

# Heriot's Ithaka: Soul, Country and the Possibility of Home in *To the Islands*

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Keep Ithaka always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you are destined for.  
But do not hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you are old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you have gained on the way . . .

C.P. Cavafy, 'Ithaka'

Old king without a throne,  
the hollow of despair  
behind his obstinate unyielding stare,  
knows only, God is gone:  
and, fingers clenching on his chair,  
feels night and the soul's terror coming on.

Judith Wright, 'The Harp and the King'

In 2009 Anthony Hassall, writing in *Australian Book Review* about Randolph Stow's oeuvre, noted that: 'The final tableau of [Heriot] alone on a cliff above the Arafura Sea, confronting the strangeness of his soul and looking out towards the Aboriginal islands of the dead, is one of the unforgettable images of Australian literature' (29). I would add that Heriot's final utterance: 'My soul . . . my soul is a strange country,' is one of the unforgettable, and most powerfully haunting, concluding sentences in Australian fiction. Yet Leonie Kramer in her 1975 critique of Stow's novels found that final sentence to be misplaced: 'It belongs—if indeed it belongs at all—not at the end of a novel of this kind, but near the beginning. Surely we have not come all this way with Heriot to be told, what we could have told him in the first place, that his soul is a strange country' (87). Despite considerable informed critique of Kramer's readings of Stow's work—particularly by Geoffrey Dutton, Anthony Hassall, Helen Tiffin and Paul Higginbotham—'her strictures,' as Hassall notes, 'have been treated with greater deference than they deserve, and have cast a long shadow over later Stow criticism' (*Strange Country* 54). At a time when interest in Stow and his work is again on the ascendancy, I want to investigate more deeply what Heriot might have appreciated his soul to be, before arguing that he could not have spoken those resonant words until the very moment when he is blinded by illumination atop that coastal cliff.

So what is soul? Not a small question, not an answerable question, but certainly an ongoing profoundly interesting question. To the ancients, soul was *anima*, 'that which animates, the living-, moving-, breathing-ness of a biological being' (Nicol). In *De Anima* Aristotle aims to 'grasp and understand' the essential nature and properties of the soul. He acknowledges from the outset that to 'attain any assured knowledge about the soul is one of the most difficult things in the world' (I.1). In his inimitable fashion Aristotle sets out to consider how his predecessors—Diogenes, Heraclitus, Hippo, Critias, Democritus, the list goes on—have sought to define the soul, before dismissing their arguments. Eventually, having analysed the

properties of movement, nutrition and appetite, and tracked his way through the various modes of sensory perception, Aristotle proposes that ‘there are two distinctive peculiarities by reference to which we characterize the soul (1) local movement and (2) thinking, discriminating, and perceiving’ (III.3). Perhaps more pertinent, in the context of Stow’s work, is Aristotle’s earlier assertion that

‘[t]he soul is the cause or source of the living body . . . It is (a) the source or origin of movement, it is (b) the end, it is (c) the essence of the whole living body. That it is the last, is clear; for in everything the essence is identical with the ground of its being, and here, in the case of living things, their being is to live, and of their being and their living the soul in them is the cause or source.’ (II.4)

It is this concept of the soul as the essence of self that Stow, more than any other Australian writer of the time, embraced.

In *Strange Country* Hassall, having dismissed Vincent Buckley’s claim that Stow was working in Patrick White’s shadow, pinpoints what was so interesting about the independent publication of *Voss* (1957) and *To the Islands* (1958): ‘Believing that a key to the Australian soul lay in the Australian landscape, they took their protagonists away from the European huddle on the fringes of the continent to seek its meaning, and their own, in the empty desolation and silence of the interior’ (28). According to Hassall the ‘time to begin the exploration of the unprofessed religious factor in Australian life had clearly arrived’ (28). Importantly, in both novels, it is the deeply intuitive characters aware of the inadequacies of Christian dogma that experience or discover a soul. In both novels a soul becomes evident after a moment of blinding awakening. White depicts the soul as a discrete entity that animates but is distinct from the body. Jackie, the Aboriginal tracker, explains to the explorers that the bodies of dead Aborigines were placed upon tree platforms to allow their spirits to depart: ‘As he placed his hands together, in the shape of a pointed seed, against his own breast, and opened them skyward with a great whooshing of explanation, so that the silky, white soul did actually escape, and lose itself in the whirling circles of the sky’ (243). Later the group struggle through what they hope is an appropriate burial rite for Palfreyman in which, for the sensitive Harry Robarts, ‘truth descended upon ignorance in a blinding light. He saw into the meaning of words, and watched the white bird depart out of the hole in Mr Palfreyman’s side as they lowered the body into the ground’ (344). There is no such description with *Voss*’ death, but as Judd explains to Laura: ‘if you live and suffer long enough in a place, you do not leave it altogether. Your spirit is still there’ (443).

