



FRAGMENTATION
AS A CONCEPTUAL MODE
IN THE NOVELS OF
RANDOLPH STOW AND DAVID MALOUF

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-SYNOPSIS-

The legacy of the colonial experience is a visionary schizophrenia, a duality of vision deriving from culturally different ways of constructing the world, which has often been perceived as disorienting or even fatal. However, this divided condition of the consciousness tends to be reconsidered in more positive terms nowadays. Randolph Stow and David Malouf belong to this trend of revision, as attested by their treatment of fragmentation, a conceptual mode which pervades their work as a strategy used to reconstruct the world in terms that are freed from the assumptions of universality (and hence of homogeneity) inherent in Europe's imperialistic discourse.

This ambivalence of perspective is given expression in a number of ways in their fiction. In The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea and Johnno it is apparent in the contrast between the two major protagonists. Indeed, in each book one of the characters is symbolically connected with Europe, while the other stands for a peripheral, de-centred outlook on the world. Their dealings with each other at the level of plot then assume an allegorical significance, since the irreducible tension between the two positions leads to the eventual separation of the protagonists, on which each novel closes. The dynamics here is one of fragmentation, of movement from a unified to a multiple mode of perception.

The contrast between unity and heterogeneity is examined in different terms in Child's Play, as well as in the novelistic 'dyptich' formed by Visitants and The Girl Green as Elderflower. One can discern a tension here between the urge to invent, in imagination, a world that would be absolved from fragmentation, that

would proceed directly from the subject's consciousness, and the discontinuity brought about by the documents one needs to support this reconstruction of the world, and which are interposed between the creation and the mind of the inventor, between subject and object. Again, this tension between two images of the world (seen as either unified or fragmented) proves typical of the colonial dilemma, and unity is presented here as essentially decreative, concomitant with death.

A study of the house symbolism in Stow and Malouf reveals the house as an enclave of transplanted culture encapsulated in a space of otherness, and utterly discontinuous with it. It emerges as a structure of confinement, supposed to keep at bay the intractable strangeness of the landscape. It thus stands out as a pouch of unity from which the Other has been expelled, and again unity is presented as decreative : the house is a womb of death, redeemed only by such mediating structures as the verandah or the open window, which allow for some renewed conversation with the Other 'out there'.

The pursuit of unity is considerably foregrounded in To the Islands and An Imaginary Life, two journey novels where the protagonist embarks on a quest for reconciliation with the Other. Both books can be read as reversals of the narrative of imperial conquest, since they involve a meeting with otherness in which the Other resists subjection and even converts his travel companion to his own modes of perception and behaviour. However, such an encounter with otherness remains hegemonizing : it privileges the One above the Other -- although this must be qualified in the case of To the Islands, where Heriot keeps vacillating all through

between the unsilenced demands of his own ego and the fascination of the Other, in a way which prefigures Tourmaline.

Tourmaline, which considers Taoism as a possible counter discourse to the voice of the imperium, never attempts to give predominance to any one set of cognitive codes. Fragmentation is now maintained : the world is reassessed in terms of a split, doubled discourse which largely informs the narrative given by the Law. The dialectical relationship which links the two perspectives makes the novel akin to Fly Away Peter and Harland's Half Acre, where the ^{imperium and the} antipodes are involved in a dynamic interaction with each other. In these novels too the two standpoints are examined inside a more flexible framework, within which singular codes are considered in terms of one another, as the actors of a self-interrogating conversation rather than the fossils of a self-perpetuating ideology.

The ultimate fragmentation, then, is the discontinuity that can be observed between one's reading of the world and one's de-centred (re)writing of it. Stow and Malouf use this fragmentation to break from a tradition which favours homogeneity, as a device to emancipate the post-colonial consciousness from the hegemony of a constricting, monolithic ideology.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University, and (to the best of my knowledge and belief) no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text or notes.

I am willing to make this thesis available for loan and photocopying if it is accepted for the award of the degree.

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INTRODUCTION

The experience of alienation is one that the European colonizers of Australia learned to deal with from the first. To the English migrants who found themselves stranded here two centuries ago, the natural environment must have seemed inconceivably strange. A report by one of the first visiting scientists to have observed the new continent with some accuracy, the botanist Sir James Edward Smith, reads as follows :

When a botanist first enters on the investigation of so remote a country as New Holland, he finds himself as it were in a new world. He can scarcely meet with any fixed points from whence to draw his analogies ; and even those that appear most promising, are frequently in danger of misleading, instead of informing him. The whole tribe of plants, which at first sight seem familiar to his acquaintance, as occupying links in Nature's chain, on which he is accustomed to depend, prove, on a nearer examination, total strangers, with other configurations, other oeconomy, and other qualities ; not only the species themselves are new, but most of the genera, and even natural orders.¹

The spontaneous European response to such a radically different scenery has been one of understandable bafflement. No landscape in the world could defeat more tantalizingly the newcomers' expectations of green, ordered beauty. Obviously their aesthetic baggage, derived from centuries of living in another hemisphere, was inadequate as an instrument to appreciate (to relate to) the

1 J. E. Smith, A Specimen in the Botany of New Holland, London, 1793, p.9 ; quoted by Bernard Smith in European Vision in the South Pacific 1768-1850, London : Oxford University Press, 1960, p.6.

subtleties of nature in the 'new' country. Therefore, Australia was assessed in terms of what it was not. It failed to conform to a norm that was essentially Eurocentric, and was judged odd and misshaped. Apart from those few who readily relished the enchantment of such a fantastic garden, most of the settlers decided to dislike a land they saw as sterile, hostile to mankind, and moreover utterly monotonous. This was the distaste of those who could not see. Typically, the artists (painters and natural-history draughtsmen) who accompanied the scientists of the first expeditions declared Australia unsuited for landscape painting -- yes, simply unpaintable! The technical problems involved in rendering the specific peculiarities of a subject matter so thoroughly at variance with anything painted before, must have been enormous of course. But the difficulty was mostly a visionary, an imaginary one. The painters of Australia were confronted with the difficult task of unlearning the very modes of perception they had been conditioned into absorbing by the Europe of their birth ; which they proved at first unable to achieve. They felt the need to cast the Australian landscape into a mould of their own, to build it into a composition that agreed with the pictorial conventions current in Europe at the time. Even Aborigines were represented in the antique postures traditionalized by the classical doctrine.

This aesthetic absolutism, of course, runs in parallel with the political one. Imperialistic Europe has always arrogated to itself the right to define the 'universal', so that its encounter with otherness through the colonial enterprise revealed itself as hegemonizing -- and hence obliterating. The Other, in the case

of Australia the Aborigine, was constructed by the White migrants, in terms of their own discourse, as irretrievably alien and therefore inferior. This allegedly irreducible difference served to justify the abominations of imperialism. The Other was subjected into conformity by various means, not least by the imposition upon It of a hierarchy of values which privileged the colonizer, namely in terms of power structures. The Aborigine, when not simply exterminated, was (and, to some considerable extent, is still) 'enslaved' by ontological and epistemological codes of recognition essentially uncongenial to those deriving from his own cultural tradition ; it is largely through the importation of this foreign, self-assertive ideology that White patterns of subjection were enforced and, very often, maintained.

For the European discourse in Australia proved ineradicable, to such a point that up to this day much of its (physical and human) landscapes have been distorted by Eurocentric ^{prejudice.} This was made apparent in the literary field by the emergence of what critics called a 'literature of exile', best epitomized probably by Henry Handel Richardson's masterpiece trilogy, The Fortunes of Richard Mahony (1917-29), whose protagonist came to symbolize the European's spiritual inability to accommodate himself to the reality of the New World. Even nowadays, contemporary writers such as Randolph Stow and David Malouf still devote important aspects of their work to a basic questioning of their environment's validity as a background ; some of their characters judge it simply unfit to cradle the European experience (alone considered as authentic), and

therefore feel justified in dismissing it altogether. Stow's Tourmaline provides extreme examples of this attitude. Naturally, the authors' position cannot be equated with that of (some of) their characters, but the consistency with which they tackle the issue seems per se indicative of a belief on their part in its centrality to the Australian experience. Alienation manifests itself in their work more as the foster-child of a derivative, inherited vision of the world, than as a consequence of the actual hardships of the land. What they attempt to expose, then, is the disheartening obstinacy with which Australians tend to assess themselves and their country against a complex background of imported ideas and conceptions which, no matter how irrelevant to the non-European environment, keep infiltrating their collective consciousness. In fact, their fictional work as a whole can be read as a reaction against the influence on the Australian mind of an ideology forcibly grafted upon it by the contingencies of History, yet too often considered as necessary or absolute.

Naturally, Stow and Malouf were not the first writers in Australia to rebel against the hegemony of the imperial discourse. Indeed, Judith Wright has distinguished in the Australian literary corpus a basic duality opposing two major strains of feeling towards the bush : what she called 'the reality of exile' and 'the reality of newness and freedom'¹.

