

Toxic flowers: Randolph Stow's unfused horizons

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Randolph Stow's 'pictorial writing' (Hassall, *Randolph Stow* 358) constitutes the limpid, polished surface of an 'artefact' that is put together after a 'blueprint', as Stow told an interviewer in the early 1990s:

Nothing just happens as I write a novel. I always compose a novel in my head before I start with a pen. Everything is planned in detail before I start the manual labour of writing. All the details have to be locked together. I want to grasp, almost visualise, the complete structure or blueprint of this artefact on which I am going to spend so much time. (Kavanagh and Kuch 240)

In an interview that took place some thirty years earlier, Stow outlined some of his planning procedures. Stow's description, as reported by John Hetherington, sheds light on what he would later call a 'blueprint':

In writing a novel he works to a strict plan, which he has gradually built up beforehand, over a period of at least a year. He sometimes uses graphs to map character development, and a sort of stage lighting plan in which the central theme is the stage with the various incidents of the plot arranged around it like spotlights. (Hetherington 246)

The theatrical metaphors suggest narrative composition as a form of dramaturgy. Spotlights heighten the visibility of parts of a stage, and consign other parts to dimness or obscurity. The effect of a dramatised plot incident, as 'spotlight', may be to throw an aspect of the novel's 'central theme' into relief, leaving other aspects of the same 'theme' (i.e. 'the stage') unlit. While Hetherington's phrasing indicates a fixed circular pattern—the central theme is the stage with the various incidents of the plot arranged around it—the 'spotlights' metaphor also allows for flexibility. Spotlights can be repositioned; the angle from which a spotlight's beam meets the stage can be changed as often as required. The 'spotlights' trope affirms the novelist's freedom to choose where, when and how to point to a novel's 'central theme'; or an aspect of it. Thus it is questionable whether 'the various incidents of the plot' will, in themselves, guide a reader to a 'central theme' in a Stow novel: the representation of these 'incidents', and the detailing of these representations, will exert their own hermeneutic pressures.

More formally, Stow's 'stage lighting plan', with its 'central theme' encircled by the 'spotlights' of plot incidents, models the hermeneutic circle, a visual metaphor of the impossibility of stepping outside the need to understand the part from the whole of a text, and the whole from the part (Macey 181). Hans-Georg Gadamer's mid-twentieth century reconceptualisation foregrounds the metaphoric character of the 'circle', and emphasises two factors that the process of understanding entails. The first is that the interpreter inevitably brings 'anticipations', 'fore meanings', and/ or 'prejudices' to the hermeneutic task. The

second is that these 'prejudices', 'fore meanings', 'anticipations' may be less subjective than traditionary. Informed by cultural practices and, predominantly, by language use and usages, in which the interpreter always already participates, prejudices are not only hermeneutical but also epistemological 'horizons' (*Truth* 302-307; Grondin 48-50; Taylor 136): projected limits, to knowledge and to understanding, that may undergo revision as we move toward them in the process of interpreting a text.

Stow's novels of bi-cultural sociality prod their readers' attention toward the role played by language in shaping knowable reality. Detail is often used to mark epistemological limits and Gadamerian 'prejudices', generated, as Gadamer puts it, through 'linguistic interpretation' (cited in Wachterhauser 65). However, as Gadamer writes: 'the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction' (*Truth* 304). 'Prejudices,' in Gadamer's view, 'are biases of our openness to the world,' and constitute 'the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience' (Universality 9). Stow's novels evince an interest in cross-cultural permeability; they work in the direction of open, hybrid knowledge fields, and creolisation of language. Yet his image of novel-at-planning-stage foreshadows the 'necessarily circular movement' of interpretation, which Gadamer specifies as a movement from the text to 'our own thoughts' and back again (Foundations 121).

