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Article

1991

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### How to cite

LEER, Martin Hugo. Mal du Pays: Symbolic Geography in the Work of Randolph Stow. In: Australian literary studies, 1991, vol. 15, n° 1, p. 3–25. doi: 10.20314/als.487c6e32e8

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:82383>

Publication DOI: [10.20314/als.487c6e32e8](https://doi.org/10.20314/als.487c6e32e8)

MARTIN LEER

## Mal du pays: Symbolic Geography in the Work of Randolph Stow

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*My mare turns back her ears  
and hears the land she leaves  
as grievous music.*

THE refrain of Randolph Stow's 'Outrider' echoes throughout his work as a central, counterpointed theme. Like a descant moving further and further away from its emotional and geographic base, the principal literary consciousness finds itself in a spatial estrangement from its remembered world, which floods the inner ear with a dissonant 'grievous music' played upon the heartstrings. I wish in the following to dwell upon some implications of this 'grievous music' in Stow's work: not only in terms of its tone, but also in terms of its perception of the human condition and especially its evocation of a spatio-temporal world.

The 'grievous music' is geographical in origin — not only in 'Outrider', but also in its prose equivalent, the scene in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* where Rick Maplestead is riding a highly-strung former racehorse away from memories of maltreatment: 'The mare kept listening, her ears back, trying every now and again to turn her head. She's keeping track, Rick thought . . . She hears the country she is leaving. It must be like music, growing fainter. As I keep listening, to the music of the war' (MGRS 227).

'War' is itself a country in this novel, just as other experiences, feelings, abstractions and events are transformed into geography by Stow's imagination. Both 'grief' and 'music' thus acquire special, extended meanings in Stow's world — as fundamental almost as space and time themselves. The 'grievous music', which A.J. Hassall sees as characteristic of Stow's libretti and other poetry (Hassall, *Strange Country* 75ff.), can never be seen separate from its geographical dimension — whether that of the Geraldton district of Western Australia where Stow grew up, or the other settings of his poetry and fiction, be they arid, tropical, or temperate (as in his 'dark' novels *Tourmaline*, *Visitants* and *The Suburbs of Hell*). It is typical that the protagonist of *Visitants*, Alistair Cawdor, should fantasise about his own imminent breakdown in terms of musical geography: as a modulation of the musical notation *agitato ma non troppo* to its logical extreme of *troppo* and then beyond to a transposition on a different level:

. . . this would be tropical . . . The glue would melt in the heat, and the wood would warp, and the strings would rot away with damp and snap, one after another. The brass would turn green, and mildew would be growing on the woodwinds. When it was finished, the instruments would be thrown in a heap, and they'd begin to sprout and turn into the trees they were made from. And reeds and vines, and the wind would blow through them, and the birds would come. That part I'd mark *finito*, or *troppo troppo*. (48)

Fundamentally, the 'grievous music' is what in French is called *le mal du pays*: a condition of nostalgia incorporating both needles on the German compass which characterises the wish to be elsewhere as either *Heimweh* or *Fernweh* — either homesickness or a longing to go abroad. *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, Stow's account of growing up in Geraldton, in particular brings out the ambivalence of longing, structured as it is round the 'twin compasses' of John Donne's 'Valediction: Forbidding Mourning'. Rob and Rick, the boy and the young man in the novel, represent among other things the two cardinal directions of the *mal du pays*.

Stow's work could almost be seen as a series of concerted attempts to survey and map different regions of what the philosopher Vladimir Jankelevitch in his book *L'irreversible et la nostalgie* (276-313) calls '*l'espace de la nostalgie*': a conception of space where the experiencing consciousness finds itself both here and elsewhere, in a present place both separated from and haunted by the past. Nostalgic space is pervaded by, if not constituted by, echo and a sense of an absent presence; something which *should* be there, and *was* there, is present only as an echo of time in space: the 'foreshadowed nostalgia, voices once heard half-heard' of the poem 'Persephone'. The return (*nostos*) for which the sufferer pines (*-algia*) is temporal rather than spatial, according to the neo-Bergsonian Jankelevitch, and thus impossible due to the irreversibility of time, yet this strain, this temporal attenuation almost to breaking point of the self or the soul in space, is what has given birth to both poetry and music, at least of a Romantic cast.

As pervasive in Stow's work as nostalgia, however, is the complementary displacement of the revenant, of haunting. The nostalgic feels the grief of past time as a pain in present place, yet the pain is perceived to originate in spatial separation; the ghost is forced to a perpetual return in time to the place of past pain, so that the pain is transferred from the place into time. This is particularly apparent in the first poem of the collection *Outrider*, a poem closely related to 'At Sandalwood': 'The Ghost at Anlaby' has an unusual way of treating the consciousness of time, only explicable in the light of the complementarity of nostalgia and haunting.

The poem begins by establishing a 'now', a present, which comes alive in a particular afternoon angle of sunlight. But this 'now' is really a flooding into the ghostly mind of the poem of sensations from the past: a world painfully beautiful, but beyond the reach of the ghost, who indeed only exists in the consciousness of this beauty, this 'grievous music', and wishes only to escape from it into a past of non-existence:

## SYMBOLIC GEOGRAPHY IN STOW'S WORK

Now sulkies come haunting softwheeled down the  
leaves; on the cool veranda, over  
whisky, wistaria, gentlemen admire  
antwaisted, hamsleeved, bellskirted ladies  
crossing the lawns with fishtailed racquets  
intent on tennis. Heart, unlearn your fire.

Forget now, forget. Below the willows  
Tom Roberts squatters, George Lambert ladies,  
whose boats and fancy made this dam a lake,  
speak of, remember, no visitant stranger.  
Once time was a sportsman, and I the quarry,  
who now would sleep with death, for sleep's kind sake.

The actual motion of the hunt has been stilled; time the hunter has ensnared the ghost, binding his grief and love to the house and verandah. The revenant consciousness has been imprisoned in an embowered past, in the interlacing branches of a climbing organic time very like the aftermath of *troppo* in *Visitants* where trees sprout from the broken instruments, yet without the sense of regeneration because the haunting nostalgia is intact:

But O whose fingers, soft as wistaria,  
played with my watch-chain, under the crabapples;  
under the lilacs in October flower  
whose fingers like lingering tendrils twined in  
my hair, my beard? What phantom remembers  
that wicked, warm, Edwardian midday hour?

Rosella-plumed sun, go quickly down on  
my afternoon ghosts. Let purple night that  
brings all lovers to their billiard-rooms descend.  
Click of the balls. Among wraiths of cigar-smoke,  
with rib-nudging stories I died before telling,  
I shall go haunting in search of a friend, a friend.