1 J. Wright, 'Australia's Double Aspect', The Literary Criterion, Vol VI, No 3 (Winter 1964), p. 2.

Beside those writers who tend to project onto the landscape the desolateness of their own inner exile, Wright discerns a whole tradition of authors for whom Australia came to represent a promise of regeneration, of liberation from the stifling authority of European values and sensibility. She points out that even Marcus Clarke, who usually rejected the bush as malevolent and inscrutable (as the antithesis of the values embodied by White civilization), was aware at times of a possibility to read the text of nature in Australia in its own terms, freed as it were from the pervasiveness of European cognitive codes. She quotes from Clarke's Preface to Adam Lindsay Gordon's Sea Spray and Smoke Drift :

Some see no beauty in our trees without shade, our flowers without perfume, our birds who cannot fly, and our beasts who have not yet learned to walk on all fours. But the dweller in the wilderness . . . becomes familiar with the beauty of loneliness . . . learns the language of the barren and uncouth, and can read the hieroglyphs of haggard gum-trees, blown into odd shapes, distorted with fierce hot winds, or cramped with cold nights, when the Southern Cross freezes in a cloudless sky of icy blue . . .¹

In literature, this vein of optimism in which Clarke participates at times starts with the poetry of Charles Harpur, and perpetuates itself later on with the Bulletin writers, especially

1 J. Wright, 'Australia's Double Aspect', The Literary Criterion, Vol VI, No 3 (Winter 1964), p. 8 ; *quoting* Marcus Clarke, Preface to A. L. Gordon, Sea Spray and Smoke Drift, Melbourne, 1876.

Joseph Furphy. It can be further traced in the work of writers like Vance Palmer or Miles Franklin. What characterized their writing was a different attitude to the environment ; instead of rejecting the landscape in the name of one that negated the distinctiveness of life in Australia, they set out to establish the bush as a valid setting for the Australian experience. They assert the dignity of hard living in the outback, and implant the seeds of a bush ethos which celebrates the cult of mateship and egalitarianism.

However, although the intention behind this is largely nationalistic (one thinks of Furphy's flagrant anti-Englishness), the image of the landscape which emerges here strikes one as a manifestly imperialistic construct, as yet again a projection of the European consciousness. Andrew Taylor has shown¹ that nature has been associated by people like Lawson and Furphy with 'a figure of haggard female endurance suffering at the hands of the male' (p. 26), and has therefore been made into a female entity. Not the rich, generous Alma Mater of the English tradition but a harsh, hardly attractive spouse who has to be subjected into fertility by the conquering male's relentless endeavours. As Andrew Taylor points out, Nature then stands out conspicuously as 'the other of the male colonizer. The land, and Nature herself,

1 In his essay 'A Case of Romantic Disinheritance', in Reading Australian Poetry, St. Lucia : University of Queensland Press, 1987, 22-35. Page references are to this edition and given in the text.

are what men exercise power over : it is what they penetrate, tame, subdue, control, rape, open up, explore and, of course, possess' (p. 33). It is a paradox that these writers, who struggled openly to emancipate Australia from the cultural predominance of the far-away metropolis, reproduced in their fiction the very categories they strove to set aside. Almost in spite of itself, then, the nationalist enterprise emerges as an unconscious reinvocation of European models of thought, since it too tends to assume centralized authority on all values cultural or political. In this sense, it falls short of its purpose to undermine the imperialist concept of a metropolitan centre from which all standards would derive : the nationalist stance relocates the centre, but ultimately fails to dislocate it.

In this respect, the achievement of Stow and Malouf proves more of an imaginative departure from the prevailing ideology. Their originality resides in a new capacity to question the major assumptions of universality (and, inevitably, the concomitant dedication to homogeneity) which underscore the Eurocentric discourse. This presupposes a visionary ability to take stock of the world from beyond the confines of the European consciousness -- or to look at oneself from the outside, as it were. This, in turn, implies a necessity to delineate very precisely, at a preliminary stage, the limits of the metropolitan field of cognition. In other words, the so-called universality of the European values is exposed as a fallacy, their grounding in discrete, temporal, contingent cultural circumstances is laid bare. Such a delimitation reveals so far unseen boundaries : the world now no longer appears as whole or homogeneous, as it

did when constructed in the light of an imperialist, hegemonizing ideology, but as surprisingly multiple and fragmented, a mosaic of perspectives. It is therefore significant that this subversion (or de-centering) of the metropolitan discourse should be achieved in the work of Stow and Malouf through the mediation of fragmentation itself. They both propose a reading of the world which strikes one as utterly fragmented ; consistently, reality is seen to disintegrate under the observant gaze of their characters, whose desire for unity thus keeps being frustrated. So that in turn, the reader experiences fragmentation too : he is confronted through their work with an ambivalent image of the world, which is perceived and rendered as alternately unified or fragmented in the framework of a systematic exploration of the value and relevance of varying modes of apprehension. Fragmentation, then, leads to further fragmentation : it is the structural, in-forming device by which a construction of the world which favours unity is gradually undermined, and ultimately shattered.

Fragmentation, of course, is a conceptual mode which pervades the Australian literary corpus. It is latent in the Australian writer's generally ambivalent perception of his country, in the divided consciousness which typifies Richardson's Mahony. In a sense, then, Stow and Malouf inscribe themselves in a long-lasting tradition when reactivating fragmentation as the primordial, in-forming principle of their world. However, they revolutionize this tradition in that they no longer perceive fragmentation as disorienting or even fatal. Patrick White

partakes in the same movement of imaginative revision with his novel The Twyborn Affair, where fragmentation of personality is presented as a positive process which offers a (so far unsuspected) potential for creativity¹. White himself seems to have oscillated in the past between two images of his home country, as either a place for exile or the authentic scene of the Australian experience. Indeed, he felt the need to expatriate himself, and suggested on his return from Europe in the Fifties that to pursue a literary career in a society so crude and materialistic as Australia was a feat of half-masochistic, half-abnegatory heroism :

In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes, in which human teeth fall like autumn leaves, the buttocks of cars grow hourly glassier, food means cake and steak, muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves.²

This is the view which used to prevail : that Australia had nothing significant or interesting to offer the aesthete ,

1 See Helen Tiffin, 'New Concepts of Person and Place in The Twyborn Affair and A Bend in the River', in Peggy Nightingale (ed), A Sense of Place in the New Literatures in English, St Lucia : University of Queensland Press, 22-31.

2 Patrick White, 'The Prodigal Son', Australian Letters 1, No 3 (1958), p. 38-39.

apart from derivative, time-lagged and often misunderstood versions of British artistic creations. The mask of Australia was being scrutinized from the vantage-point of the European consciousness, and dismissed as inauthentic when at variance with what was regarded as the only site of authorized culture or vested history. Such an attitude, prevalent as it may be today still, now tends to be reconsidered by someone like Patrick White ; this concurs with the general strain discernible in the fiction of Randolph Stow and David Malouf, who equally propose a completely new valuing of the Australian (or colonial) condition. Fragmentation of reality is presented in their work as pregnant with unthought-of possibilities. The colonial person's standard position, poised ever so perfectly between two distant hemispheres, is reassessed as a positive, enriching asset, an acceptance of which might hold a potential for liberation from imperial constricting codes. A close reading of the novels written by these two authors will make this clear.

CHAPTER 1

VISION FRAGMENTED



1. Duality of vision

Randolph Stow and David Malouf each wrote a semi-autobiographical novel where they recount the experience of growing up in a society which, however real and appealing to the senses, keeps looking to Europe as the only locus of true history. Aspects of both The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea (1965) and Johnno (1975) give an account of the inner tensions that inevitably start nagging at those brought up in a spirit of allegiance to separate, conflicting homes. In each of these books reality is rent apart, duplicated as an effect of a twofold way of looking at it. The major protagonists' ambivalent perception of Australia is given expression through the use of the Doppelgänger motif ; in each book the main character is split in two separate entities : two discrete personalities which embody extreme, opposed responses to the text of the Australian landscape. Therefore the plot of the novels, which traces step by step the various haps and mishaps of the protagonist s' difficult relationships ^{with} one another, emerges as a kind of allegorical externalization of an inner conflict : the dramatization in novelistic form of the lonely monologue of the colonial condition.

Part of Stow's achievement in The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea is certainly the vividness of his evocation of West Australian landscapes. The narrator goes some length into describing the little town of Geraldton and its country hinterland ; the overall picture emerging is one of relative complexity : Rob Coram lives

and grows in an environment that is fully-fledged and coloured, and represents a constant demand on the senses and an inexhaustible reservoir of experiences of all kinds. In his boyhood explorations of the country Rob learns to appreciate its sheer beauty : 'Ah, his country was pretty : spare, bare, clean-smelling country'¹. The country is pretty, and there is no escaping the claims it lays on its inhabitants ; Rob develops a sense of belonging there, which finds expression in his interest in the history of the place. Every phase in Western Australia's history is evoked in the book : the days of Aboriginal occupation, commemorated by the site of the Hands Cave (p. 55-56) ; the first sightings by the Portuguese of what they called the Costa Branca (the White Coast), and the marooning there of two Dutch mutineers who rebelled on the Batavia, off the coast of the Abrolhos (p. 113-14) ; the days of the lead-mining convicts, evidenced by the remnants of the Shot Tower of Geraldine (p. 236-39) ; and then of course the heyday of sheep stations in the country, and Geraldton's development from a country town by the sea into a provincial seaport (p. 215). Rob develops a taste for ruined homesteads, and recognizes that 'the mines too were history, not dead history yet' (p. 234). Another mouthpiece of the past is the fascinating junk harboured in Mrs Charles Maplestead's house and in Aunt Kay's drawers and trunks, which

1 R. Stow, The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea, Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1986,^{p. 69.} All subsequent references are to this edition and given in the text.