Stow's 'stage lighting plan' induces its own Gadamerian 'anticipation': 'stage' is readable not only as a visual but also as a spatial metaphor. It evokes the three-dimensional space—breadth, height and depth—in which theatrical action is performed; it suggests not only a theatrical stage, but also a sound stage, even a film location, where lighting, camera placement, and focus expand the capacities of theatrical spotlighting to shape representation. A comment of Stow's, on what he calls the 'cinematic structure' (Hassall, *Randolph Stow* 351) of his novels up to *Midnite* (1967), is telling in this regard. During a 1974 interview, John B. Beston asked Stow about his 'varying the focus' as a compositional technique in *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* (1965). Stow replied that, in *Merry-go-Round*, he was:

[...] sort of varying the long shot and the close shot. In the long shot time is telescoped, and in the close shot the events happen in the time they would actually take. (Hassall, *Randolph Stow* 350)

Stow's comment evinces a concern not only with 'the events' in his fictions, but also with their framing. In this paper I suggest that 'varying the long shot and the close shot' is a compositional technique that is employed in several Stow novels. This paper also discusses Stow's use of theatrical-cinematic tableau, arguing that tableau serves, in portions of Stow's narratives, as 'the mirror in the text': as *mise en abyme* (Dallenbach 35). However, Stow's deployment of *mise en abyme* is not confined to tableau.

Flowers in Randolph Stow's fiction are ambivalent images. They connote breaks or gaps in understanding, of self and/or others: unfused horizons rather than the 'fusing of horizons' that is Gadamer's metaphor for the process of understanding (*Truth* 307). Stow's flowers resonate to the New Testament, and to *The Flowers of Evil*, the title given by French poet Charles Baudelaire to his 1857 collection of poems. My readings of passages in Stow in which flowers figure prominently begin with a toxification of flowers that carry a Christian allusion in Stow's first novel *A Haunted Land* (1956) and end with an exploration of Baudelaire's

Flowers of Evil as toxifying intertext in Stow's *To the Islands* (1958). These readings bracket another, of a passage in *Tourmaline* (1963) in which oleanders, scientifically known to be toxic, predominate.

Toxicities of the text: *A Haunted Land's* paper flowers

In the closing pages of *A Haunted Land*, protagonist Andrew Maguire, rugged 'individualist' (66) farmer-settler of the Western Australian wheat belt circa 1902; would-be Leibnizian monad (ibid; c.f. Blackburn 207) of the farm Malin, broods on the death of one of his adult sons and the dispersion of another three of his five children. 'I have lost my kingdom,' Andrew summarises (252), simultaneously invoking one of *A Haunted Land's* and its sequel, *The Bystander's* key intertexts, the story of Oedipus. In crisis, many of Stow's characters resort to book reading and/ or quotation from books. Andrew takes a volume from the shelf and starts reading George Herbert's poem 'Affliction IV'. But Herbert's meditation on the tensions inherent in living a Christian life does not console Andrew; he hurls the book at the wall, killing a moth, and tries another book, of nursery rhymes his late wife used to read to their children (250-1). Andrew reads 'The key of the kingdom', not quite a nursery rhyme, but, as John Speirs explains, a modern English version of a pre-medieval version of the Corpus Christi carol, with its own history of being chanted, as a children's dancing game, in open spaces, and in stone mazes of greater antiquity than the poem (Speirs 79-80).

The itinerary of the poem is from the gates of a city, into the city, along a street, into a yard, a house, and then a room within that house where 'a basket of sweet flowers' sits on a bed. As soon as Andrew starts reading this poem, the text as it were inserts a movie camera inside his head. *A Haunted Land's* reader sees what Andrew is visualising as he reads: a 'great golden key' at the start, then city, street, yard, and so on. Andrew reads with imaginative intensity: 'windows look ... down on him'; he 'opens a door', feeling like 'an intruder'. Dramatised as a trip in virtual reality, Andrew's reading stops its journey in the middle of the poem, on the flowers. "I did not understand a kingdom ... it was too big for me," Andrew says. "Only the flowers I understand" (251-2). The novel's text offers two visualisations: one, of Andrew reading, lost in a book; the other, of Andrew's reading process, which is taken beyond visualisation into hallucination: 'He took the flowers and held them against his face and he was laughing now' (252).