The idea that one’s spirit resides in ‘Country,’ approaches Stow’s position; however, for Stow spirit and land—the internal and the external environment—are indivisibly one and, significantly, are apprehensible in life. He explains:

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 term we might 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 . . . The environment of a writer is as much inside him as in what he observes. (‘Raw Material’ 47)

In an email exchange with Roger Averill, Stow's authorised biographer, I raised the idea of Stow's extreme sensitivity, his heightened appreciation of his environment absorbed through a kind of overly porous skin. Averill replied:

I have long thought that Stow lacked a few layers of skin, allowing him to experience landscape and nature more directly and with greater sensitivity than most of us . . . I do think the idea of being stripped, at least to the skin, if not deeper, does relate to Heriot and his final declaration. To reach 'the islands' and his realization that his soul is a strange country, Heriot has to be stripped of everything, of all his cultural certainties. (4 June 2013)

There is no need here to rehearse extensively the debates that have centered on Heriot's erudition. Some early critics viewed Heriot's prolific citations from European literature as a flawed demonstration of Stow's learning. Kramer decried the 'incoherence' of his literary allusions (87). A more productive strand of criticism has seen Heriot's learning as a burden that he must carry into country and shed on his pilgrimage if he is to reach true knowledge. John Beston and Anthony Hassall have read *To the Islands* in conversation with the many textual quotations it references. In this essay I want to mention briefly only three intertexts: first, Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*; secondly, John Marston's 'The Malcontent'; and thirdly, Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.'

Kerry Leves—in an as yet unpublished doctoral thesis—argues that ennui is the central experience in *Les Fleurs du Mal*. He writes of Baudelaire: 'In the opening poem . . . "ennui" is asserted, and personified, as that which locks the reader and writer together, in mutual knowledge and complicity' (173): 'Ennui! Eye brimming with involuntary tears, dreaming of gallows while puffing on his hookah. You know him, reader, this dainty monster—hypocrite reader,—my fellow,—my brother!' (Millay 6). An appreciation of Heriot's pervasive ennui and its eventual shattering is central to understanding how he discovers, or more correctly uncovers, his soul. There is no doubt that Stow wants to draw attention to Baudelaire's theme. From the third paragraph of *To The Islands* he signals Baudelaire's importance: '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 boiteuses journées*—" (nothing's as long as the limping days, from 'Spleen II'). Two pages later we read: "'*J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille an*" [I've more memories than if I was a thousand years old]. And this cursed Baudelaire whining in his head like a mosquito, preaching despair' (3). Leves cites the poet and translator Edna St Vincent Millay who writes: 'The title *Les Fleurs du Mal* is not adequately translated as *Flowers of Evil*. These poems are flowers of doubt, flowers of torture, flowers of grief, flowers of blasphemy, flowers of weakness, flowers of disgust' (Millay xxxiv). Such a description maps beautifully onto Heriot's state of mind throughout much of *To the Islands*. Perhaps it is the way in which Stow made these states so obvious that caused Kramer to feel that readers knew about the strangeness of Heriot's soul all along. This narrative of world-weary despair is introduced with an epigraph from *The Malcontent* signalling from the outset a story about (self)enclosure, withdrawal and profound disturbance. We appreciate immediately that Heriot is tired, disillusioned and depressed. Large slabs of flat prose and descriptions of monotonous, colourless landscape reflect Heriot's mental state. But it is only by journeying through Country—or through his mind—that Heriot will be able to shed his self-absorption. The journey is essential to his eventual discovery.