Rob ransacks in his thirst for knowledge of his country's youth. 'The body of Australia and the past of Australia had him enthralled, and he besieged Mrs Maplestead for her memories of the district he lived in' (p. 208). The conclusion he reaches, in his frequent investigations of the past, is its continuing relevance for the present : not dead history yet.

It changed, and yet it didn't change, the boy was thinking, looking along the endless grey-green and white shore. Java the Great became New Holland, and then Western Australia. Costa Branca became Edels Lands, then the Northward, and at last Victoria District. Wittacarra became Champion Bay, and finally Geraldton. But the coast of Costa Branca was the same White Coast; and the Tower of Geraldine, like an edifice from the history of another tribe, thrust up still from the unvisited scrub. (p. 238-39)

Thus, by studying the past Rob manages to determine the place that is his own by birthright in the tradition of living in Australia. This is made easier for him by the close intertwinement of the familial and national histories : the Cyclopedia of Western Australia devotes an entry to his grandfather Charles Maplestead (p. 267), and his great-great-grandfather died in the desert while prospecting for gold, his bones 'still out there, with Leichardt's, bleaching in hot tragic Australia' (p. 93). Rob feels exalted at the thought of having pioneer's blood running through his veins, for he sees there the expression of his acquaintanceship with Australia and its past, as well perhaps as a suggestion that the tradition will be perpetuated : '. . . the blood of his country would go on and on, the blood of his country would never end ' (p. 274).

Thus, Rob Coram stands out for the harmony of his relationship with the country of his birth. As he sets about 'learning the country' (p. 231) in the years of his youth, he develops a deep sense of belonging there, together with an acute sensitivity to any kind of artistic representation of Australia. He proves remarkably responsive, for instance, to the pathos of old bush ballads, particularly as they are sung by the young Harry, who can play the squeezebox and yodel like a real hillbilly singer (p. 68). Similarly, he finds the story of Old Shep so much more moving than that of Beth Gelert, 'because Old Shep was not a far-off poetic dog like Beth Gelert, but an ordinary farm dog like Peddy in the yard outside' (p. 68). He also judges Adam Lindsay Gordon, 'the poet of Australia' (p. 92), far superior to Byron : 'Of course Adam Lindsay Gordon could beat Byron. Byron had a gammy leg' (p.94). And among all his picture-books the one he prefers is 'called Art in Australia. There he saw the fabric of his country and its plants and its people curiously transfigured, hardened or softened or elongated, made craggy or delicate and rich' (p. 239).

All this amply illustrates the privileged relationship Rob entertains with his native Western Australia. In a sense he incarnates the spirit of his country, he is continuous with its past and at home in its present. Obversely, his cousin Rick Maplestead is severed from his roots by the war, and never really overcomes the estrangement from the home country this entails in him. Significantly, this association with the war that is raging in 'far-away, hardly believable Europe' (p. 133) links him with the Old World -- though of course, to be accurate, Rick fights

the Japanese and not the Germans. The structure of the novel also emphasizes Rick's dissociation from the home land. The first part of the book is called 'Rick Away', and the title of the second part ('Rick Home') is tinged with irony since this half of the novel precisely undertakes to demonstrate Rick's inability to resume his old self as a farm hand in Australia, and his constant longing for overseas. Also, Rick's own insistence on his old age (p. 234, 255, 273), as opposed to Rob who 'for the first time in his life knew that he was young' (p. 261), contributes to strengthen his connection with ancient Europe. Typically, Rick finds Australia 'bloody boring' (p. 257) and empty : 'An Anglo-Celtic vacuum in the South Seas' (p. 142). Contrary to Rob who saw in Perth the 'huge and ancient metropolis' of a revered culture, 'as old as London' (p. 135), Rick holds Australia's past in derision by upholding against it the spectre of Europe's more 'significant' history. Referring to the rabbit-proof fence he jeers : 'And there's a bit of history for you . . . Just about as historic as the Maginot Line, but funnier' (p. 237). Or : 'What miserable bloody beginnings this country had . . . when you think of it. First, half-starved abos, then marooned mutineers, then lead-mining convicts. And at last, respectable folks like us Maplesteads, kid' (p. 238). Rick's deflating conception of Australian history runs in parallel, of course, with his association with war in the novel : to wage a war is a way of writing history, an alternative version of it that plunges its roots deep at the core of an alien, (in this case) European sensibility. In terms of the Australian experience, war has

long been pervasive and persuasive as an instrument to construct the nationalist ideology and its supporting popular myths. Paradoxically, then, the narrative of Australian history as elaborated by the nationalist consciousness was defined through comparison and confrontation with a distant, un-Australian body of myths and experiences. While Rick embodies this attitude in the novel, Rob stands for a completely different perspective, since he envisages the past of his country exclusively in terms of itself.

Thus it appears that the two cousins hold antithetical views of Australia. The picture, however, is not as Manichean as this may suggest ; Rick once confesses, albeit reluctantly, that he finds the country pretty (p. 204), and Rob himself indulges at times in romantic thinking about his ancestors' snowy, 'more beautiful, more soul-filled countries, that had earned the right to be written about in books' (p. 205). But on the whole it is obvious that they represent two sides of the same coin, two facets of the same cultural personality. Their physical resemblance seems to sustain this reading : Rob is referred to as 'a carbon copy of Rick' (p. 260). In a sense, then, Rob and Rick can be seen as Doppelgänger^{''} : they stand for two different, complementary ways of looking at the world, for two conventions of vision that are both current in Australia. It is significant in this respect that the point of view of the novel constantly alternates between the two protagonists, thus allowing each 'view' to speak for itself. Also, the painful separation of the cousins as Rick leaves for England at the end of the novel seems to point to the irreconcilable character of the two perspectives.

Or at least, it suggests that the time for reconciliation is not yet ripe...

The very same duality of vision is apparent in David Malouf's Johnno, where it is similarly reflected in the opposition between the two major protagonists, Dante (the narrator) and Johnno. Indeed the narrative, dotted as it is with Johnno's vituperative comments about Brisbane, does much to present Queensland's capital city as a provincial tropical backwater forgotten by history and trivially irrelevant as a background to ordinary lustful young men's legitimate aspirations to intensity. But this view is ultimately redeemed by Dante's late realization of Brisbane's actual beauty, and of its real significance as a home country. Dante, of course, proves much more permeable to Eurocentric ways of apprehending the world (under the influence, no doubt, of his compelling friend) than Rob does in The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea. Johnno, ^{however,} / displays more precise affinities with Rick in his indictment of Australian emptiness : typically, he denigrates life in Brisbane as 'shadow boxing in the suburbs of limbo'¹. In fact, Brisbane's history is presented (by Dante as a narrator) as an uneventful succession of trivialities, such as the unglorious episode of the 1893 flood, 'when old Victoria Bridge, a substantial iron affair,

1 D. Malouf, Johnno, Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1986, p. 107. All subsequent references are to this edition and given in the text.

had broken up under the pressure of the debris and been swept down-stream, and the Queensland Navy's only gunboat was left high and dry in the Botanical Gardens' (p. 99). Significantly, the one moment of greatness Brisbane is seen to be granted in the whole of its 'un-history', occurs when the city is rocked in the peripheral waves of Europe's war -- thus unexpectedly catching up with true History : 'Brisbane was suddenly at the centre of things. Though we hardly knew it at the time, our city was having its . . . encounter with History' (p. 27). However, in spite of this one moment of brilliance Brisbane is perceived (and resented) by the narrator as a place that consistently thwarts the protagonists' aspirations to involvement and intensity. For instance, the city denies them the loftiness of religious devotion : when Johnno kneels down, in holy self-abasement, at the feet of a Greek Orthodox priest he is swarmed all over by the ants that were crawling on the ground. Similarly, Brisbane seems to leave very little room for the high, romantic pangs of unrequited love ; as Dante observes Johnno in the desperate act of wooing the girl Binkie, 'a fog . . . suddenly thickened and rose off the river in a dense white cloud' (p. 95), thus imparting^{to} the scene a milky, dreamy quality that drains from^{it} whatever substantiality it had managed to gather. Again, as Johnno seeks to thrill himself by diving into the Brisbane River in flood, 'a fine silver mist hangs in the air' (p. 101), and just before he plunges he is seen, as in a shadow play, 'silhouetted for a moment against the play of lights on the water' (p. 102) -- as if indeed he were 'shadow boxing in the

suburbs of limbo' (p. 107).