But Andrew has read selectively, excising half the poem. 'The key of the kingdom' does not end on the "basket of sweet flowers", but from that point begins a journey out again, taking its reader through the house, the yard, back into the city (Speirs 79). The didactic purpose of the poem seems to be to mediate the 'sweet flowers' that are, symbolically, Christ, but that also evoke his advice—"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" (Matt. 6.28-9)—within a social context where, perhaps, private contemplation and meditation can be recognised as implicitly social privileges, concomitants of a robust recognition of the necessary infrastructure.

Andrew, the 'individualist', edits out his sociality. As *A Haunted Land* indicates elsewhere, Andrew is an active, even a brutal participant in the extirpation of the Indigenous people (48-9). But at novel's end, among flowers imagined through a reader's imagining of the imaginary

character's imagining, the would-be Leibnizian monad gets lost in the romantic sublime; the historical roots of his privileged ability to do so are as effectively excised as the roots of the flowers in the basket: for Andrew, though not for the novel's reader. The playful reflexiveness of this—the novel's as it were finding the reader in Andrew's position, visualising (fantasising? hallucinating?) from a text—has the effect of questioning the immersion any reader may experience through words arranged on a page in a fiction. As textual mirror, the passage refracts a spotlight-like beam on one of *A Haunted Land's* central themes: dissociation, personal and social (250).

In the shade of bi-cultural sociality: *Tourmaline's* flowering oleander

Stow's *Tourmaline* deals with a different kind of immersion, that of the inhabitants of a desert town in the revivalist Christianity brought to them by a young water diviner, Michael Random. Early in the novel, Michael visits the town's ruined church, that is cleaned and embellished by the Indigenous woman Gloria Day, mother of Agnes Day, and grandmother of *Tourmaline's* principal female character, Deborah. The older women's names, connotative of liturgical Latin ('*gloria dei*' – glory of God; '*agnus dei*' – lamb of God) and the New Testament, contrast with Deborah's namesake, The Book of Judges' prophet and judge (Judges 4.4-14). That Stow's Deborah collocates with the Old Testament's is apposite, in a novel that questions Christian dogma, while presenting some of its characters as directly addressing, struggling with, and/or revealing God: behaviours more usually associated with the Old Testament, e.g. Abraham, Deborah, Moses.

An oleander bush grows near the ruined church. Gloria Day waters it by urinating on its roots; she decorates the altar with its flowers. The dialogue suggests that both Michael and Gloria are, in Simone Weil's phrase, 'waiting on God' (Little 50): privation is what they share. Michael says that he may have found God, or God him, because God 'makes [him] suffer', provides 'pain. Shame. Weakness' and a sense of individual persecution. But Michael is unsure of what God 'want[s] [him] for', and of 'where [he] stand[s]' with God. The rhetoric given to Gloria is more diffusive, but sounds the same ground bass of prayerful wishing and hoping.

'I ask him to make it rain,' [Gloria tells Michael]. 'And the stones, I give him.'
She pointed at the altar, where two round black pebbles, unnaturally smooth, lay
before the wilted oleander flowers. 'Rain stones,' she said. 'He can make it rain, if
he want to.' (89)

The 'rain stones' insert the sign of another epistemology, another metaphysics, into this context of Christian patience, along with more complicating nuances. The 'pebbles', laid on the altar 'before' the flowers suggest that 'rain stones' have primacy, but also that Gloria, like Gadamer, recognises that 'the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction' (*Truth* 304). Gloria's, which is to say Stow's, mixing of cultural signs, seems to argue for a reading of Gloria as a non-dualistic saint. The mix of signs points also to a Christian and a Taoist tenet. The church and the oleander—an imported toxic plant—can be read as signs of a culture inimical to Gloria's: in this sense, she does good to her enemies, as Christians and Taoists are enjoined to do (Matt. 5.43-4; Tao 2.63). Gloria's speeches and behaviour seem almost to illustrate the following axioms from the *Tao Te Ching*: 'In speech it

is good faith that matters'; 'In action it is timeliness that matters' (1.8). Here, timely action might be urinating on a plant's roots, to sustain it in extreme drought.