Thus 'The Ghost at Anlaby' embraces both sides of the *mal du pays* out of which Stow's work is written: its nostalgia and the quality that made Stow entitle his very first novel *A Haunted Land*, a perception of his native region of Western Australia that comes out most clearly through the boy Rob in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*:

The boy was not aware of living in a young country. He knew that he lived in a very old town, full of empty shops with dirty windows and houses with falling fences. He knew that he lived in an old, haunted land, where big stone flour-mills and small stone farmhouses stood windowless and staring among twisted trees. The land had been young once, like the Sleeping Beauty, but it had been stricken, like the Sleeping Beauty, with a curse, called sometimes the Depression and sometimes the Duration, which would never end, which he would never wish to end, because what was was what should be and safe. (2)

At some time in the past, a 'now' has been caught in a time-warp like the Sleeping

Beauty. History has become a region, which seems to perpetuate a particular era. This 'haunted land', stricken by a kind of historical *mal du pays*, underlies the boy's sense of the world, instilling in him a sense of durational space which precedes, yet which is also coextensive with consciousness. It is in fact the spatial side of the 'grievous music', both nostalgic and haunting, which recurs through Stow's work in suggestively similar names from the station 'Malin' in *A Haunted Land* through the name of the almost-ghost-town in *Tourmaline* to the spirit-child Malkin in *The Girl Green as Elderflower*.

Two sides of the *mal du pays* or 'grievous music' in which Stow's work originates are especially significant, however, and especially remarkable: the way works ranging from *Tourmaline* and *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* through 'Stations' to *Visitants* and *The Girl Green as Elderflower* makes the *mal du pays* into a general spiritual and emotional condition in colonial and post-colonial culture; and the humour, which purifies the nostalgia of sentimentality, indeed objectifies it, and thus instead of undercutting the effect makes the sense of loneliness so much more devastating. This is particularly the case in those novels where a sensitive, distraught character like Rick Maplestead in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* or Alistair Cawdor in *Visitants* is paired in an almost Quixote/Sancho Panza-like way with a down-to-earth larrikin like Hugh MacKay or a slow-witted, immature, but absolutely 'sound' youngster like Tim Dalwood. On no level is the *mal du pays* ever one-sided; finely composed shifts in point of view are among the hallmarks of Stow's art.

It is irony and humour along with the understated but pervasive wider cultural implications, which enable Stow in his work to set up and explore a topography of 'grief', of feeling. The *mal du pays* manifests itself as 'a double nostalgia' in Stow's life and work, Graeme Kinross Smith has said: a double longing for his native Western Australia and his ancestral Suffolk. But the *mal du pays* always appears in the work as inherent in the setting, whether European, Melanesian or Australian. In his one youthful statement about the aims of his work, the short article 'Raw Material', which it is tempting to treat as a kind of manifesto, Stow wrote of his wish to do in literature what Drysdale, Nolan and Tucker had done in their paintings of 'the Australian environment':

The feeling, the sense, what a Spaniard would call the *sentimiento* of Australia: the external forms filtered back through the conscious and unconscious mind; that is what these artists convey, and what I would hope to convey if I were capable of executing all I can conceive. In that sense, the world out there is raw material. But only part of it — all the rest is mind.

The feeling, *sentimiento*, of a place is the environment transformed by the mind; it is through feeling that the 'raw material' is transformed into art; and through feeling and sensations that the essence of a continent, region or place is conveyed in art: a well-recognised ability of certain literatures — Spanish, Russian, Caribbean, Latin and perhaps North American. Among these Stow wants

Australia to take its place. Thus essence in Stow's world is 'feel'; the mind of Stow's work is a centre of feeling: it is through grief, love, sense of beauty, desolation and pain that the world is understood. The central perceptor in Stow's work is what one might term an 'outrider' — a scout, a registering consciousness in alien territory — though Stow uses another word:

The boundary between an individual and his environment is not his skin. It is the point where mind verges on the pure essence of him, that unchanging observer that for want of a better word we must call the soul. The external factors, geographical and sociological, are so mingled with his ways of seeing and states of mind that he may find it impossible to say what he means by his environment, except in the most personal and introspective terms . . .

Both edge and centre, it is this intrinsic point *beyond yet in* the world which focuses feeling in Stow's work. The soul is an outrider, a visitant, a ghost, and — in the final words of *To the Islands* — 'a strange country'. Stow's entire work is an exploration, as A.J. Hassall rightly puts it, of a 'landscape of the soul' (Hassall, *Strange Country* 1), an attempt to expose the connections between landscape and feeling, as John B. Beston has rightly seen ('The Love Poetry of Randolph Stow'). But it is important to see this not just as a theme or an image: the landscape as metaphor for psychological alienation. The landscape is the fundamental subject matter and structuring form in Stow's work. In 'Raw Material' Stow writes that behind his work is 'the concept of a literature based on figures in a landscape, more naked and disturbing than a Border ballad or a Spanish *romance*, in which eternal things are observed with, always, the eyes of the newborn'.

This literary equivalent of the 'figures in a landscape' of Drysdale, Nolan and Tucker shows a world where environment and mind coalesce. Whether one or the other is stronger, they cannot be understood separately, but only in their interpenetration. Just as Drysdale's figures are attenuated to the point of abstraction in contrast with the landscape, and Nolan's figures merge with the landscape as shimmering mirages, and Tucker's are reduced to heads like burnt-off stumps, so Stow in 'Raw Material' perceives the literary concept of 'character' to be part of the 'environment', and in a number of poems, like 'Ishmael', he creates landscapes where the human figure is merely a focus of emotion:

Antarctic seas work statuary of ice,  
and sand-toothed wind, in the hungry waiting country,  
raises unseen its pale memorials  
to lioness, sphinx and man. These blinding images  
I call to mind to mould the mind, inviting  
desert and sky to take me, wind to shape me,  
strip me likewise of softness, strip me of love,  
leaving a calm regard, a remembering care.

The elemental forces of the landscape, sky, wind, desert and sea, are certainly

part of 'the two sensations' that most powerfully evoke the *sentimiento* of Australia according to 'Raw Material': the sense of size and the sense of the past:

Size is obvious. It *is* a huge country, however often the journalists may say so, and the distances are vast. But size itself is a complex of feelings. When one is alone with it, one feels in one way very small, in another gigantic. One expects something. One is a little like Adam perhaps. In the cities, personality is fenced in by the personalities of others. But alone in the bush, with maybe a single crow (and that sound on a still day widens the world by half) a phrase like 'liberation of the spirit' may begin to sound meaningful. The sense of the past is linked with this vastness. It is very easy to feel — even to 'remember' — the period when there was no animal life on earth. And on the hottest days, in the most desolate places, it is possible to know, almost kinetically, the endurance of *things*.