Like David Malouf's Ovid (nearly two decades later), Heriot has to abandon knowledge, language and self-pity in order to overcome his separation from the landscape. Like Malouf's

Ovid, Heriot eventually reaches a place or a state of mind that is before and beyond language and intellectual knowledge: a state of heightened intuitive perception and openness to experience. Heriot's encounters in Country see him progress incrementally towards that goal. The most dramatic moment of his burgeoning self-awareness occurs when he emerges naked from the pool, speaks in Language to the blind old Aboriginal woman and erupts in self-righteous abuse at receiving no response: 'Ah, you thing,' he said resentfully, 'you thing of dirt and wrinkles and pubic hair' (111). Here his introspective gaze is shaken severely enough to enable him to truly apprehend another being distinct from himself: 'He realized then that she was blind, and was filled with penitence.' We witness a tableau of reconciliation:

He fed her until she was satisfied, and then she reached out and touched his shoulder with her hand, and leaned over and rested her forehead there. In that way they sat for what seemed a long time in that timeless place, naked brown woman by naked white man, and he stroked the loose skin of her back with tenderness, wanting to laugh, wanting to weep. (112)

Despite this epiphany Heriot still has much more ground to cover. That very night he sings over the top of a 'corroboree tune of tearing sadness' (114) with his Lyke-wake Dirge, committing his (conventionally Christian) soul to Christ. When Justin begs him to desist, he begins another self-obsessed rant about all he has given to the mission and to the world: 'I've given hosen and shoon . . . Haven't I? And meat and drink. And a wife. And many years of my life' (114). Steeped in self-pity, he falls asleep and dreams of events in a landscape of cliff and sea that would perhaps have satisfied critics as an appropriate ending to the novel. In his dream Heriot falls against and claws at a cliff, attempting to stay ahead of an incoming tide and 'boiling' light: 'Against the rock the waves broke in a brilliant surf, smashed into violet, indigo, green, yellow, orange, and red. All pure light, flowing and fractious, hungry for Heriot' (115). In sleep, Heriot approaches what he seeks and resists, desires and dreads: annihilation:

. . . he cried out, in astonishment and joy. I am all light, cried Heriot, I am torn, I am torn apart, all light, all glorious light. All elements and colours in him were resolved, each to return to its source below the enormous swell. And under the surf and into annihilation sank the last of Heriot's wild white hair. (115)

This scenario, which could offer some concrete resolution, must remain a dream rather than a conclusion: Heriot has not yet reached his final psychological and spiritual destination; and, moreover, Stow's imaginative project is always geared toward open-endedness, ambiguity and the nourishment of individual imagination rather than finality or resolution. As Paul Higginbotham (writing over 30 years ago) noted: Stow's 'novels progress to what appears to be an impending tragic finale only to end in apparent irresolution, especially evident in *To the Islands*. The forces at work in the novels are largely unfamiliar to readers of Western literature, so the calamities to which they lead seem disconnected and senseless' (383).

In his meditative collection of essays, *Between Stations* (2009), Kim Cheng Boey explores the possibility that it may be necessary to 'walk into homelessness in the quest for home' (50). Heriot, believing he is guilty of murder, does just that. But Heriot never finds a home. He asks Helen in the opening pages of the novel: 'Home? What is home?' (10). In the final days of his pilgrimage, dismissing Justin's protestations, he takes possession of what is obviously a sacred Aboriginal burial site declaring: 'I have come home now . . . This is home' (175). But this cave cannot be Heriot's home just as the islands cannot be the resting place for his spirit.

They are the islands of the Aboriginal dead and Heriot—for all his attempted shedding of European learning and language—is not an Aboriginal man. Even as he farewells Justin, he continues to see his loyal and patient companion through the prism of his book learning: ‘Ah, Justin . . . you’re my good deeds, my salvation from myself’ (182). There is, however, a cataclysmic shift in his perspective in the closing moments of the narrative. Perched on a red rocky ledge above the shining, noisy, blue-green sea, Heriot, blinded by the blazing light of the setting sun, is suddenly energised, decisive, powerful: ‘He knew suddenly the momentousness of his strength, his power to alter the world at will’ (182). This intense sensory experience—where his eyes are ‘dazzled’ with the colourful sea shattering against the vast red cliffs, and where the sun is ‘not lighting but blinding’—is the experience of affect that uncovers to him his soul: ‘It was the sea’s shine, and the sea’s noise, shattered against rock cliffs. Ultimate indeed, at last found’ (185).