The first section of dialogue between Michael and Gloria closes on a long shot, as if a movie camera had been tracked backwards to reveal the following tableau:

They stood gazing. She was in the shade, he in the sunlight. A rectangle of sky was above him. Over her shoulder, through the open door, the flowering oleander burned in the sun. (89)

The rhetoric of the *Tao Te Ching* privileges dimness and obscurity over clarity and visibility (e.g. 1.4, 1.14, 2.56). Gloria stands 'in the shade'; Michael stands where sunlight is concentrated through a 'rectangle of sky': a geometric framing device, severed at this moment in the text from its continuity with the broken church roof. Michael's 'rectangle' correlates with the sharp boundaries of individual identity. It connotes Michael's reversed orientation from that of Gloria, who is identified with what happens in shade and on the ground, in communities. "People in the camp pretty hungry now," Gloria offers, as a reason to pray for rain (89).

The tableau allows a reading of the 'emotional situation' in dramatic or, after Peter Brooks, melodramatic terms (Brooks 48). In the dialogue that precedes it, Gloria's answers to Michael's questions suggest that the town, impoverished spiritually as well as materially, may be ripe for religious revival and thus provide an opportunity for Michael, through his mysterious divining ability, to gain social prominence and/or power. Michael is like a Jesus who *gave in* to Satan's temptations in the wilderness (c.f. Matt. 4.8-9); his questioning Gloria, about the religious life of the town, carries a nuance of private calculation, edged like the 'rectangle of sky' above him. But the text also suggests that Gloria's non-dualistic saintliness has affected Michael. After the tableau, he stops quizzing Gloria and starts interrogating God: "[A]h, God, what do you want me for?" It is not God but Gloria who answers: "One talent." The reference is to the Parable of the Talents in the New Testament.

The Parable of the Talents tells of a master of a house who, going away on a journey, gives each of his three servants five, two and one talent respectively – a talent being a weight or measure of money. The recipients of the five and two talents trade and make profits; the third servant buries his one talent in the ground for safekeeping. The master returns, rewards those who have profited, and casts out the servant who buried his talent (Matt. 25. 14-29). It has been suggested that the Parable of the Talents forms part of the weave of what Weber called 'elective affinity' between 'aspects of Protestantism and those of the ethos of capitalism' (Blackburn 111). Here, Gloria's intervention precipitates the plot's catastrophes: prompted by Gloria, Michael gets to work, divining, and leading a religious revival; the consequences are socially disappointing and for Michael, fatal.

To return to the tableau: the dominant image of 'the flowering oleander burn[ing] in the sun', placed behind Gloria's shoulder so that we understand she cannot see it, suggests that even the saintliness we infer—her simplicity, her goodness—should be read as a propaedeutical sign. Gloria's kindness to Michael is also the unwitting cultivation of a poisonous plant, a toxic import: Michael himself, along with his socio-religious project. The picture bifurcates,

becomes two: a saintly Aboriginal woman ministers to a troubled young white man; yet, between two textual signs, 'rectangle of sky' and 'flowering oleander', another plane of vision opens, from which to re-read the tableau against one of the novel's concluding and conclusive statements, on its last page:

There is no sin but cruelty. Only one. And that original sin, that began when a man first cried to another, in his matted hair: Take charge of my life, I am close to breaking. (210)

In the ruined church, 'a man' cries not to 'another' man, but to a God that does not answer. Michael's question is answered instead by a woman, who, if she does not 'take charge' of him, propels him toward taking charge of Tourmaline.

According to the website of Kew Gardens in London, oleanders have been used, in traditional medicine, to treat cancer, heart disease, leprosy, snake bite, and ulcers (<http://www.kew.org/plants-fungi/Nerium-oleander.htm>). Thus Stow's choice of this plant may be in keeping with the Taoist tenor of *Tourmaline*. Stow has characterised Taoism as 'a very pragmatic religion concerned mostly with time and change, action and inaction' (Hassall, *Randolph Stow* 365). A pragmatist's humour may, after all, underpin, and undercut, the portentous phrasing of the tableau—'the flowering oleander burned in the sun'—since oleanders are so toxic that they act, on humans, as their own emetic. The *Tao Te Ching* exhorts its reader to engage less with things as they appear when clearly lit, than with the uses made of them, in various kinds of shade (for example, 1.11, 1.12, 1.51).