Despite its being seen with 'the eyes of the newborn', by a soul like Adam thrust into a 'hungry waiting country', the continent also carries 'a sense of human history, and in a way that short history is a precis of the whole career of man'. The pioneers of Australia and of Stow's own family (the Stows being a founding family of Adelaide and his mother's family, the Sewells, pioneers of Western Australia) become in their descendant's eyes the 'archetypal settlers' of St. John Perse's *Anabase*<sup>1</sup> and Australia, the continent they changed and were changed by, becomes in 'Raw Material'

a symbol for the whole earth, at all times, both before and during the history of man. And because of its bareness, its absolute simplicity, a truer and broader symbol of the human environment than, I believe, any European writer could create from the complex material of Europe.

What it means, every observer will interpret for himself, and interpret differently at different times and in different places. In its skeletal passivity it will haunt and endure.

The poem 'The Land's Meaning', dedicated to Sidney Nolan, brings out Stow's symbol of Australia in something close to its barest skeletal and most disturbing form. By a metaphysical inversion, the arid interior becomes a topography of the spirit, and exploration becomes introspection. But the Waste Land is not here a temporary cultural and religious malaise; it is the basic condition in which our feelings seek nourishment:

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

I have not, it is true, made the trek to the difficult country  
where it is said to grow; but signs come back,  
reports come back, of continuing exploration  
in that terrain. And certain of our young men,

<sup>1</sup> The passage Stow is referring to — and quotes in T.S. Eliot's translation ('Raw Material' 5) — comes at the end of the first section of Perse's *Anabase*: 'o chercheurs de points d'eau sur l'écorce du monde; o chercheurs, o trouveurs de raisons pour s'en aller ailleurs' (Perse 94).

## SYMBOLIC GEOGRAPHY IN STOW'S WORK

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?

And the question (applauded, derided) falls like dust  
on veranda and bar; and in pauses, when thinking ceases,  
the footprints of the recently departed  
march to the mind's horizons, and endure.

Rather than using the landscape as a simple analogy for a spiritual meaning, the poem hints that this meaning is really beyond its powers of poetic expression. The meaninglessness of the human communication in the bar and the township is contrasted with the enigmatic nothingness of the desert: the real meaning of the land, which enters consciousness whenever the supposedly civilising human activity stops.

With its ambiguity of meaning and its wryness of tone (Stow has described the poem as a 'wry sermon' on the 'text' of the first two lines), this is a poem about felt states of being. The land takes hold of the mind — even when its reality is denied — in an obsessive, partly liberating, partly dangerous, total spiritual transformation, where the land becomes the only reality on a metaphysical as well as a physical plane. The topography of the interior of Australia becomes the topography of a mind and of a universal concept: *caritas*, charity, the Christian 'love of man', though this is explored here in a disturbing, suggestively individual manifestation:

And often enough as we turn again, and laugh,  
cloud, hide away the tracks with an acid word,  
there is one or more gone past the door to stand  
(wondering, debating) in the iron street,  
and toss a coin, and pass, to the township's end . . .

But one who has returned, his eyes blurred maps  
of landscapes still unmapped, gives this account:

'The third day, cockatoos dropped dead in the air.  
Then the crows turned back, the camels knelt down and stayed there,  
and a skin-coloured surf of sandhills jumped the horizon  
and swamped me. I was bushed for forty years.

'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." '

The poem here uses explorers' accounts to create a symbolic landscape even more introspective, elemental and archetypal than that of Patrick White's *Voss*, which is also in feeling utterly unlike the megalomaniac desert of the German Romantic Soul that White evokes. Stow parodies the latter in his children's novel, *Midnite*, where the title character meets Johann Ulrich von Leichardt zu Voss, with his



camels Sturm and Drang, 'exploring me' in what 'I have today the Great Cosmic Symbolical Desert named' (*Midnite* 93). Stow's landscape of the spirit and of love is precisely the opposite to a landscape of the self: it is a landscape of self-loss. The soul has become merely the external observer of the land, to the extent of merging with its emptiness as in the Sidney Nolan illustration that accompanied 'The Land's Meaning' in the original edition of *Outrider*. The 'skin-coloured surf of sandhills' sounds like a straight description of a particular Nolan style of painting the Outback, for example, in his explorers' series.

This is an introspective rather than an interior landscape. We are inside a mind which is really a landscape with horizons, dust and tracks of earlier explorers. Consciousness does not here appear as a perpetual cartographer of inexact maps, almost by definition out of sync with the real world — as I have described the imaginative cartography of David Malouf ('At the Edge'). Rather consciousness is itself a map, however 'blurred', on which is traced in temporal stages the journey of a mind through an exteriorised interior space towards the eternal centres of love and grief. This is the spiritual journey of Heriot in *To the Islands*. But an earlier, less complex form of this landscape that is a mind can be found in 'The Recluse', written when Stow was still in his teens:

His mind was a long seashore, where the tide  
cast up its wrack; and year by year the sea  
roared to his waking, and the whistling wind  
gnawed him with teeth of sand, perpetually . . .

This abstracted, mental coastline is a hermitage for the ghost of a shipwrecked civilisation, a shadowy Prospero without a cast. Even more fundamental to Stow's world view than the desert landscape of 'The Land's Meaning', this coast without a continent is probably the oldest European-named part of Australia as it appears on a modern map: 'King Joao's men, four centuries ago, named it *a costa branca*, the white coast'. To the imagination of the boy in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, the coast is haunted by the mystery of its dark, bloody history; he feels 'a thrill of darkness' at the thought of the Abrolhos mutiny and the two mutineers condemned to be the first two white settlers of Australia (113f.).

This is part of the background to the composite ghost of 'The Recluse' — and to the pervasive ambivalence of European history in Australia as it appears in Stow's work. In the article 'The Southland of Antichrist' he contrasts two historical circumstances, which seem to him to have become the two myths from which Australia draws its meaning. On the one hand, there is the imagined Australia del Espiritu Santo of Captain Quiros, who never set foot in Australia; on the other, the Jonestown-like horror realised by Jeronimus Cornelisz, the second-in-command of the *Batavia*, the lieutenants of whose regime became the first white 'settlers' of the continent.