In ‘Anima Minima,’ Lyotard grapples with the possible concept of soul and explores the relationship between affect and soul. He explains:

The affectability of the soul by sensation . . . conceals an absolute dependency of each in relation to the other. The *anima* exists only as affected. Sensation, whether likable or detestable, also announces to the *anima* that it would not even be, that it remain inanimate, had nothing affected it. This soul is but the awakening of an affectability . . . This soul does not affect itself, it is only affected by the other, from the ‘outside’ . . . Existing is to be awoken from the nothingness of disaffection by something sensible over there . . . What we call life proceeds from a violence exerted from the outside on a lethargy. The *anima* exists only as forced. The *aistheton* tears the inanimate from the limbo in which it exists, it pierces it with vacuity with its thunderbolt, it makes a soul emerge out of it. A sound, a scent, a color draw the pulsing of a sentiment out of the neutral continuum, out of the vacuum. (242).

Lyotard’s explanation describes beautifully the birth of Heriot’s soul. His thesis underscores the importance of Heriot’s prolonged ‘lethargy’ and self-absorption prior to his encounter with the violent, brilliant forces of nature.

Heriot is shocked out of his ennui by the majestic power, sight and sounds of the coastal landscape or, reading that landscape psychically, by the shocking realisation—the ‘thunderbolt’—that not only can he never atone sufficiently for the Onmalmeri massacre and the continued deracination of the Aboriginal people, but that as a white man he can never be at home in this country. Returning to Stow’s ‘Raw Material’ we read:

I am conscious of gaping cracks in this attempt to relate ‘my environment’ to some theoretical Australian literature . . . But there is a concept behind it: 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 a newborn. (49)

Heriot as the ‘poor, bare, forked animal’ is born/borne, atop his cliff, into a new level of (self) awareness.

Crucially, Heriot never sees the islands. I would like to think he cannot see them because as a white man he has no right to see them but a more plausible reading might be that he needs to

understand that reaching the islands—what he thinks of as his Ithaka—is less important than his journey toward them. Like Cavafy’s ideal voyager, Heriot undertakes a long journey ‘full of adventure, full of discovery’ (67), all the while carrying his fears, inadequacies and demons in his soul. Only in the novel’s penultimate sentence, as he kneels amongst the bones of the Aboriginal dead, does he surrender his need for his expected destination, comprehend what he has learned on the journey and appreciate that his desired Ithaka does not disappoint: ‘. . . his ancient blue eyes, *neither hoping nor fearing* [my emphasis], search sun and sea for the least dark hint of a landfall’ (126). Like Cavafy’s voyager, Heriot has finally realised that he has reached his goal:

Ithaka gave you the marvellous journey.  
Without her you would not have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won’t have fooled you.  
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean. (69)

Poised upon the cliff, Heriot faces towards what Malouf might term the horizon of possibility.

Throughout his journey Heriot has been driven by feelings of guilt and the need for reparation. At some level he remains wedded to the notion that some kind of expiation and forgiveness will become possible through his suicide, all the while clinging to the arrogant belief that his spirit will find peace, will find a home, on the islands. Only once he has been blasted out of his ennui and become animated by sensory assault can he appreciate not only that he has a soul but also that as a white man in this historical and cultural space his soul can at best be ‘strange,’ be a strange—uncanny, *unheimlich*—country. As Freud suggests, ‘the uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression’ (145–46). Heriot has given years of his life to the mission and its Aboriginal inhabitants. Like Judith Wright’s old king in ‘The Harp and the King,’ he has surrendered his throne, experienced the absence of God and held his ‘obstinate unyielding stare’ in the face of the ‘soul’s terror coming on.’ In becoming open to the lived reality of his world, he finally admits to himself what he has known for a long time: that he has never been, and can never be, at home in such a world. As Heidegger explains: ‘Everyday familiarity collapses. Being-in enters the existence of *not-being-at-home*. To talk about “uncanniness” means nothing other than this’ (176).