Stow's text balances the obviousness of the mother-son, goddess-suppliant relations that it develops here between Gloria and Michael, against its writing of Gloria as the mouthpiece of an imperative that has been configured through Christian hermeneutics: impressive, but "not a substitute for thinking", as Tom Spring, Stow's representative in the novel (Hassall, *Randolph Stow* 366), says, in an earlier episode, with reference to a like closure (40). The written signs Gloria places on the altar—'MARY MOTHER OF GOD; GOD THE FATHER; JESUS LOVER OF MANKIND; FATHER SON AND HOLY GHOST. And also GOD SAVE OUR QUEEN' (65)—affirm her holy simplicity. But they also hold political nuances. In 2010 we might read them as indicators of a proto-feminist reclamation of God as Goddess. Yet in the Cold War context that is also this novel's (Imperishable, no pagination), they can be associated with the use of 'MARY', the 'QUEEN' of Heaven, as an iconic "antidote to ..secularism" (cited in Harris and Spence 494), notable in the Roman Catholic revivalism of Father Patrick Peyton, who conducted the highly successful National Family Rosary Crusade in Australia in 1953-54 (Hilliard 138). But Gloria's signs, 'written in charcoal' on 'pieces of packing-case wood' (65), also indicate that she is a goddess of text, whom Michael consults as an oracle.

“White man always talking”: *Flowers of Evil* in *To the Islands*

Grahame Jones argues that in Stow's third novel, *To the Islands* (1958), Baudelaire's poetry is 'not only an important element of the moral lighting but... has a significant function in determining the plot' (Jones, 138). Stow begins *To the Islands* by having his principal character quote from perhaps the most famous 'toxic flowers' in Western European literature.

Stephen Heriot, the director of a mission station in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, begins his day with a line from ‘Spleen 2’, from *Les Fleurs du Mal* by Charles Baudelaire.

Collecting himself from sleep, returning to his life, [Heriot] said to the lizard [perched on a rafter above his bed]: “I am Heriot. This is the sixty-seventh year of my age. *Rien n’egale en longueur les boiteuses journees.*” (1)

Poet and translator Edna St. Vincent Millay 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; cemetery flowers, fertilized by the corruption of the ardent and well-cared-for flesh; flowers forced on the sterile bough of the mind’s unblossomy decay. (Millay xxxiv)

‘Spleen 2’ fits several of Millay’s categories, including ‘cemetery flowers’, along with those of ‘disgust’ and ‘grief’:

Spleen 2

I’ve more memories than if I were a thousand years old.

A big chest of drawers, cluttered with bank statements, poems, love letters, lawsuits, romances, thick locks of hair rolled up in receipts, contains fewer secrets than my sad brain, a pyramid, an immense vault holding more corpses than a paupers’ boneyard. – I am a cemetery the moon abhors where, like remorse, long worms crawl always across my favourite dead. I am an old boudoir full of faded roses, strewn with a jumble of outmoded fashion, where only plaintive pastels and pale Bouchers breathe the odour of an unstoppered flask.

Nothing’s as long as the limping days when, under thick flakes of snowy years, ennui—fruit of bleak incuriosity—takes on immortal proportions. From now on, O stuff of life, you are mere granite wrapped in vague terror, drowsing in the depth of a fog-hidden Sahara; an old Sphinx unknown to a heedless world, forgotten from the map, whose savage mood harmonises only with the sun’s rays setting. (Baudelaire in Waldrop’s translation, 98)

The lines, ‘Nothing’s as long as the limping days’ (*Rien n’egale en longueur les boiteuses journees*) and ‘I’ve more memories than if I were a thousand years old’ (*J’ai plus de souvenirs que j’avais mille ans*), and by implication the poem from which they come, are – to adopt a phrase of novelist’s metalanguage, from Stow – part of Heriot’s ‘intellectual furniture’ (Hassall, *Randolph Stow* 394). A reader might take the lines, italicised in Stow’s text (1, 3), to be directing her or him to Baudelaire’s poem, in order to supplement the rhetoric of character by which Heriot is represented. Thus Heriot’s internal monologue—‘I am an old man, an old man’ (3)—could be amplified by a sense of dread (‘I am a cemetery the moon abhors’); of uselessness (‘I am an old boudoir full of faded roses’); and of ‘savage’ ennui (‘O

stuff of life, you are.. an old Sphinx unknown to a heedless world'). Yet the poem in question is one of a set of four 'Spleen' poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, poems 75-78, all of which can be read as elaborating on each other. *To the Islands* and its protagonist Heriot can be read productively against these and other poems in the cycle.