As Rob's ruminations on the *Batavia* and the Abrolhos show, Stow's imaginative history, like his geography of Australia, is above all concerned with

feeling. History has left a heritage of haunted spots, 'resonant' events or places in which feeling is concentrated, so that they acquire the magic ability of myths to evoke the sensations and spirit of the past. Mostly in Stow's work these spots are scenes of 'darkness' like the Abrolhos or Onmalmeri, the site of the Aboriginal massacre in *To the Islands*. For in the oscillation of Australian history — as it appears in Stow's work — between the myth of Australia as Eden and the myth of Australia as prison, the harmony of inner spiritual ideals and environment has tended to be deafened by the repercussions of human actions. White Australians are caught in a paradox as 'prisoners of Paradise'; an interior prison, which is partly an apparently almost unbreakable inherited idea of paradise, jarring against the real, exterior paradise in which they find themselves.

'Meaningful myths,' Stow says, may be created out of 'meaningless historical events' ('The Southland of Antichrist' 167) like the *Batavia* disaster, just as the 'undefined' meanings of the shored-up fragments and Latin tags in 'The Recluse' acquire redefined meaning from resonating off one another in a kind of musical collage. The poem shows time as an eroder and a carrier of flotsam and jetsam, and Australia as the eternity on which the driftwood of time is beached. The fragments in Stow's work are the substance out of which life and art must be created in the aftermath of a shattering event as in Eliot's *Waste Land*.

It is tempting to see the disruptive event in biographical terms and connect it with Stow's experiences as a cadet government anthropologist in New Guinea, where he caught malaria and attempted suicide (see interview with A.J. Hassall). But the fragments are a dominant motif and structure in the works written before he went to New Guinea, such as 'The Recluse' and the novels *A Haunted Land*, *The Bystander* and not least *To the Islands*. The principle of centrifugal fragmentation goes deeper in Stow's imagination than his personal experience of what Cawdor in *Visitants* calls *tropo*, however much that experience may have coloured signal statements of it like the poem 'Outrider':

*My mare turns back her ears  
and hears the land she leaves  
as grievous music.*

My lies bestrew the air;  
my lies are epitaphs  
But the high ironical horseman  
throws back his head, and laughs.

And sings to my timorous mare,  
and will neither hush nor draw rein  
if that plant (ah, Christ) of black ice  
should beckon again.

The 'lies' which form the epitaph are the symptoms of a disease of memory in a mind, which wishes on the one hand to figure out what really happened in the past, underneath the wake of lies the mind has stirred up between itself and what happened when it circled too close to the meteor of death. On the

other hand this mind has no keener wish than to forget. For the experiencing consciousness is caught in its own wake — wanting to let go, yet also to hold on to what launched it on the orbit that gives it identity — in a perpetual movement away from, which is also an inevitable course towards, death. Both the planet of black ice and the 'ironical horseman' are of course death, the magnet and reinsman of life.

From the outset, Stow's world is centrifugal and catastrophic, a landscape of ruins inhabited by ghosts. Its characteristic moment, the point of departure for his work, is the moment after a blackout when the world is reconstituted anew by a shudder, a slight disjunction as the present tries to connect with the past on the other side of the blackout. But though memory refuses to fill the gap, the experiencing consciousness is caught in it, as 'The Ghost at Anlaby' is caught in the beautifully haunting 'now' appearing out of nowhere in the opening line: 'Now sulkies come haunting soft-wheeled down the leaves . . .' This is the moment out of which the work of art grows.

In Stow's work sound unfolds a landscape:

A crow cries: and the world unrolls like a blanket;  
like a worn bush blanket, charred at the horizons.

But the butcherbird draws all in; that voice is a builder  
of roofless cathedrals and claustrophobic forests  
— and one need not notice walls, so huge is the sky.

In the morning, waking, one is most in love.  
It is then that the cool convection of song and echo  
wells in the clearings, and all is possible.

It is then you are not there. We meet after noon.  
In the wrack of the crow. In a desert of broken quartz.

Reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's 'Landscapes', where the voices of birds similarly evoke the moods and experiences of time in different landscapes, Stow's 'Landscapes' shows the 'grievous music' and the landscape, the poem's world, to be completely coextensive. The poem is the convector by means of which the world-constituting feeling of love-grief, which can only exist in time, is transferred into space. In the image of sound convection, by which the birds' voices fade away into cool echoes in the landscapes they have evoked, the poem brings together its analogies between the unfolding of sound, landscape, feeling and the movements of the day. The crow at daybreak cracks open the world and lays bare the experiencing consciousness, which the morning-note of the butcherbird moulds into a hopeful architecture of love; but by afternoon the day and the landscape of love have become 'the wrack of the crow', 'a desert of broken quartz', and the mysterious 'you' appears; undoubtedly a human figure, a lover (Beston, 'Love Poetry' 13), but somebody who was not present when love seemed most 'possible' and 'welled' in the mind where the whole poem is again contained.

The world unrolling like a blanket here, like the landscape uncovered in 'The Land's Meaning', stretches to 'the mind's horizons'. The landscape unfurling through sound is the mind coming to consciousness, as happens also at the opening of *To the Islands*:

A child dragged a stick along the corrugated-iron wall of a hut, and Heriot woke. His eyes, not yet broken to the light, rested on the mud-brick beside his bed, drifted slowly upwards to the grass-thatched roof . . . Collecting himself from sleep, returning to his life, he said . . . : 'The sixty-seventh year of my age. *Rien n'egale en longueur les boiteuses journées* — '

Outside the crows had begun their restless crying over the settlement, tearing at his nerves. The women were coming up to the kitchen. He could hear their laughing, their rich beautiful voices . . . (1)<sup>2</sup>

It is in fact remarkable how many of Stow's novels begin with a description of somebody waking up. Above all, these awakenings establish an identity, as is made clear in *The Bystander*:

Waking out of the brief sleep into which she had fallen, she lay and listened to the wheels of the train under her until they seemed to be questioning her — name, age, place of birth, weight, height, colour of hair — and she lay analysing her life into words that could be written along dotted lines. (9)

As a Baltic refugee arriving in remote Western Australia, Diana Ravirs obviously has quite specific reasons for this self-examination. But there is inherent in the very process of awakening, as Proust knew, an almost kaleidoscopic breakdown and reconstruction of consciousness, and especially the separation of 'self' and 'other'. It is this metaphysical questioning of identity which also accounts for the openings of *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, which is structured round four separate awakenings, and *The Suburbs of Hell*, which provides the most comic as well as most tragic version of all: 'Harry Ufford woke in his armchair and removed from his lap his faithful cat, Rover. "Go and sit on your own self," he complained' (3). This almost sounds like a self-parody of the neurasthenic metaphysics of Stow's other openings with their theme of the self separating from the perceived world; but Harry's domesticity with the dog-named cat is prefaced by the chilling soliloquy of the disembodied voice of Death, which puts all these openings in a new perspective as a kind of ontological break-in to the privacy of a mind performed by both writer and reader:

A thief is outside. He passes in the street, peers through windows without seeming to. He wants to be in, to handle things, to know. Lonely, one might think; wistful — but

<sup>2</sup> The point, however, was even clearer in the first edition (1962), with its image of 'the morning standing at his bed like a valet, holding out his daylight self to be put on again, his name, his age, his vague and wearying occupation' (11).

not so. A thief is a student of people, knows so many that his head is full of company. I have stood in a pub and seen a face, heard a voice, and slipped out and entered that man's house, calm in my mastery of all his habits. But then — ah, the thrill then, after my many studies: to find his things, his self, lying opened before me, all his secrets at my fingers' ends. For some thieves the excitement of that opening is a drunkenness. It is the intoxication of inside. Because a thief is, as he knows, an insider, a master of secrets. But the waiting may be long. (*Suburbs* 1f.)

This movement from outside to inside is performed whenever we open a book, but in Stow's work the transition is consciously made. Hence the sometimes rather difficult or densely poetic writing at the beginning of his novels where we are attuned to a particular mind's 'habits' and ways of perceiving — as with Heriot's at the beginning of *To the Islands* or the Law's in *Tourmaline* — or to some containing metaphor through which the whole novel must be read, such as the merry-go-round or the house surrounded by the sound of palms in *Visitants*. For every new beginning we have to readjust the mind; it is almost a violation. But then the beginning of a fiction foreshadows the end; death is inherent in life from the time we are launched on our orbit. As Death puts it, having caught up with all the main characters in *The Suburbs of Hell*:

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. (164)

We are put in a very private relationship with the experiencing minds in Stow's poetry and novels: as 'outriders' in their death — for we read about them from the point of view of death, of finished time — and as audience to the 'grievous music' of their innermost souls.

Stow's novels in particular shift constantly between a precisely observed external world and the introspection of a perceiving mind; between external characterisation and the poetic, inner 'grievous music' of souls veering up and down the scale of their potential like the singers of *Eight Songs for a Mad King* and *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot*. The frequent and often very subtle modulations from the external to the internal voice is partly what has led to the criticism of Stow's novels for allegedly breaking down in the conflict between 'realistic' and 'symbolic levels of writing'. As L.T. Hergenhan has pointed out, the almost schizophrenic changes in register which Leonie Kramer<sup>3</sup> found to be a stylistic flaw in the opening paragraph of *To the Islands* constitute such a shift from

<sup>3</sup> The terms Kramer sets up in her review of *Tourmaline* and her more extensive article have dominated much critical discussion of Stow's work. Although I agree with A.D. Hope and L.T. Hergenhan in their critique of the extreme limitations of Kramer's terms, which seem to disregard most prose fiction of the last 200 years, I also accept Kramer's diagnosis of two, almost schizophrenic, registers in Stow's writing. But I see their combination as a *forte* in his work, a sign of genius rather than a flaw. Perhaps this is in itself proof of the profound relativism of perception and experience of the world, which Stow's contrasting registers reflect.

external narrative to the mind of Heriot; and as we have seen, this opening can be found, with variations, in all of Stow's novels. Realism and symbolism are not allegorically coterminous levels of meaning in Stow's work; rather they are combined and contrasted, they merge and clash, as do the outer and inner worlds of the characters. The clash between 'realism' and 'symbolism' continues on the journey in the interaction of Heriot and Justin, another of Stow's Sancho Panza-like realists, and in the pointed contrast between the beauty of the external, realistic landscape and Heriot's mental landscape of spiritual anguish.

The over-all concern in Stow's work is not with the definition or development of character, but with the soul in an environment, in a place. 'Character', as we learn in 'Raw Material', belongs to the place, and few writers can be more accurate or convincing in their sensing and evocation of place than Stow. Voices and human figures are merely a part of the sense of place, along with climate, light, smell, sounds and colours. Indeed, as would tend to happen with such an artistic programme, the place sometimes overwhelms the human presence, especially when the setting is the Australian desert as in *Tourmaline* or the tropics as in *Visitants* and the 'Thailand Railway' sequence, which begins with the speaking voice attempting to come to terms with his feelings towards 'The Jungle':

The planet is ours: and the blue and desert spaces  
submit at last, to aggrandize our legend;

only the jungle works in the way of man,  
moulding or melting the world to its own being.

I do not know the jungle, though it enfolds me;  
I do not know this colonist of my fibres,

but I liken it to a great mouthless stomach:  
listen, the ceaseless churn, the fermenting gut.

The jungle sleeps by my side and cries in its sleep,  
and I wake afraid, for I cannot tell the jungle  
from cries of the tortured, cries of the fever-demented  
— bird or baboon? or a friend, near the end of pain.

The smell of the jungle, its rot and bitterness  
clings to my flesh: my flesh that by leaf and thorn  
the jungle has torn to give passage to voyagers  
that navigate my veins like a skein of rivers

I do not know the jungle, though it enfolds me,  
but I liken the jungle trees to the legs of giants,  
rotten with running ulcers, trailing foul rags,  
sheathed in a shrunken and wrinkled purplish skin.

And their cries for the peace of death it must be that wake me.  
And I think in my sleep it must be that I call to them.

The self has been overwhelmed by an unknown Other, an environment which interpenetrates human consciousness like a sickness, a fever dementia. This neurasthenic relationship between self and other dominates Stow's work. The

human figures merging into place or emerging from place all have some connection with death — which is always conceived as a breaking and entering of an Other, resulting in a breakdown of the self.

'Thailand Railway' is concerned with defining the self against the other — a self which has a national as well as a personal dimension. In this as in other respects Stow's work issues from a pattern of breakdown and recovery. The self breaks down to the extent of seeing itself as an other — or to the extent of one emotion merging with its opposite, as in 'The Enemy' where hatred becomes indistinguishable from love in passionate intensity. It reaches a limit, a state of darkness from which the self must recover or perish.

The mental vantage point of Stow's work is within the eye of the storm — or 'The Wind-rose' of Stow's own poem: 'The wind-rose is/because I live/here, in the small/black heart of the rose'. The centre of feeling is a still point, involuntarily passive in the midst of fever, colonised and enslaved by the other. The jungle, the disease and the human enemy merge to create the perilous and exposed environment for the soul. With the central viewpoint inside an exposed mind, the movement of feeling and thought, of meditation and narration in Stow's work is centrifugal. Whether in aggrandisement or disintegration, the mind must move outward, most often to a feeling of being invaded.