Not surprisingly, then, like Rick in The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea, Johnno feels attracted to Europe. Already in his youth, his being categorized as a 'war child' (p. 22) because the war bereft him of the restraining hand of a father, symbolically established his connection with Europe quite clearly. The loss of the father emphasizes this connection too : in terms of the psychology of colonialism Europe can be seen as the home of a parent culture, and the history of the new societies as a slow process of emancipation from its influence and authority. However, significantly, the instrument of the loss is war itself, yet again an excrescence of European history, which points to the ambivalent, unresolved nature of this liberation. It is therefore no surprise that Johnno, appalled at the prospect of being shaped by a geographical non-entity such as Brisbane, should make a resolution to 'squeeze the whole continent out of [his] arsehole', 'to shit out every last trace of it' (p. 98) -- thus patently disavowing any filiation with the country of his birth. He flees to seek his better fortune in the Congo (a covert allusion to Heart of Darkness?), and then eventually in Europe : Athens and Paris. Although (unlike Rick) he does not actually fight a war, the kind of society Johnno goes to in Paris is a war-like one, a 'moonlit newsreels' world made up of 'iron-spiked wall[s]' and 'uniformed figures' (p. 120) with 'tommy-guns at the ready' (p. 119). Dante, on his part, reveals himself so thoroughly under Johnno's rebellious influence as to declare Brisbane 'a huge shanty-town . . . set down in the middle of nowhere' (p. 83) and to fly to Europe where his friend is

expecting him.

Yet for all that, Dante has had his moment of (qualified) revelation by this time, while wandering at dawn through the streets of the city :

I liked the city in the early morning . . . After Johnno's sullen raging I felt light and free. It was so fresh, so sparkling, the early morning air before the traffic started up; and the sun when it appeared was immediately warm enough to make you sweat. Between the tall city office blocks Queen Street was empty, its tramlines aglow. Despite Johnno's assertion that Brisbane was absolutely the ugliest place in the world, I had the feeling as I walked across deserted intersections, past empty parks with their tropical trees all spiked and sharp-edged in the early sunlight, that it might even be beautiful. But that, no doubt, was light-headedness from lack of sleep or a trick of the dawn. (p. 82-83)

This passage clearly illustrates Dante's insecure position towards Brisbane ; he is awkwardly poised between his spontaneous love for it, between the objective and unbiased image which he construes through his sensory, empirical observations, and his received opinion that he should dismiss it as second-hand and unauthentic. David Malouf has commented on this in an interview :

Part of the game in Johnno was Dante's own refusal, in the narration, to recognize the difference between the place as he felt it (and could present it through feeling) and the way he saw it in the context of what he thought he knew, that is what ought, as he saw it, to make a place 'interesting'.¹

1 T. Shapcott, 'David Malouf' [Interview], Quadrant, Vol 22, No 10 (October 1978), p. 23.

In Johnno, then, the basic duality of vision noted in The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea manifests itself in two ways : both in the antagonism between Dante and Johnno, and in the inner struggles of the former. Since Dante is the narrator, and both Johnno and Brisbane are perceived through his eyes, his own ambivalent vision of the world informs the whole book. Yet, he eventually resolves his private conflict. Once in Europe he realizes that even Paris can be 'low, grey, smog-ridden' (p.111); and as he notices that back at home he is referred to as an expatriate, he becomes aware of the meaninglessness of such a denomination and of the abiding attachment he has been nourishing for his home country : 'He had never left Australia in more than fact' (p. 128). Dante then goes back to Brisbane in order to stay there : freed, as Johnno never is, of the Eurocentric categories that used to dominate his colonial mind. By all means a major achievement.

2. Plurality of vision

a. The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea : the broken metaphor

At the beginning of The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea Rob's vision of the world is whole, rounded, circular. He lives the safe protected life of a child surrounded by innumerable uncles, aunts and cousins, in deep sensory harmony with the closed, self-contained little community settled at Sandalwood, and he wishes this to go on forever. This desire to see the extant order perpetuated indefinitely is symbolically represented by the merry-go-round of the title : Rob is intensely yearning for a ride on what he thinks is a roundabout planted in the sea, and in his secret fantasies he includes Rick and Aunt Kay (two essential pillars indispensable to the survival of his world) in the timeless spiral induced by the contraption :

He would swim miles and miles, until at last the merry-go-round would tower above him, black, glistening, perfect, rooted in the sea. The merry-go-round would turn by itself, just a little above the green water. The world would revolve about him, and nothing would ever change. He would bring Rick to the merry-go-round, and Aunt Kay, and they would stay there always, spinning and diving and dangling their feet in the water, and it would be today forever. (p. 15)

However, the merry-go-round is only an optical illusion : 'It just happens to look like a merry-go-round' (p. 14). It is in fact the wreck of a sunken barge whose mast protrudes from the surface of the sea. Its inaccessibility is further enhanced by the fact that the particular area of the harbour which shelters the wreck has been requisitioned by the army and enclosed with

barbed-wire fences. The novel, in fact, endeavours to illustrate just that : Rob's apprehension of the world as whole and unified is illusory, and his anxious attempts to preserve the illusion are defeated in the end.

Indeed, the integrity of Rob's world is threatened from the outset by divisive forces that are both internal and external. A first disruption of unity is incurred from within by Time's inexorable march forward, and Rob's consequent growth towards adulthood and greater maturity of vision ; another, external disruptive element is of course the war, which takes Rick away from Rob and transforms the known world beyond recognition. It may not be fortuitous, then, that the army should be responsible for the ultimate inaccessibility of Rob's symbol of unity :

as the war, infiltrates the world, ^{the}
latter can no more be
constructed as independent and self-contained.

It is at the age of six that Rob first sees himself immersed in the flux of Time :

He was thinking of time and change, of how, one morning when he must have been quite small, he had discovered time, lying in the grass with his eyes closed against the sun. He was counting to himself. He counted up to sixty, and thought : That is a minute. Then he thought : It will never be that minute again. It will never be today again. Never. (p. 4)

Quite appropriately Stow comments : 'He would not, in all his life, make another discovery so shattering' (p. 4, my emphasis). Obviously, the inscription of a linear pattern inside the circle of Rob's days carries within itself the germs of a

disruption of the major kind. The full implications of the discovery the boy still has to draw : they probably lie, for the time being, beyond the range of his conceptual ken. Yet already he hates the mere notion of change, against which he feels powerless : 'He felt secure with [his mother], he felt that she could thwart any danger, except the one danger he really feared, which was made up of time and change and fragmentary talk of war' (p. 12). Typically, too, every rift he discovers in the fabric of his world, or every modification imposed on his perception of it, provokes in him a surge of renewed yearning for the familiar, reassuring circling of the merry-go-round :

Uncle Paul had taken him in a dinghy right to the end of the breakwater, and he had looked back and seen the town transformed, another town completely, rising out of deep green sea, below high sandhills which became flat-topped rock hills to the north. . . . Because the whole world had been changed he had thought that then, at last, he might go to the merry-go-round. But on that day too there had been something to prevent it, and so they had come back again to the everyday shore. (p. 13)

Also, Rob's fresh awareness of time keeps disturbing him occasionally. Once, while playing in his grandmother's orchard, he falls from a tree and is struck by a bout of amnesia that obliterates not only his memories of the actual event, but the twenty minutes that preceded it as well : the linear pattern he now dimly perceives informs his life is not even continuous, but displays odd interruptions that cannot be accounted for. Reflecting on this phenomenon, Rob has to acknowledge that he has not yet fully assessed the whole significance of the new

discovery : 'Time confused him and possessed his mind, like a riddle which might have the answer to every riddle' (p. 57).

Time, there is no escaping it, wields authoritative power over the boy's destiny. As he learns the facts of life on his journey towards maturity, he is progressively made aware of unsuspected depths and complexities that underlie the smooth surface of the world. The past of his country, for example, proves less monolithic than he had thought. As he visits the Aboriginal site of the Hands Cave he discovers the existence of 'camps of the dipossessed' (p. 56), of those alternatives blotted out by history but nevertheless surviving in the timeless memory of the primeval stones : 'Time and change had removed this child from his country, and his world was not one world' (p. 56). He will perceive later on that the advent of White rule in Australia was but a contingency of history that eclipsed other ways of relating to the land, other ways of apprehending the world for which he may have to make allowance : 'It was funny about blackniggers. They were Australian. They were more Australian than Rob was, and he was fifth generation. And yet somehow they were not Australian. His world was not one world' (p. 79). As he sets about 'learning the country' (p. 53), then, Rob is initiated into a perception of history as fragmented rather than monolithic, essentially at variance with the homogeneous, hegemonizing version of it drafted by the mainstream of Australia's White colonizers. History, when constructed from the perspective of a post-colonial society, turns out to be irreducibly manifold. Again, such a conception differs fundamentally from the one upheld by Rick Maplestead whose war-

waging activities symbolically connect with expansive, imperialistic Europe. It is significant in this respect that Rick should prove thus indispensable to the stability of Rob's world : as soon as the separation between the cousins is consummated (and Rob is free at last of all Eurocentric bias), the world disintegrates :

As a grown man Rob would discover that the pink [flowers] were trigger-plants, but he would never know the names of more than a fraction of the flowers of his country, which would continue to be called by different names by different individuals within different families. (p. 260)

Time, then, works wonders of change on the way Rob takes stock of the world. Repeatedly in the course of the novel he is asked, when confronted with other perspectives and outlooks, to revise his own vision and allow the new facts to '[slide] into place in his scheme of things' (p. 130). Till at last, casting a retrospective glance as an adult on the world of his youth, he can measure the whole distance he has covered and wonder 'how a country town on the sea had become a provincial seaport, how a world so congruent, so close-knit by history and blood and old acquaintance, had become fragmented into mere municipality. But he knew the answer by that time' (p. 215). The answer consists in devising an alternative narrative of the past, which allows at last for the authenticity of the marginalized, and thus refutes the pretensions of centrality (or circularity) evinced by the 'historians' of imperialism.