In 'Spleen 1', the poem's speaker dramatises the annoyances of cold, wet weather ('The month of drizzle, the whole town annoying'), fantasising that 'the soul of some old poet trundles down the rainspout with the sad voice of a chilly phantom' (Baudelaire 97). In *To the Islands*, Heriot feels the heat ('Already the heat was pressing down on him, the sheet under him clung to his back and it not yet six o'clock') and hears 'this cursed Baudelaire whining in his head like a mosquito, preaching despair' (1, 3). In a reversal that exchanges discomforts, hot for cold, Stow recycles Baudelaire's 'old poet ... with the sad voice of a chilly phantom' as Baudelaire's imagined vocal, 'whining' like an apposite tropical mosquito. The 'Sphinx' from 'Spleen 2', a recurrent motif in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, appears also, when Heriot sketches 'a crumbling cliff with the profile of the Sphinx' (3), tacitly a fanciful self-portrait. Compare 'Beauty', poem 17 in Baudelaire's cycle: a not unfunny poem about the perception of beauty as a solemn self-delusion. In it, 'Beauty' characterises itself: 'I am beautiful, like a dream in stone ... I sit enthroned in the blue, like a misunderstood Sphinx' (Baudelaire 28). Heriot's self-perception is commensurable: 'He saw himself as a great red cliff, rising from the rocks of his own ruin' (3). The sense of allusion to Baudelaire's 'Beauty', and to a concomitant self-appreciation, is reinforced when Heriot asks the young nursing sister Helen Bond if she perceives him as 'a crumbling cliff' (14).

Heriot's condition resembles *ennui*, naturalised into English as 'a feeling of weariness and discontent resulting from satiety or lack of interest' (*Macquarie Dictionary*, 589) and also from 'lack of occupation' (*Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 343). *Ennui* is 'the stuff of life' of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. In the *Fleurs*' opening poem, 'To The Reader', '*ennui*' is asserted, and personified, as that which locks reader and writer together, in complicity:

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! (Baudelaire 6)

Ennui also connotes annoyance, and the dangers that go with it. In 'To The Reader', *ennui* would turn the earth into debris, and 'swallow up the world, in a yawn' (ibid.). In *To the Islands*, Heriot smashes a crucifix in front of Father Way, his successor-to-be, and announces: "I believe in nothing.. I can pull down the world" (74-5). Walter Benjamin characterises Baudelaire's speaker as 'the melancholy man', disconnected from tradition and from history (Benjamin 186). Stow's Heriot is made to feel disconnected from a sense of communal purpose.

Most of the men had gone with the tractor to get more stone for the new building; Dixon and Way were superintending the roofing of the finished part. Gunn was in his schoolhouse, Harris in his store. But for Heriot there was nothing to do but wander round his village and wait for the next schedule on the wireless. But tomorrow, he thought, he would go with the tractor, he would gather stones

himself, he was strong, his heart was good, there was nothing wrong with him but this tiredness of the mind, this throbbing resentment and desolation. (28)

Stow's text suggests, through the mouth of Heriot, that a like condition—"misery of the mind"—threatens the Indigenous community also (47). Stephen, a young Aboriginal man, is introduced in the final line of Chapter One, as he confirms Heriot's recognition of him, after an absence in gaol for 'stealing': "Yes, brother, I come back to my country" (16). Stephen is described in Chapter Two as a good singer, 'his voice clear and firm', 'an actor able to fill his singing with surprising nostalgia'; but Stephen sings 'mainly to himself, [a] hill-billy song of some white man's boyhood' (32). After Stephen's affirmation of 'country', this description configures his vocal performance as a deracinating gesture, almost self-erasure. A more immediate sense of deracination is conveyed as soon as the first of the novel's Indigenous characters are introduced, in Chapter One. Heriot, looking out from his shower, sees two older women, Mabel and Djimbulangari, walking through the grass.