This centrifugal transposition, where an embattled mind finds itself partly invaded, partly carried off as wreckage into the besieging environment, is the main theme of *Visitants*, but is also present in many of the fever-poems from *Outrider* like 'Kapisim, O Kiriwina', 'Outrider' itself or 'Sleep'. It comes out perhaps most clearly of all in 'Strange Fruit', 'one of Stow's densest and most private poems' (Hassall, *Strange Country* 5), where the feeling is less precise than in 'Thailand Railway', but all the more disturbing in its breakdown of the self into observer and environment, into a constantly shifting 'I' and 'you' who used to be united like Adam and Eve in a mythical past, though now one of the former 'psychic partners' stalks the other from the sea of darkness surrounding his campfire:

Suicide of the night — ah, flotsam:  
 (the great poised thunderous breaker of darkness rearing above you,  
 and your bones awash, in the shallows, glimmering, stony,  
 like gods of forgotten tribes, in forgotten deserts)  
 take care. Take care. For your campfire falters, and firelight  
 folds, and will clamp around you its charcoal calyx,  
 and already for many hours your eyes (my terror)  
 have drowned in deep waters of dream, till I grow fearless.  
 (Embers of crocodiles love you from the mangroves.  
 Dingo ears yearn, yearn towards your tranquil breathing.)  
 Day and the firelight guard you from harm so darkly  
 rehearsed, removing me far; for by day I dread you,  
 fearing your quester's ear, that might interpret  
 what sings in my blood; your eye that might guess my fever.

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But so long as the harsh light lasts I stalk your horses'  
desolate spoor: a statue among the anthills  
should you look back; and prowling — and yearning, yearning,  
howl out my grief and grievance, and burn in fever.

The parentheses are among the many signs of disjunction: they are not the workings of a subordinating mind, but of a mind that is losing control over its responses and especially over its sense of self. The identification with darkness and the eyes of darkness mounts to a surf and a refrain, as the speaker grows fearless with the waning light. In the end, as in 'The Land's Meaning', the memory of a journey and a meeting is introduced, which somehow externalises the initial lyric mode by suggestions of an underlying story. But it remains deliberately enigmatic like the 'strange fruit', which suggests the Fall, but surely also both sex and suicide, as in the Billie Holliday/Josh White song. Above all, it is an image of transgression by which the self has already put itself outside itself:

I am the country's station; all else is fever.  
Did we ride knee to knee down the canyons, or did I dream it?  
They were lilies of dream we swam in, parrots of myth  
we named for each other . . .

Alone for an hour, in a thicket, I reached for strange fruit.  
Now you sleep by the fire. And these are my true eyes  
that glare from the swamps. And the rattling howl in the gullies  
is my true voice. That cries: You shall try *strange fruit*.

As I see it, the speaker and sleeper are still essentially counterparts of the same soul, the same psyche (see also Beston, 'Love Poetry' 21). The breakdown into 'I' and 'you' is a preliminary to the 'suicide of the night' which the sleeper is about to commit, where one side of his mind is already outside, merged to the environment, but waiting to break inside the circle of the faltering protective light — like the burglar Death in *The Suburbs of Hell* or Cawdor's 'visitant'. The beautiful image of the 'charcoal calyx' surely suggests death, which is both stalker, tempter and environment in the poem, perhaps a fallen Eve, as Hassall suggests (Hassall, *Strange Country* 5), an Eve merged with Lilith. But I see no real justification for a sexual differentiation between the alienated partners, who are more like self and soul, and whose relationship as two sides of the same identity should perhaps rather be seen in the auto-erotic terms Stow uses in the dream-poem 'Him'.

These landscapes of feeling are also landscapes of inversion: in the general rather than specifically sexual sense. In 'Strange Fruit' love has turned to terror and death beckons: 'I am the country's station: all else is fever'; in 'Him' the other is the self, the double. We are in an externalised inner landscape, where the self serves as environment for the soul, the centre of feeling. But this presupposes that rather than feeling alienated by the Australian landscape, as is the common interpretation, the poet has reached a point in the internalisation



of the Australian landscape where he can use it and the history it embodies as metaphysical imagery for psychic states. This is particularly the case in 'Sleep':

*Sleep: you are my homestead and my garden;  
my self's stockade; identity's last fortress . . .*

All day I have stood the siege, and my hands are shaking;  
my paddocks are charred and fuming, my flocks are slaughtered;

my lands mirror the moon in desolation.

But the moon has come. And the tribes, like smoke, seep campward.

And turning, barring the wall-slits with jarrah shutters,  
my rifles leaned to the door, I cede; conjuring

*Sleep: who are silence; make me a hollow stone  
— filled with white blowing ash, and wind, and darkness.*

The 'mind's horizons' are both spatial and temporal at this point where a sensibility stretched to its limit seeks refuge in a surrender which is an ultimate defence, a healing break that will cleanse the climate of fever-demented feelings like the month that brings rain after the dry season. Hate and fear merge with potential love in 'a general grieving', and darkness seems safer than daylight, as notoriously it is not during a siege: the delusion is not unlike 'Strange Fruit' 's 'I am the country's station, all else is fever', or 'The Calenture' which forms the subject of another of Stow's fever poems.

This limit of the mind is the point of transcendence in Romantic poetry, but in the metaphysical imagery of Stow's poems (as in Donne, Hopkins or Yeats) extremity contains feeling in inversion; it stretches the mind, but it also makes for a sense of balance. The displacement and exposure in these psychological landscapes appear much more disturbing (or resonant in their reticence) for being contained within the homestead-centred cosmology of Stow's work, so evidently based on the cultural landscape of his childhood district. 'Sleep' makes a metaphysical conceit out of the archetypal pioneer homestead and the experience of Western Australian pioneering whose spiritual life is also the subject of 'Stations: A Suite for Three Voices and Three Generations'. Here, too, the dreams, wishes and secrets of a reticent culture — never fully expressed and perhaps barely conscious — grow out of a sense that 'the earth and world besiege us', even as the first Australian-born generation develops a commitment that differs from their colonising parents':

*Forever to remain — the condemnation  
pronounced on graver felons — was for our fathers,  
coming in freedom, a discipline, a promise,  
always retractable.*