Another destabilizing element that affects Rob's initial vision of reality is the war fought in Europe and the Pacific, which keeps impinging on the shores of his little world. First, the war claims Rick away from Rob, thus provoking a major jolt in the smooth wheeling movement of the merry-go-round (p. 34). But it also touches the way of life of the Maplestead clan in other ways : the backyard tennis court has to be dug up for an air raid trench, and later on the family decides to pack up in preparation for an evacuation to the country that never eventuates. The war alters the very shape of the world, too : an increasingly larger portion of the beach is devoured by barbed-wire fences -- which, quite appropriately, causes the merry-go-round to recede still further back in the realms of the sea.

His world had changed. His father was in the Garrison all the time now and hardly came home. Everywhere there were soldiers, fifty thousand soldiers, somebody said, and soldiers called Yanks with flying-boats called Catalinas took up more and more of the beach, putting up more and more fences, pushing farther and farther back the merry-go-round in the sea. (p. 46)

More importantly still, the war transforms people beyond comprehension. Rick describes it as a country in its own right, 'an extra nation . . . not on the map' (p. 165) that marks its citizens with an indelible seal. Significantly Janet Cooper fails to recognize her own dead husband from descriptions given by his mates of captivity : 'He was racking his memory for every detail he could think of concerning Peter, and what he remembered seemed to have no bearing on her husband. He remembered some other Peter, some other Rick. They were people she had never known or

seen' (p. 109). The war, then, seems to explode the people it touches in a series of spectres hardly related to one another. Rob is duly warned by his mother that Rick's appearance might have been affected by the hardships endured in the prisoners' camp : "No!" the boy cried, between temper and tears. "He mustn't be different." He could not permit any change in Rick' (p. 144). Fortunately, though, Rick comes home looking 'just the same' (p. 147), and readily inscribes himself in the comforting circularity of Rob's world by quoting Donne in the boy's autograph book :

'Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end, where I begun' (p. 150).

Rick, however, has been changed more subtly than it first appears, and his quotation from a poem called 'A Valediction' could well be taken as an ironic, disguised farewell bidden to Rob, the family clan, and Australia itself. He presently repudiates the old ties to country and family in acknowledgement of the growth he has undergone : "Look, kid," Rick said, "I've outgrown you. I don't want a family, I don't want a country. Families and countries are biological accidents. I've grown up, and I'm on my own" (p. 273). This, together with Rick's resulting departure for England, constitutes the last, definitive blow struck at Rob's world, and shatters it beyond repair : 'The world the boy had believed in did not, after all, exist. The world and the clan and Australia had been a myth of his mind, and he had been, all the time, an individual' (p. 275).

Thus the overall movement of the novel, initiated by the action of time and accelerated by the impact of the war, is one of growth from integration to disintegration, from unity to multiplicity, from oneness to fragmentation. This is reflected on the metaphorical level by the parallel evolution undergone by the merry-go-round as a symbol. Significantly the roundabout on which Rob is playing at the beginning of the novel, and from the vantage-point of which he sees the world revolve about him, is but an earthly reflection of that other, perfect, glistening merry-go-round rooted in the sea. The symbol of unity appears from the start as twofold, fractured, subdivided. It undergoes even further fragmentation as the novel goes on. The circular trajectory of Rob's life, emphasized by a series of repetitions that reproduce as it were the very cyclical pattern which they are referring to (see especially, on p. 34, the repetition of the same sentence at the start of two different paragraphs : 'The boy's life had no progression, his days led nowhere'), is seen to extend from the merry-go-round to the many windmills that dot the landscape with the white spots of their sails : 'The horizon was spiked with windmills, turning and turning, their broad tails shifting, meeting the easterly' (p. 34). Similarly the sea itself, characterized by its endless cycle of ebbing and flowing, by the regular rhythm of the waves beating on the shore, symbolically comes to echo the movement of the merry-go-round with which it is associated in the title.

His days revolved, they moved towards no culmination. His mother turned out the light and he lay in the dark. At night the windmill clanked in the sky and the sea roared to the

southward. The sea moaned through his childhood, a morning sighing, thumping in winter rains. In the country, trees took the place of the sea, trees sighed him asleep. But the sea-sound to which he was born was the first sound, the beginning and ending of all his circling days. (p. 37)

Thus the central metaphor of the novel duplicates itself again and again, disintegrates into an image which is no longer whole but composite, multiple, *divisive* -- paradoxically so since it purports to symbolize unity.

The merry-go-round duplicates itself even further as Rob's father builds yet another makeshift roundabout in the boy's own backyard. The connection with the windmill is stressed anew : 'His dad was clever. Not many people would have thought of turning an old windmill-head into a merry-go-round. That was what the merry-go-round was : the old head of a windmill in the tennis court' (p. 99). The irony gets more pungent still when Rob comes back by chance, as a twelve-year-old, onto his boyhood playground and finds that his image of timelessness has succumbed to decay : 'The broken seat had vanished long ago, and the bent stays dropped down against the iron centre post. It looked curiously forlorn' (p. 220). He soon makes a plan to restore it to its original condition, thereby reaffirming his dedication to changelessness, and contemplates affix^{ing}/a 'thoughtful motto' (p. 220) to it : the lines from Donne that Rick once quoted to him. 'And since a merry-go-round was something that people ought to think about, like a sundial, he would put a thoughtful motto on it, like a sundial' (p. 220). The comparison with the sundial is ironically appropriate. A sundial, after all, reflects the endless, cyclical course of the sun along the curve of the sky ;

while at the same time of course it records the passing of time. So that the merry-go-round comes to represent at once changelessness and decay, at once unity and multiplicity. It grows into a powerful symbol that contains the two extremes of Rob's vision on his journey from childhood to maturity. It is paradoxical indeed that Rob's image of unity should become multiple, his image of timelessness mutable. But the process by which this is made apparent only reflects Rob's own increasing awareness of the world's complexities. Moreover, the reader is alone enabled to straddle the polarities embodied by the merry-go-round -- and enjoy the dramatic irony that results. Whereas Rob has to make his way, slowly and painfully, from one end of the compass to the other, till he too manages to contemplate the merry-go-round in its condition of essential dividedness :

He thought of a windmill that had become a merry-go-round in a back yard, a merry-go-round that had been a substitute for another, now ruined merry-go-round, which had been itself a crude promise of another merry-go-round most perilously rooted in the sea. (p. 275-76)

Rob's perception of the world as whole and unified thus slowly makes way for an alternative image of it that strikes one as fragmented and multiple. This gradual process of disintegration is rendered in two different ways in the novel. First, as he studies the history of his country, Rob realizes that the past can be construed in different ways according to the standpoint from which it is observed ; Australia is not

impervious to Eurocentric, imperialist ideology, as attested by the shaping influence exerted on his world by the war fought in 'impossibly far away' (p. 163) Europe, which makes the merry-go-round more and more inaccessible. This irreducible strain in the Australian consciousness is represented allegorically by Rick Maplestead, whose eventual departure at the end of the book can be interpreted as a tentative liberation on Rob's part from Eurocentric patterns of thought and perception. Secondly, this emancipation is achieved through an elaborate construction of the world as essentially manifold, as a means of decolonizing reality from the authority of an ideology which presents itself as one, absolute. This is conveyed in the book by the development of the central metaphor, which represents unity yet carries within itself the germs of an infinitely divisive process. The merry-go-round of the title is fragmented in a series of sub-images which each reflect, as so many facets of the same reality, on the utter illusoriness of all monolithic orders. The tactic Stow utilized here is strongly reminiscent of the concept of 'infinite rehearsal' which Wilson Harris, the Guyanese novelist and critic, put forward as a strategy destined to liberate reality from all 'final' readings of it. 'There is no final play, all is rehearsal,' he says¹ : this strategy, as we shall see, is of prime importance in Johnno as well, where the protagonist transcends, by his sheer multi-facetedness, the realistic picture which the narrator strives in vain to elaborate.