The Onmalmeri massacre underpins and haunts the narrative of *To the Islands*. Stow relentlessly pursues questions of guilt and reparation through his characters’ dialogue and through the casting of stones. It is significant that Terry Dixon, as a member of the search party looking for Heriot, stands at the edge of a cliff overlooking the bright blue pools of Onmalmeri and chooses to throw a stone into the water below. Like Heriot in his final moments, Dixon is struck by the country’s colour, power and beauty. Unlike Heriot, however, his action has no palpable effect other than to scatter some birds: ‘He picked up a stone and threw it far out, and it swerved and landed with an echoing clatter in the clump of pandanus at the cliff foot. A cry of birds broke out’ (87). Terry Dixon never harbours any illusions that he belongs to the land or the Aboriginal people. Indeed he feels ‘foreign everywhere’ but, in a hopeful gesture towards the future viability of mission life, Stow allows Terry to find a place of belonging with Helen Bond: he ‘felt his foreignness leaving him. No need ever again to wander . . . He had his home here, she was his home’ (170).

Heriot appears to have no future and yet his final act is to hurl 'a block of stone' into the sea and thereby 'work a change on the world' (185). What might that change be? Earlier in the narrative, Heriot and the murderer Rusty debate the possibility of an unforgiving God. When Rusty suggests that God 'pays us back for what we done,' Heriot insists: 'We pay ourselves back . . . Because you know our crimes are like a stone, a stone again, thrown into a pool, and the ripples go on washing out until, a long time after we're gone, the whole world's rocked with them' (133). Heriot casts his stone 'to alter the world' (185). Does he believe that while it is not possible for one man to atone for the sins of a nation, he may be able to set in motion ripples of thought that may reverberate after his death? Is the novel's true conclusion somewhere far in the future? In interview, Stow has spoken of the important role resonance plays in his work: 'resonance, reverberation, association . . . it means to sound again, to ring again. And what I aim to do . . . [is] to ring bells in people's minds, to make them relate to their own experience' (in Hassall 'Breaking the Silence' 320). Certainly Stow continues to confront his readers with questions of culpability and colonial history. In his next novel, *Tourmaline* (1963), the narrator, the Law, remarks: 'we come in humility, and in guilt, knowing that in some way we are all murderers . . . and the dead have been our victims . . . And we ask him [God] in his good time, to revise our sentence' (119).

The idea of an ongoing, resonating narrative calls to mind Coleridge's great poem of imagination, storytelling and soul making: 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'—referenced in the novel, and part of whose epigraph reads:

I can easily believe that there are more invisible than visible beings in the universe . . . About such matters the human mind has always circled without attaining knowledge. Yet I do not doubt that sometimes it is well for the soul to contemplate—as in a picture—the image of a larger and a better world, lest the mind, habituated to the small concerns of daily life, limit itself too much and sink entirely into trivial thinking. (744)

Coleridge's mariner kills the albatross for no good reason. His transgression, like Heriot's casting of the stone at Rex, demands reparation. The mariner must endure a journey surrounded by death, alone in a watery wilderness accosted by phantoms that magnify his psychic unease. He is finally saved, but his suffering for his crime can only be expiated in the repetitive telling of his tale. There is no closure for the mariner, just as there is no definitive ending for Heriot whom we leave kneeling and looking toward a possible hint of the distant islands. Is Heriot's final sentence the end of this story?

In his prefatory note to the 1991 revised edition of *To the Islands*, Stow writes: 'I do not regret having raised the large questions asked here, and so wisely left unanswered. If the novel retains any interest . . . it may be because this story of an old man is really about a certain stage in the life of a sort of young man' (vii). Stow wrote *To the Islands* after having worked on the Forest River mission in 1957. Having learnt something of Aboriginal culture and spirituality he sought to honour that knowledge in a narrative that also incorporated a 'propaganda' (xiii) element supporting the work of white missionaries in providing services to Aboriginal people. If we read Heriot, his disillusion and his discovery of his unbelonging, with the young Stow in mind, it is possible to argue that the intensely sensitive Stow felt his own soul to be troubled deeply by Australia's colonial history and its ongoing effects. Where James McAuley in 1940 could write of his relationship with the Australian landscape: 'And I am fitted to that land as the soul is to the body,' (65) and where Patrick White felt that he was a Londoner at heart but that his blood was Australian 'which is why I have to put up with the

hateful place,' (Marr 419) Randolph Stow experienced palpably an irreparable rupture between his internal and external environs. After *To the Islands* he wrote *Tourmaline*—where the characters are mere 'tenants' of the dry red land—and left Australia forever. In Suffolk he found his 'spiritual home' (Hassell, 'Breaking the Silence' 393). In Suffolk he had the strength to finish writing *Visitants* but only after he had written *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, a story of a journey back from alienation, a story of finding a home. As Heriot's final discovery makes clear, no such narrative of reconciliation would have been possible had Stow remained in the strange country of his birth.