That is not our case,  
the sons: who ran as children wild  
in an unfenced, new-named inheritance.  
Boys of a greedy spring, horizon-drunk,

peacocked its gold, its streams, declared their stations  
casually by fair water, changed, were changed,  
learning at last that country claims its station  
as men do theirs, and skylines lock around us  
surer than walls: *forever to remain*

As 'the mind's horizons' — the confining skylines or stockades of culture, language and poetic metaphors — become Australian, the 'promise' becomes a predicament and an obligation. The idea of the 'station' begins to acquire metaphysical meaning for the land-owning class, whose experience the sequence records, as a kind of static counterpart to 'generation'. It is like the Aboriginal sacred pool an omphalos through which the flow of the generations passes. There is a dream-like quality to all: Australia, and her 'shadow people', remain as deliberately nameless as the three voices: an enveloping darkness except where a hearth marks a station. But once the culture has taken root — or the land has taken its 'station' in the colonists' minds as they have taken their stations in it — this darkness is at the heart of their dreams as well as in the dreams' surroundings, so the youth can say: 'Only I, riding the flat-topped hills alone/feel in the inland wind the sting of desert/and under alien skin the surge, the stirring/a wisdom and a violence, the land's dark blood.'

Foreshadowing the end of the sequence where 'The Garden Runs Wild' and war looms on the horizon, the youth's 'stirring' is characteristically both interiorised and exteriorised, both essential and intrinsic to his being and a sign of alienation. This ambivalence of feeling becomes a pervasive ambivalence of Australian geography in Stow's work, where the desert is loud with surf, and the interior of the continent, its heart, its centre of feeling, is an 'Out There', as comes out most strikingly in 'The Singing Bones'. Based on Barcroft Boake's 'Where the Dead Men Lie', this poem is as Australian in its cadences as 'Stations' is an attempt to reach an inner colonial, Victorian heroic dream-note in the language; and part of its Australianness is the wryly exaggerated pessimism, which with an equally characteristic inversion of tone the poem hymns:

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. Who can find,  
even, the camp-sites where the saints last slept?  
*Out there* their place is, where the charts are gapped,  
unreachable, unmapped, and mainly in the mind.

. . . Time, time and time again, when the inland wind  
 beats over myall from the dunes, I hear  
 the singing bones, their glum Victorian strain.  
 A ritual manliness, embracing pain  
 to know, to taste terrain their heirs need not draw near.

Sound again evokes a landscape, indeed a country, which exists in a particular but ambivalent system of feeling: Australian patriotism, its piety and ethos, its legends, hero-saints and modes of worship. Again a type of 'grievous music' manifests an inherent *mal du pays*, a geography of sentiments and attitudes which have their root in separation and alienation. Stow composes his tonal maps from the contrast and interchange between the 'Out There', where 'the charts are gapped, unreachable, unmapped, and mainly in the mind' (as seen in 'The Land's Meaning' as well as 'The Singing Bones') and an inside which feels the 'stirring' of 'dark blood' under 'alien skin', the hauntings of a 'visitant' who is both an emissary of the environment and of another race. The mind has been projected into the outside world, alienness resides within, as can be seen in its most extreme form in 'Strange Fruit', *Visitants* and *The Suburbs of Hell*.

The 'visitant' is always more or less directly associated with death, but also with time, the carrier of change, periodicity, music, and longing: both desire and nostalgia. The intrusion of the 'visitant', in Cawdor's mind, in Tourmaline or Old Tornwich, or on a larger scale of Europeans in Australia, sets the story moving by striking a note which somehow resonates in the mind — or indeed skull in *The Girl Green as Elderflower* — within which the poem or novel is set. The note may break open a mind that has been frozen in a moment in the past — or iced into a wedding-cake as in *Miss Donnithorne's Maggot*. The note may lay bare a landscape of the soul, as in 'Landscapes' and 'The Land's Meaning', or a national ethos, as in 'The Singing Bones'. In any case, the intrusion awakens an echo from the past, an event or a feeling which haunts the scene of our trespass. Thus in Stow's 'mind-film' 'The Arrival at the Homestead' the scene and certain echoing patterns of arrival and meeting, zoomings and cross-cuttings is really all we are given in the way of a story and indeed of characters:

After the jolt at the dry creek-bed, and the turning of the red road through the straggling myall, part of the homestead came in sight. And the traveller knew it. Or perhaps did not quite know it, since it could have been any homestead at all in that part of the country, such as he might have drawn from memory or built like Meccano in his mind. Yet something made him slow the car, something at last made him pull up and wait, in the soft red dust at the rotting gate through which he could see down the beaten earth path to the house.

Stow's writing approaches from two completely opposite angles. There is the almost exaggeratedly external observer, as here, the outsider who looks in, through many screens, and partly discovers, partly pieces together from the mental building-blocks of his memory, a previously unknown but almost always

also strangely familiar place. On the other hand, there is the internal coming to awareness of an outside, with which all Stow's 'mind-films' begin. An oscillation between different points of view, and different rhythms of language in the inner 'grievous music' of a 'mind-film', is often used in Stow's work to build up a story, suspense or even character. Here it is stripped to an almost abstract movement in point of view through which we experience several temporal layers of expectancy and arrival. The state of mind and the event generate human figures: a woman like Tennyson's 'Mariana', ever waiting, ever victim; and a number of male figures (the 'arrivals': the very word fluctuates in meaning between the event and the person) who seem almost to merge, so that the observant traveller becomes lover, murderer, discoverer, suicide and boy on earth closest reading the newspaper squares hung on a string as toilet paper, piecing them together to reconstruct the story of the 'Bush Tragedy' and its sequel 'A Letter Two Years Late'.

The story, too, is generated by the identical patterns of arrival the haunted homestead seems to impose on the arrivals. As they step inside the gate with the feeling of being watched from inside the house, they enter a time-warp in which moments, which are years and even decades apart, coexist compressed and opening into one another. The woman waiting, the sex scene, her mummified dead body are cut up like the newspaper report; they are squares of almost-frozen time conjoined and reconstructed by the reader in a process where not only 'all time is eternally present', but each unfinished moment is eternally present.

With its studied anonymity, the 'mind-film' repeats and echoes not only itself but the pattern of flotsam and jetsam embedded in all of Stow's work. Just as the continent of Australia appears in Stow's work as the eternity on which the driftwood of time is beached, so the eternal aspect of time holds its momentary aspect in perpetual suspension. The moment forms part of a course — from birth to death — held as a kind of parenthesis in eternity, but the moment carries immanent the entire contrapuntal tonal development of a 'grievous music', which is the self, a small atom carried here and there by an alien other.