1 W. Harris, 'Comedy and Modern Allegory' [unpublished paper delivered in Turin in 1985].

b. Johnno : a living metaphor

In Johnno David Malouf also presents an image of reality that strikes one as elusive and fragmented. Johnno has the knack of stepping in and out of character and thereby defeating the most reasonable expectations about his future behaviour. Therefore, Dante constantly has to revise, adjust or qualify his opinion -- his vision -- of his mysterious friend. Yet, the very writing of the book is an attempt on the part of the narrator to establish the truth about Johnno, this phantom of his past whose mystery he has never thoroughly elucidated. Dante's actual motivations for embarking on this quest are psychologically complex, and may have to do with the subdued guilt he feels for having failed in the past to respond to Johnno's cryptic demands for help (issued in the form of jaunty postcards emanating from all over the globe), and indeed to understand him at all. The narrative thus originates from a realistic impulse : his ambition is to set the record right, and pin down at last the ultimate reality of an enigmatic figure to whom he never did justice. Significantly the cue which launches him on this task is the discovery, amidst his family archives, of a photograph that deliberately tries to bend the facts, to disguise the truth : Johnno, who always had a perfect eyesight, appears wearing spectacles, alongside the members of a team of lifesavers to which he never belonged. Dante is too intensely dedicated to the shape of reality to allow this to pass : 'The book I always meant to write about Johnno will get written after all. Johnno made

sure of that, on an afternoon years back when we barely knew one another, while he was just a cocky schoolboy setting out to sabotage, for pure devilment, a picture he should never have been in' (p. 11-12).

Interestingly the portrait of the late Johnno that results appears as a kind of long flashback embedded in the framework of the present, encapsulated between the prologue and the epilogue : the past is being examined from the perspective of the present. So that Dante stands at a double remove from the reality he endeavours to describe : first his sense of irony (which prevents him from ever committing himself too deeply, so that he watches Johnno's antics from the sidelines all the time), then his distanciation in time provides him with the detachment he needs to apprehend the world globally. But this proves a difficulty. Part of his ambitious project precisely consists in suppressing, in the rendering, this aloofness of perception that he sees as an obstacle to an accurate estimation of reality. He strives towards a reading of the past that would be, paradoxically, immediate : 'I had been writing my book about Johnno from the moment we met' (p. 12). There may be no way out of this 'dilemma of distance'. The novel abundantly illustrates Dante's consistent inability to take part in the flow of life, except vicariously by watching Johnno from afar, by 'writing his book'. The narrative, then, although it tends towards an accurate, analogical reproduction of reality, is presented from the prologue onwards as irretrievably discontinuous with the subject matter it tackles.

Other discontinuities soon start to appear ; in fact, Dante's perception of Johnno strikes one as fragmented from the

first : his earliest recollection of his friend is that of a schoolboy seen through a glass pane which is, symbolically, broken. 'Johnno has been put outside. . . . The glass of the doors is striped with sticking-plaster from the War and Johnno, his nose flattened against the pane, . . . gives a good imitation of a fish in a tank' (p. 13). Furthermore, Johnno's physical appearance seems to vary surprisingly across the span of two decades. The ugly duckling of the school years soon develops the 'long hard lines of an athlete' (p. 47), and his 'flamboyant waves' (p. 46) give way to a neat brushback. For the first time he outgrows Dante's idea of him. In fact, every time Dante commits the mistake of losing sight of his friend for a while, he finds him unrecognizable afterwards. When he meets him in Paris even his voice sounds odd and different : Johnno, it turns out, is taking pains to imitate the Scottish accent. Europe, it appears, has transformed him altogether :

He had a fine gold moustache growing downwards towards the jaw, and this, with his hollow cheeks and large eyes, bluer even than I had remembered, made him look fragile, aesthetic, in a way that I found difficult to reconcile with the big, raw-boned Johnno, all angles and impatience, of four years ago. (p. 114)

In Athens, however, the lean period seems over ; Johnno has grown plump, almost fat. He confesses : 'I've been going to pieces in the sun' (p. 131). On his return to Brisbane he looms even larger : 'He was enormous. . . . Perhaps three stone heavier than he had been in Greece' (p. 146). Every time Johnno puts in an appearance in the novel the visual impression he leaves differs ;

his development from childhood to boisterous adulthood is rendered in the novel not as a continuous flow of experience but as a broken succession of stills, independent, unrelated. This is at least how Dante sees him, and the reader through his eyes. And there is a suggestion that Johnno's own mother too 'must hardly have known him when he reappeared at last after all those years, can hardly have believed that the fair, coltish boy who had gone off and remained just like that in her memory, had grown huge and sodden, every stone a proof of how far he had out-grown her knowledge of him, how far he had moved away' (p. 159).

Johnno's sudden physical metamorphoses parallel other, unpredictable changes of a more internal kind. A born actor, he steps in and out of the various roles he chooses to assume with ease and elegance. His connection with the world of the stage is stressed repeatedly too. The highflown rhetorical game that regularly opposes him to the teacher of chemistry 'gives all dealings between them the air of a scene at the theatre' (p. 14); when he eventually gets put outside he is said to be 'off-stage, but never quite absent' (p. 14), and the wisecracks he continually releases in class are 'delivered in a fierce stage whisper' (p. 14). Also, as Dante realizes, Johnno's evocation of his career as a Brisbane firebug is 'less a confession . . . than a rehearsal' (p. 137). Small wonder, then, that the elaborate theatricality of Brisbane's prostitutes should appeal to him with such irresistible forcefulness (more assuredly than their actual beauty), and the sense of style of their pimps even more! In the course of the novel he appears, successively, in the guise of :

an obstreperous class madcap ; a studious and self-controlled athlete ; a literary iconoclast ; a bohemian drunk wallowing in the gaudy decadence of Brisbane's brothels ; a mysterious conspirer involved in secret international plots ; a religious penitent enamoured with purity ; a bashful lover ; and, last but not least, a homeless vagrant roaming through Europe. What common feature could emerge from those mental postures, Dante never quite discovers -- save perhaps a continuing restlessness within the context of any one of them. Dante, then, when attempting to delineate the essentials of Johnno's personality, only manages to expose him in a discontinuous series of poses.

In fact, the physical disjointedness is seen to match the mental one. The more Johnno enlarges his astonishing repertoire of roles and attitudes, and the more his body seems to inflate as if to encompass the new realities created. When Dante meets him in Athens he reflects on his plumpness : it is 'as though he had begun to realize in the flesh his own larger possibilities, and was growing to fill them' (p. 131). Later on he sees him as 'larger than life' (p. 146). This gives a suggestion of the true nature of Johnno's rebellion. He challenges more than the narrow certainties of a conservative middle-class smugly settled in parochial Brisbane : more radically he questions, through his 'infinite rehearsals', the tyranny of a reality that imposes itself as absolute and intractable when he wishes to see it as a mere alternative. Therefore he summons the police in imagination when he feels like running, he invents a surrogate image of Dante as an 'exterminating angel' (p. 161), schemes to launch him as a male whore in Sweden, plans a trip to Nepal, another to Brittany,

and a pilgrimage to Santiago di Compostella. He embarks, in short, on the grandiose project of restoring to existence all that has been eclipsed by what is. In this context, the mere question of his personality appears as irrelevant and *unfathomable* : 'What was he involved in, I wondered. Drug trafficking? Politics? Of the left? Of the right? It seemed typical of our relationship nowadays that I couldn't tell. It might have been any one of them' (p. 135).

Johnno utilizes fantasy to undermine the hegemony of reality and make it what, in his eyes, it never really ceased to be : a fortuitous materialization of that other, intact, proto-reality that contains all possibilities. His rebellion, then, his decision to 'destroy the myth' (p. 152), takes the form of a systematic exploration and rejection of life in all its envisaged aspects. Till at the end -- well, 'who could know what the end would be, when all the myths had dissolved like so many ghostly chains and we were free to be ourselves?' (p. 87). This perpetual toying with possibility makes Johnno a kind of metaphor in the flesh, a symbol for life's inexhaustible richness in potentialities of all kinds, which announces Ovid's metamorphoses in An Imaginary Life, Malouf's second novel. Dante eventually comes to recognize the emblematic significance of his friend as a character :

For what else was his life aiming at but some dimension in which the hundred possibilities a situation contains may be more significant than the occurrence of any one of them, and metaphor truer in the long run than mere fact. How many alternative fates, I asked myself, lurking there under the surface of things, is a man's life as we know it intended to

violate? (p. 164-65)

Johnno's puzzling death, then, he considers as 'aesthetically apt' (p. 164), in that it stays in keeping with his constant tendency to elude definition. It is appropriate, too, that the one surviving document by which to read Johnno's life should be a contrived, falsified photograph : 'Maybe, in the end, even the lies we tell define us. And better, some of them, than our most earnest attempts at the truth' (p. 170). Such a reading of reality, however, all-encompassing though it strives to be, fails to throw light on the enigma of Johnno's loneliness, despair, suicide. But this is how it should be : no masks of finality must obliterate, beyond rehearsal, 'the mystery of intact reality'¹. Like Rob in The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea Dante ultimately adopts a multiple, comprehensive, intertextual reading of the world which negates the supremacy of any single text. Fragmentation is put forward here as a counterpoise to the totalitarianism of realism, whose univocality is exposed as reductive of the unfathomable coalescence of truths which makes up reality.