They moved like he did, loosely and tiredly, two old women with their hair tied in kerchiefs, their dresses hanging straight on their thin bodies. Looking at Mabel he thought that he had never seen her in any clothes but these, the dirty coloured skirt sewn to a flourbag bodice on which the mill brand was still bright green and legible. (2)

In this time-telescoping long shot, Mabel's 'flourbag bodice' conveys the appropriation of 'country', and self, to whitefellas' purposes, in this case wheat farming and the manufacture and consumption of flour. Mabel's garment, the 'flourbag' with the 'mill brand [...] green and legible', reads as a *mise en abyme* of *To the Islands*' back story: the deracination of Indigenous people through the white settlers' primary-producing economy, a deracination that the novel presents in a reversed or opposed version when Heriot goes bush and is fed and looked after by the Indigenous man, Justin.

In Chapter Two, an incident involving another Indigenous woman, Djediben, the mission storekeeper Harris, and a St. Christopher medal, supplies a more spectacular *mise en abyme*, conveyed through a close shot, in which 'events happen in the time they would actually take' (Hassall, *Randolph Stow* 350). Haggling with the storekeeper for more tea, Djediben offers him what she perceives as money.

"Any," asked Djediben, "dea, *abula*?"

"You've got your tea," Harris said irritably. "Go away now. *Bui!*"

She whimpered at him. "No dea, more dea, *abula*." Holding out to him her already well-filled tea bag.

"You're a greedy one, Djediben."

"Ah, *abula*," she said, grinning hugely with her few tobacco-brown teeth, "money 'ere, *aru*'ere."

From the dirty kerchief round her neck she produced a St. Christopher medal, the gift of a Roman Catholic mission far away.

"That's not money."

She became angry then, and muttered savagely to herself of the avarice of white

men, her fingers meanwhile working at a knot in the corner of the kerchief. It gave at last, and two shillings fell on the concrete floor. (23)

In the context of a Christian mission, a St. Christopher medal, traditionally depicting the eponymous saint carrying an increasingly heavy Jesus across water, might be supposed to have a universal validity and value. As Diogenes Allen writes, glossing Simone Weil: 'Money is analogous to magic: money provides us with goods as an incantation executes a magician's wishes' (Allen 109). Thus the status of the St. Christopher medal is analogous to that of the obolus, traditionally offered to Charon: the latter's payment for ferrying a soul across the Styx. The obolus appears, along with Charon, in poem 15 of the *Fleurs du Mal*, 'Don Juan in Hell', where Don Juan's plunge into Hell is also a descent into financial negotiations and transactions (Baudelaire 26). Djediben's confusion over the medal evokes the contractual, legalistic character of Western European civilisation, with its divergent, compartmentalised valuations, physical and metaphysical, of a like thing. Djediben's shilling coins are 'money', but her coin-like religious medal is 'not money'. The passage stands as an epistemological threshold, where value is tied to systemic knowledge. As Slavoj Žižek explains:

..money is precisely an object whose status depends on how we 'think' about it: if people no longer treat this piece of metal as money, if they no longer 'believe' in it as money, it no longer *is* money. (Žižek xix)

The 'flourbag bodice' and 'St. Christopher medal' *mises en abyme* can be read against two poems that run consecutively in Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*. The first of these is 'Correspondences', which famously begins:

Nature is a temple whose columns are alive and sometimes issue disjointed messages. We thread our way through a forest of symbols that peer out, as if recognising us. (Baudelaire 14)

The poem that follows 'Correspondences' grieves over the 'iron swaddling' to which nature is subjected by 'the god of Utility' (Baudelaire 15). Stow's *mises en abyme*, constructed around 'flourbag bodice' and non-negotiable 'money' respectively, invoke 'the god of Utility' as a whitefellas' deity, or at least a late industrial era imperative; they point to 'Utility' as a mode of life that affects both Indigenous and white members of the mission community. In this context, Heriot could be read as past his use-by date.