The moment — considered as a note in a 'grievous music', a stage in a temporal development of love and grief, a self bound on its course by the immanence of death — is in fact the opposite of eternity. The metaphysics of time and timelessness forms the subject of *'From The Testament of Tourmaline: Variations on Themes of the Tao Teh Ching'*, which in accordance with the pervasive complementarity of Lao Ze's philosophy defines the Tao as 'a sound in time for a timeless silence'. Basing itself on the book that begins 'The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao', 'The Testament of Tourmaline' attempts to construct a poetic *via negativa* and in the last lines of the book turns poetry back to its source: 'In the silence between my words, hear the praise of Tao'.

Tao is the defining Other, the ever-present absence without which nothing would appear present: 'the spaces between stars', the 'silence between words' or notes of music. Thus, far from being a denial of language, the Taoist poetics

of 'The Testament of Tourmaline' tries to achieve a complementarity between what is said overtly and what is implied:

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 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.

Far from losing itself in a universal mysticism, the sequence must be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the landscape of the Australian interior, a counterpart to 'The Land's Meaning' as well as a retrospective exposition of the philosophy behind the novel *Tourmaline* (as Stow pointed out in his interview with John B. Beston and as has been extensively discussed in the Taoist stream of Stow criticism: A.D. Hope, Paul D. Highinbotham and especially Helen Tiffin). It is an attempt to recreate in words the great Australian emptiness. The *Tao Teh Ching* is a particularly fruitful text for this project, partly because of its use of inversion, its constant balancing of a statement with its opposite, but also because its imagery is so fluid and aqueous. Alan Watts called Tao 'the Watercourse Way' and Stow similarly sees it as 'Multiple, unchanging, like forms of water, it is cloud and pool, ocean and lake and river'. An artesian image of 'the Empty Way' becomes very apt in a continent whose surface is two-thirds desert, but in the underground of which flow vast systems of lakes and rivers:

Deep. Go deep,  
as the long roots of myall  
mine the red country  
for water, for silence.

Silence is water.  
All things are stirring,  
all things are flowering,  
rooted in silence.

Silence and waterlessness work their transformations on the mind contemplating the interior of Australia. The soul finds itself in an environment where the absence is presence and emptiness replenishes. This reveals the way to unwinding the 'grievous music' of the self bound on its temporal course of mortality; but it was off this emptiness that the 'grievous music' found its resonance in the first place. Thus the Antipodean *mal du pays* in Stow's work inverts the nostalgia of Odysseus. There is no problem here of every attempt at return being a new setting out. On the contrary,

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There is no going but returning.  
Do not resist; for Tao is a flooded river  
and your arms are frail.

The red land risen from the ocean  
erodes, returns; the river runs earth-red,  
staining the open sea.

The invasion of the self by an alien Other, in which the grievous music has its origin, thus finds its resolution in a spiritual recognition of the Other as the basis of self. The feeling that the youth in 'Stations' has of the land's blood running in his veins is just one example of a recurrent motif in Stow's writing about Australia, where red dirt becomes a geographical equivalent to blood. This acquires very strong religious overtones in *Tourmaline*, and 'The Testament of Tourmaline' finds that 'body is land in permutation'. Water geographically and blood physiologically return the self to its source. Return is the inherent movement of the natural order, and of the 'Watercourse Way'.

For a while 'the empty road/winding through stars and time to make its end/endlessly at its own last, next beginning' may look like a setting out, an answer to the inherently human urge to set oneself apart, which is what gives rise to grief and nostalgia. But the poem 'Penelope' inverts Tennyson's 'Ulysses' by making the speaker's *Wanderlust* not the product of boredom with Penelope and Ithaka, but part of a seasonal-emotional cycle: a wish not to leave but to return and renew a buoyancy of homecoming which seems to grow rather than diminish with each roaming. All the adventures, all the other lovers become reflections and foreshadowings of the one lover-island. The mythical pattern is changed because, as Stow has explained to John B. Beston, the earth in this poem is to be imagined as round, not flat (See Beston, 'Love Poetry' 17; my interpretation, however, is almost the opposite of Beston's).

All these stirrings of desire are stilled in the 'counterfeit silence' of Stow's art. 'Love passes into lovelessness' and 'knowledge, motive, power become curious noises, a total wisdom being paid for a total yielding'. In the peculiar reticence of Stow's poetry, as in embracing the Tao, the soul loses selfhood, on which both 'the love of time' and 'the grief of time' depend. Like an echo returning to its source of sound to find only silence, the soul in losing its urge for self-realisation finds 'the lasting land', which is both Australia and paradise. Here the *mal du pays* is overcome, not in the consummation of desire, in the explosion of conquest, but in yielding to erosion with the assurance that it is merely part of a timeless continuity. The meanings of words erode, but merely into the silences they celebrate.

Characteristically, this pattern is not confined to the 'Variations' on the *Tao Teh Ching*, but is inherent in all Stow's 'grievous music'. Concentrated to the point of silence, its reticence imparts meaning through resonance and echo: repetition, rhyme and other melodic radar soundings; inversions and economy, not to say gauntness, of imagery; wryness of tone which sets up reverberations

between surface expression and underlying feeling; and the added 'counterfeit' quality which makes these resounding silences, in a sense all resulting from an attempt to come to terms with the emptiness of Australia, always play themselves out as 'variations' on a set model varying from Elizabethan song through Spanish ballads to hillbilly songs.

The poem 'In Praise of Hillbillies' and the related article 'Wrap Me Up With My Portable Grammophone' with typical irony bring out the real depth and seriousness of feeling which is like the silences between words and notes in the most despised form of music among the urban intelligentsia. The article in a mock-scholarly fashion and the poem through personal memories of hillbilly (or country-and-western) singers, find the characteristic emotion of the hillbillies to be nostalgia, their characteristic motion that of return. More than anything, perhaps, the poem suggests the development of the hearer: through the declining order of awe in which he holds the singers — from childish hero-worship through deep-felt appreciation of both the feeling and ambivalence of the Aboriginal hillbilly to adult, ironic restraint — and through the landscape vignettes of roads and rivers that assert their underlying movements like dream windows between the portraits of the singers. From filling the world, the music seems to dwindle to a singer's histrionics; but at the same time *Fernweh* turn to *Heimweh*, the urge to embark on explorations turns to nostalgia for the lost country of childhood:

Because past the saltbush  
the red road may never  
lead me, in playing  
I act out my roaming.  
But though I speak only  
of drifting, of straying  
the end is returning  
— the song is my homing.

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# SYMBOLIC GEOGRAPHY IN STOW'S WORK

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