons of the pastoral English landscape, Clare is all raw nerves, with constant relapses into tropical horror as when playing with an ouija-board he gets a message from his spiritual counterpart in the otherworld: 'It said: "You'll never escape." It said: "I'm still here." It means I died there' (*Girl Green* 18). But the raw nerves also sharpen his delicacy and sensitivity of description and his sense of the magic of words, of place, of stories. The stories here are about connections opening with a medieval 'green world', the otherworld of place in a country where the accessible cultural memory has a deep hold, very much the time the contemporary French novelist Pascal Quignard in his theory of the two pasts we live calls the *jadis* as opposed to the *passé*, the abiding as opposed to the transited past.

The single soul is precariously balanced here, between two emotions that run as a refrain through Stow's work: love and grief. They are connected from the definition of poetry in the poem 'Outrider' / 'My mare turns back her ears/ and hears the land she leaves as grievous music' – to the oft-repeated Biga-Kiriwina phrase 'kàpisim', which translates as 'my grief for you'. In *The Girl Green as Elderflower* this turns to an almost Donne-like sermon:

'In love is grief, ' he said, 'in grief is love. As your grief for him is love, so is my grief for you. Pity my grief. Let my grief teach you to love mankind.

'Truly there is nothing in the world so strange, so fathomless as love. Our home is not here, it is in Heaven; our time is not now, it is eternity; we are here as shipwrecked mariners on an island, moving among strangers, darkly. Why should we love these shadows, which will be gone at first light? It is because in exile we grieve for one another, it is because we remember the same home ... (135)

Yet as Christian affirmation, this remains equivocal 'This I believe and must ... I believe and must' (136).

Mick Stow dedicated to his friend and neighbour, who was in part the model for Harry Ufford, the hero of *The Suburbs of Hell*, a plaque on the old headquarters of the maritime rescue services in Old Harwich, which bears as an inscription the last lines of Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'Heaven-Haven':

And I have asked to be
Where no storms come
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb
And out of the swell of the sea.

If I were to dedicate runes to my friend Mick, I would choose an uncollected poem by Randolph Stow, 'The Wind-Rose', which on the one hand

expresses Stow's Joycean and Rimbaudian ideal that 'a writer should be a voice and nothing more' (Kinross Smith), and on the other hand contains that combination of gentleness, ferocious humour and barely contained tragedy, which was Mick:

The wind-rose is
because I live
here, in the small
black heart of the rose.

From me inked spokes
probe the horizons
dressed with petal-like
lozenges of

jet: gilt: vermillion.
In the distance
A blur of lapis
lazuli rings all.

... Near me I feel
cherubim puffing,
dolphins mermaids
schooners pirogues
possibly coasting
an unknown island
whose natives dance
to *Stranger on the Shore*.

They want me to land
and I want to join them
if they exist. But can't
tell where I am.

The wind-rose is also
a name for the poppy,
I read in the still
black heart of my rose.

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