CHAPTER 2

THE WORLD DOCUMENTED

1. The many truths of Randolph Stow

In Johnno and The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea, the duplication of vision entailed by the colonial legacy is placed in proper perspective as reality is envisaged as the subject of an even more thorough *fragmentation*. Both Dante and Rob Coram progressively discover, on their fumbling exploration (or reading) of the past, that the world is not one world, that it lends itself to a surprising variety of interpretations. The explosion into discrete fragments that results from this multiplicity of vision is brilliantly dramatized in Stow's next novel : Visitants (1979). The perspective here is wrenched apart. The narrator is not one but manifold ; five different witnesses bear testimony to the outbreak of a Cargo Cult that occurred on the island of Kailuana, off the east coast of Papua, in which they were all involved personally. At the same time they try to elucidate the enigma of Alistair Cawdor's death, a white-government patrol officer who committed suicide in mysterious circumstances, by cutting his wrists and throat with a razor blade. Interestingly the novel consists of the actual inquest report : like Johnno, Visitants as a narrative attempts to establish the truth about a sequence of past events. Again, then, the impulse is realistic. The narrative tends towards a representation of the world that would be unquestionable, authoritative, 'official' like a legal document. The witnesses endeavour to single out a reading of reality which would 'naturally' occupy the top position in a hierarchy of views : they combine their efforts to construct the past as univocal,

monolithic, exclusive of other (dissenting) views. The whole enterprise obviously rests on an unchallenged belief in the accurate, transparent, true-to-life character of their own reports. The assumption is that truth pre-exists the report, and the report reflects the (whole) truth.

However, as in Johnno, the result achieved falls short of the questers' expectations. Mr MacDonnell, the Kailuana planter in whose house the inquest takes place and himself one of the witnesses, stresses the futility of the endeavour :

The futility.

But they must know, they say, where it began, for the sake of their files. Just a formality, to have it in black and white. And then it will be there for ever, lying on a shelf, turning grey.

It is ended. That was the point.¹

As Anthony J. Hassall comments :

The black and white of the coroner's file is a lie and turns grey. The novelist's file, on the other hand, will try to tell the truth, to capture the shadings, to explain what really happened. But the fact that he chooses the form of an official enquiry suggests that Stow is aware that he too ultimately reduces experience to a limited black and white record.²

1 R. Stow, Visitants, London : Pan Books (Picador edition), 1981, p. 6. All subsequent references are to this edition and given in the text.

2 A. J. Hassall, Strange Country, St Lucia : University of Queensland Press, 1986, p. 129.

In fact, the novel undermines the conception of reality as one and homogeneous, continuous with a (single) representation held to be faithfully expressive of it. Rather, the world is constructed in Visitants not as a continuum but as an assemblage of fragments, which generates a plurality of interpretations instead of yielding to the tyranny of a given reading.

Therefore, it is important that the depositions of the various witnesses should be recorded in alternation, and that none of them should be delivered at a stretch. They are each fragmented into a series of brief interventions, which respond to one another as in a conversation -- rather than a monologue. The narrative fragments, it is true, are not entirely disconnected : they echo each other like variations on a theme. Yet the subjectivities involved are so strongly characterized, and their cultural backgrounds so varied (three of the witnesses are natives of the Trobriands, the other two White 'visitants' of the place), that the five views presented strike the reader as subtly, irredeemably differentiated. Naibusi, the worldly-wise native servant who spent her entire life with McDonnell the White planter, is well aware of the difficulty of bridg^{ing}_k these differences of perception :

"It is very strange," [Saliba] said, "this talk of the star."

"It is very strange," agreed Naibusi. "What colour are these people from the stars? Are they black or white?"

"Nobody has seen them," I said. "Not truly. They do not come down from their machine."

"Good, then," said Naibusi. "I am content. I think I would not understand star-people. I do not understand Dimdims yet." (p. 116)

As a matter of fact, even the reader ultimately fails to bridge the perceptual gaps and take in the overall picture, since to some extent he/she too remains in the dark in the end as to what exactly happened. Alistair Cawdor, the main quester and protagonist of the novel, remains equally frustrated by the truth. The narrative is interspersed with excerpts from his diary, in which he attempts to reconstitute the events that occurred on Kailuana during the nights of 'Vailala madness', and to articulate them in a network of causes and effects. But he too must recognize that he has 'good reason to doubt [his] own judgement on a number of matters' (p. 149), or to adjust his reading according to 'whose half-truths and whose denials one accepts' (p. 155). So that at the close of the book a number of mysteries remain unsolved : the actual role and origin of Metusela, a numinous priest-like figure who preaches the destruction of earthly wares and receptiveness to the 'visitants' coming from the stars ; the reality of the flying saucer, reportedly sighted by various natives on a number of occasions ; and of course the enigma of Cawdor himself, who keeps being perceived from the outside and remains for the reader forever aloof and detached, another 'visitant'.

Thus the narrative of Visitants points to a plurality of meanings, by exposing the shortcomings and inadequacies (in fact, the utter inaccuracy) of a unifying, universalizing reading of reality. Therefore, in an important sense, Stow comments on the hegemonizing character of Europe's codes of cognition, and suggests (like Malouf in Johnno) an alternative epistemological mode which allows for the coexistence of several perspectives,

several envisionings of the world. A similar movement into fragmentation is discernible in The Girl Green as Elderflower (1980), where reality is again constructed as quintessentially multiple, manifold. Stow suggested that the two novels could be read in relation to each other, as two panels of a kind of literary dyptich :

[These novels] are intended to complement one another. What Clare is recovering from is obviously much clearer if one has read Visitants. And similarly the fate of Cawdor in Visitants doesn't look quite so irreversible if one has read Elderflower. So I did intend them to be companion pieces . . .

Crispin Clare, the protagonist of The Girl Green as Elderflower, is an ex-anthropologist who has had to leave the tropics with a bad case of cerebral malaria and now spends his convalescence in a small Suffolk village called Swainstead. He was thus afflicted with the same illness as Cawdor, and like Cawdor he was driven toward madness and suicide by the alien 'visitor' invading his head :

"Now tell me why," Perry said, into his ear. "Cris. Why did you try to hang yourself?"

"I thought I was mad," Clare said, choking. "I was mad, at the time."

"That's bullshit," Perry said, holding him close. "That much I do know. You had malaria, because you were a fool and

1 A. J. Hassall, 'Interview with Randolph Stow', Australian Literary Studies, Vol 10 (1982), p. 322.

hadn't stocked up with drugs." 1

However, as opposed to Cawdor, Clare survives. As Stow mentions in the interview quoted above, he wanted to provide the story of Alistair Cawdor with an alternative, more optimistic ending : 'I was trying to show that even a situation like Cawdor's is not irredeemable'.² Let us now briefly consider the contextual framework in which he locates each of these separate, complementary resolutions of the narrative.

In Visitants, Cawdor's quest is a pursuit of unity. He appears in the novel as a lonely, isolated figure, whose every attempt to communicate seems doomed to fail. Osana, the native interpreter of the patrol, recognizes this when observing Cawdor after one of his brawls with Tim Dalwood, his young partner :

I went on watching the back of Mister Cawdor while he stared at the sea. Mister Cawdor's clothes were white and his head was black and the sea was shining. I think now that Mister Cawdor was always lonely like he looked then. (p. 17)

Cawdor's estrangement from his fellow human beings accounts for his anxiety to establish contact with the extra-terrestrial visitants sighted on several occasions by some natives of the island. Clearly, in his eyes, the visitants stand for redemption from solitude and alienation. Dalwood reports one of his

1 R. Stow, The Girl Green as Elderflower, New York : The Viking Press, 1980, p. 74. All subsequent references are to this edition and given in the text.

2 Hassall, 'Interview with Randolph Stow', p. 317.

conversations with Cawdor :

"I don't understand you, that's all. Whose side are you on - the Martians?"

Then he said something that was covered by the rain. I couldn't hear the words, but I heard the tone of his voice, excited, as if he was impatient with waiting for something. I pulled back the net and called across the room: "What was that?"

And he shouted, in the roaring dark, while the rain came faster and the palms thrashed. "We're not alone," he shouted. "Ah, you thick lump, can't you see it? We're not alone." (p. 108)

Cawdor's suicide is actually a desperate attempt to break free from isolation. At the moment of dying he has a vision of himself as a kind of bridge (he says : a 'tunnel') bringing together the atoms of his disintegrating body and the stars which form the universe : 'Down the tunnel. My body. Atoms. Stars.' (p. 179). The vision is one of ultimate reconciliation, or reunification, with the whole of the universe ; Cawdor's quest eventuates in a glimpse of unity as the in-forming principle of the world, presented as concomitant with death. This concurs with his dedication to establishing the truth as a single, incontestable text, evinced in the diary excerpts which dot the narrative. Cawdor insists on constructing the world as homogeneous, unified : a decreative impulse which brings about his death.