In her recent memoir *Moving Among Strangers: Randolph Stow and My Family* (2013), Gabrielle Carey quotes one of Stow's Harwich neighbours: "'My understanding", said Hugh, somewhat timidly, "was that Randolph didn't like Australia because he didn't like the way they treated the indigenous people"' (206). Carey nods, but thinks to herself: 'Stow saw at first hand the mistreatment of our indigenous people, but what purpose did removing himself from his native country serve? Was this a national or personal or ancestral solution?' (208) Perhaps the answer to those questions is that Stow removed himself from Australia as a solution to all three anxieties. His departure in 1966 was also a creative solution. As he explained to Xavier Pons and Neil Keeble, he was interested in the Aboriginal people but did not find the company of white Australians 'madly interesting' (359). Stow felt that he would never fulfill his potential as a writer if he stayed in Australia. In a lecture delivered in 1985, he stated: 'if I meant to go on writing . . . I needed to be an outsider, yet not a complete outsider: . . . I needed, in fact, to pick up the threads my forebears had cut round about 1830' ('Transplantable Roots' 7). When Carey quizzed Fay Zwicky about why Stow may have felt he needed to go into self-exile, Zwicky replied curiously that 'the trouble with Australia . . . is that you have to explain yourself' (127). Stow does not explain Heriot's final utterance. He does not neatly cast Heriot into the sea. Rather, in his quiet Taoist way, he offers an enigmatic, whispered statement that rings out from the pages of his novel.

I have argued that Heriot is blinded by illumination in the same moment that he realises he cannot be at home in Australia. Oliver Lovesey has an alternative, very interesting reading. Heriot's journey, he argues, functions

allegorically, reenacting voyages of imperial exploration, or more precisely what Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes* terms the 'anti-conquest,' which she defines as

the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony. . . . The main protagonist of the anti-conquest is . . . the 'seeing-man' . . . the European male subject of European landscape discourse—he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess. (51)

While for much of the journey it might be true to argue that Heriot's eyes 'passively look' and unquestioningly possess, in the crucial moment of his seeing, the moment when he is blinded by illumination, he looks and knows he cannot 'possess.' Lovesey goes on to argue that Heriot 'renounces the burden of his own responsibility for involvement in colonial settlement,' finding a 'convenient way to deny its reality' by taking 'refuge in a type of quasi-spiritual quietism resembling Taoism' (55). He insists that Taoism's 'quietism cannot annihilate the archive of imperialism. Heriot's discovery of peace entails unburdening himself of his involvement in colonial practices' (55). I am not so convinced about Heriot's shirking of responsibility. Yes, Heriot moves towards some kind of Taoist stillness. To quote Stow's



words from earlier in this essay, Heriot stands on the cliff in a landscape ‘in which eternal things are observed with, always, the eyes of a newborn.’ He does not, however, discover peace. Rather he discovers his culpability.

*To the Islands* continues to interest readers decades after its publication and long after the covers of the text are closed. That interest is generated by the now iconic image of Heriot atop his cliff and the haunting power of his final declaration that reverberates across space and time challenging contemporary readers of Western literature to broaden their understanding of Stow’s intentions and perhaps even interrogate their complicity (or otherwise) in Australia’s colonial history of violence and dispossession. Looking back over the more than fifty years since publication of *To the Islands* or even the thirty-nine years since Kramer’s review, we realise—in a way that Kramer would not have intended—that Heriot’s last utterance is not the final word in this ongoing narrative but rather a stimulus inviting us to see our country and ourselves anew, a moment in Stow’s larger, ongoing philosophic meditation, and an epiphany when Heriot ‘so full of experience/. . . understood by then what these Ithakas mean’ (Cavafy 69).

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