The poem that then follows in *Fleurs du Mal*, poem 6, 'Beacon Lights', bears reading against Heriot's continual quoting from literature. In 'Beacon Lights', visual art, e.g. that of Rembrandt, Watteau, Goya, Delacroix, is identified as a 'fervent sob that rolls from age to age' and 'the best evidence of our dignity' (Baudelaire 16-17). The poem substitutes aural for visual experience:

..echo rehearsed in a thousand labyrinths ... cry repeated by a thousand sentinels, order sent through a thousand megaphones; beacon lit on a thousand citadels, holloa to hunters lost in the great wood! (Baudelaire 17)

The sentiments expressed in 'Beacon Lights' might be read as underpinning Heriot's quotations from works of literary art. In his 1975 article on Heriot's literary allusions (Beston 169-175), John B. Beston lists quotations from Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (*Islands* 13); *King Lear* (60, 89); Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (79 in the 1958 edition, dropped from Stow's 1982 revision); *Everyman* (70); a 14th century religious lyric (75); Pascal's *Pensées* (88) and Horace's *Epistles* (166). Additionally Heriot quotes from Shelley's 'Ozymandias' (13 in 1958, dropped 1982), Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'Spring' (15) and from the old English ballad, 'The Lyke Wake Dirge' (114, 124). As Beston shows, Heriot's most sustained bout of quoting occurs in his conversation with the hermit Rusty (*Islands* 129-130; Beston 169), during which Heriot quotes from another ballad, 'The Daemon Lover'; from Dante's *Inferno*; from Francois Villon; from the sixteenth century Spanish poet Garcilasso de la Vega; from the Latin *Epithalamium* of Alcuin; from Xenophon's *Anabasis*; and from the courtly love poet, Walther van der Vogelweide. "I was a clever man," Heriot says, continuing:

"I knew a good deal. But I lost it all, looking after my huts and houses. And now they've ruined me." (130)

Stow's text suggests that Heriot's 'clever[ness]' has lapsed into self-pity; read intertextually here, Baudelaire's figuration of art as a 'fervent sob that rolls from age to age' may hold a strong nuance of bathos.

Heriot, who sets store by the eloquence of his culture's poets and philosophers, tries to maintain his own 'dignity' with a string of quotations, to doubtful avail. Heriot's quotations, along with his anecdotes of having been 'deceived' with words in his childhood (129), allow the Taoist theme of the unsatisfactoriness of language to emerge. The *Tao Te Ching*, contra Heriot's valorisation of verbal art, instructs:

Truthful words are not beautiful; beautiful words are not truthful. Good words are not persuasive; persuasive words are not good. He who knows has no wide learning; he who has wide learning does not know. (2.81)

Heriot's 'literary allusions', and his loquacity, along with his frequent sententious or sentimental intonations, form a stark contrast to the easy-going laconism of the Indigenous man Justin, who looks after and feeds the increasingly helpless Heriot in the bush. As Justin says to Heriot in Chapter Eight: "White man always talking and never listening" (144). Justin's care and competence render even Baudelaire's poetic magnificence questionable.

Stow's statement, in his Preface to his 1982 revision of *To the Islands*, that this 'story of an old man is really about a certain stage in the life of a sort of young man who has always been with us' (xiii), in itself tells us little, but read against *To the Islands*' intertextuality with Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, one of its indications is a 'young man', who, in writing his third novel, sought to question, perhaps to test, certainly to re-read Baudelaire's poem cycle about the contradictions of modernity, against his own experience as a rations storeman, in Umbalgari country, at the Forrest River mission in the north of Western Australia, 'for some months' early in 1957 (Hassall, *Strange Country* xiv-xv). The young storeman, a twice-published novelist, was also a poet, and a very recent (1956) arts graduate, with majors in

English and French, and a reading knowledge of German, Middle High German, and Latin, including Latin poetry of the Middle Ages (Beston 175-6). In *To the Islands*, Heriot carries a similar language-based learning into the wilderness, toward islands that never appear, as if he bore the blame less for the Indigenous man Rex's injury (Heriot mistakenly thinks he has killed Rex by throwing a rock at him) than for learning itself; and for the ingenious uses made of language by poets and playful, reflexive novelists.

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