Conversely, in The Girl Green as Elderflower Clare constructs the world as multiple, and this leads to psychic recovery. Yet, like Cawdor, he is obsessed with an image of the universe as a uniform pattern including the micro- and macrocosmic scales :

Clare pushed aside his emptied pot and looked at the circles on circles stamped in drying beer over the shining wood of the bar. So inside atoms. So in all space. The everlasting terror of a process without term. (p. 32)

Clare's particular paranoia takes the form of a persistent concern with 'the way of the Green God' : the levelling law of Nature according to which all living creatures must die, and release their swirling atoms in the flux of undifferentiated matter, to allow life to go on as a process. Clare is tormented in his dreams by a vision of the Green Man as 'a face made of summer leaves, not sinister but pitilessly amused' (p. 4), which he recalls upon seeing atoms in beer rings : 'He thought of his dream, of how he had . . . seen the foreign leaves, which had formed themselves into a face, invulnerably amused' (p. 32). However, Clare recovers from his neurosis, by resorting to an extremely efficient therapy : he sets about writing his malaise out of his system.

Quite how to go about doing it Clare could still not see, but the impression was strong with him that the doing would be important, might even be the rebeginning of his health. (p. 3)

He develops an interest in The Lord Abbot's Tales, a collection of twelfth-century Suffolk legends written in Latin. He translates three of them and reworks them quite extensively, drawing on his personal experience. Each myth then offers unmistakable resonances of his own story : they are all concerned with themes like exile, alienation, and one of them also focuses

on death. Clare comes to terms with these, gradually, through the cathartic effects of his writing. After he wrote the first story, for example, he realizes that he is better able already to face up to the hard way of life. As he witnesses, horrified, the scene where a big Alsatian dog swallows down in a few gulps the beautiful cock-pheasant which used to prance around on his estate, he reflects :

It had been his own cock-pheasant, he felt sure, the constant visitor which had marched so masterfully under his windows. What at one time would have sickened him he could now once more take with calm. It was the way of the green god. (p. 68)

Thus, writing proves healing. But the mode of writing Clare adopts is significant too. While reworking the local myths into his own stories he draws heavily on the material provided by his immediate environment : his Swainstead friends and relatives all find their way into the stories where they appear, three times successively, in varying guises and roles yet consistently recognizable under the same name and features. The text of reality (the frame story) is thus duplicated time and again, relativized, transposed in a number of alternative versions (the medieval myths). Reality is mythologized : it becomes multi-layered, plurivocal, intertextual. The novel then functions as a kind of gallery of mirrors. The events informing the frame story all reflect on the happenings described in the encapsulated narratives, and vice versa. The characters disintegrate in a number of related but distinct entities which obviously

complement one another and have to be fitted together to constitute their complete selves. This fragmentation is epitomized by the child Amabel, a character in the last of the stories, who bears two names instead of one : Amabel and Mirabel. She incarnates in one body, in one identity, two characters presented separately in the frame story (the young medium Amabel and the mysterious green-eyed blonde who haunts Clare's day-dreams), and thus symbolizes the pluri-potentiality with which Clare invests reality. Significantly, she plays an important part in helping Clare to come to terms with the way of the Green God : fragmentation of reality emerges as the channel through which health and sanity are recovered. In the last of the myths, Amabel pays tribute to the God of Life by sacrificing on the altar of Love : she offers her body to everyone. She also acknowledges her filiation to Him. Gazing at an effigy of the green-leaved face, she says :

"This . . . is our god."

"A strange god," said the knight. "One would say a cruel one."

"He is," said the girl, "the bringer into being, and the destroyer. He is neither cruel nor merciful, but dances for joy at the variousness of everything that is." (p. 127, emphasis mine)

The levelling, annihilating life force which Clare dreaded at the beginning of the novel is thus reinterpreted as a symbol of variety and multiplicity : unity becomes manifold, a movement which coincides with Clare's rewriting of the world as de-centred and fragmented. It is appropriate, then, that Amabel, when asked about who she is, should reply with a little laugh :

'Does it matter? .. . I have so many truths to tell' (p. 134).
As in Visitants reality explodes in a series of fragments.
The Girl Green as Elderflower shows that this process can be
coped with and survived -- indeed, that it constitutes the
highway to survival.

2. Child's Play : the 'shape of reality'

The tension between two different conceptions of the world, constructed as either unified or fragmented, also informs much of Child's Play, David Malouf's novella. The unnamed narrator is a terrorist who prepares the assassination of a famous writer. He belongs to an organization that requires from its members, along with a stern self-discipline and a dedication to hard work, an almost religious withdrawal from the 'secular' world. He rents a room in a labyrinthine seventeenth-century palazzo where he can live, away from indiscreet glances, in perfect anonymity¹ ; his daily routine takes him to an 'office' (he refuses to call it a hideout) where he works with four others in untroubled silence : language, though not strictly forbidden, is tacitly ruled out. To make the isolation perfect, he was asked to sever all connections with his previous existence and to relinquish, provisionally at least, acquaintances and personal belongings. He himself conceives of the six weeks he devotes to preparing his coup as a deliberate stepping out of his ordinary existence, an interruption in the flow of life, which he intends to resume once the murder is accomplished : 'This is a time outside my life. Like the others I have lent myself to an occasion, a crime, but will be redeemed immediately after. I shall step into this killing and then step out again. On the other side life, and my

1 I intend to discuss the significance of the room in Chapter 3.

real life's work'.¹ Thus the reality of the crime is a world in suspension, cut off from the ordinary happenings of everyday society, and inhabited by nameless, faceless people in total disruption from their 'normal' selves : 'What makes us useful as killers is that we have no past. The crimes we are to commit have no continuity with us. Nothing in their geography, their politics, their psychology, leads back to what we are' (p. 19).

Thus, the world emerges here as discontinuous, fragmented, divided by invisible boundaries. However, the terrorist seems to be rebelling against this : he attempts to break free from his self-imposed isolation in several ways. First of all, he confesses that the safeguard of his personal sanity might well depend on his being allowed, on his daily walk to the office, to submerge himself in the richly confusing activity of the streets and take in its warm ebullience, its 'collisions' and 'dense proximities' (p. 13), so as to counterbalance the bare austerity of his life in the cell. But he also proves refractory to the Organization's rule of isolation in another way. When asked to divest himself of all personal belongings he makes a small exception : unknown to anyone, he retains the tiny variegated pebble that he used to fiddle with as a child at the bottom of his pocket, a schoolboy fancy from which he drew comfort in moments of tension or difficulty. He is pleased to think, too, that this pebble might have reached him from the dead end of the

1 D. Malouf, Child's Play, Ringwood : Penguin Books, p. 94. All further references are to this edition and given in the text.

universe :

Held to the ear like a closed shell I could hear waves in it ; not of the sea but from space, a steady beating. Held on the palm of my hand I saw reflected in it the far side of the universe, invisible to us, from which it might have fallen as a fragment of some scattered meteor, still in touch (and I through it) with a million other particles elsewhere, all of them responsive still to the tide of energy from 'out there'. (p. 63)

The pebble, then, a fragment at once of the protagonist's past and of the world at large, indicates his refusal (or inability) to let go altogether of his hold on reality (seen, or constructed, as a continuous whole) ; in fact it could well be that the crime itself, to the preparation of which he brings his whole being to contribute, amounts to nothing else than to 'break out of empty dreaming into the world of events' (p. 58) and thus, by trying to alter the shape of the world by a deliberate act of the will, to assert the effectiveness of his grasp on it. This creates an interesting paradox. The terrorist tries to maintain a reading of reality as a continuous ('metonymic') entity, as opposed to the discrete ('metaphoric') construction of it instituted by the Organization ; so that the crime will emerge as an assertion of metonymic power (the power to influence history) disguised as metaphor, by apparently coming from outside history. I shall have opportunity to come back to this.

What appears, then, is that the terrorist yearns for unity : he is trying to bridge the gap which severs him from the world, to break back into the crowd. The methods deployed to achieve

this end are significant too. The narrator's preparatory work consists in analyzing a number of documents (mainly photographs) relating to the locus and the victim of the crime. Thus, from the safety of his city office, he reconstructs the world on the sole basis of a few pictures. The imperialist strain inherent in such an endeavour appears in the light of what Roland Barthes said about photography : the photographic image tends towards 'an analogical reproduction of reality, [in that] it includes no discontinuous element that could be called sign . . .'.¹ A photograph is (usually) thought of as giving an exact transcription of the world, as directly continuous with its referent ; it can therefore be defined as an image of unity (and hence, perhaps, as an act of possession). The impulse motivating the narrator's quest is thus comparable to the narrative thrust of Visitants (and of Johnno, for that matter) : he attempts to construct the world as one, unified. However, as in Visitants, this hegemonic urge is defeated. After all, a photograph is also (is first of all, one would be tempted to say) a fragment, as indicated by the frame which superimposes an arbitrary boundary on the surface of reality. Its 'fictive unity',² then, is circumscribed within the bounds of a frame. Also, in an important sense, a photograph represents a moment of stasis, a rupture

1 R. Barthes, 'On Photography', in The Grain of the Voice (transl. L. Coverdale), New York : Hill and Wang, 1985, p. 353.

2 Susan Sontag, On Photography, Ringwood : Penguin Books, 1982, p. 110.

of the time continuum. Therefore, not surprisingly, the image of the world constructed by the terrorist ultimately falls apart in a mosaic of fragments -- as I intend to show in detail. It turns out to be elusive too, and for all his intent scrutiny the narrator finally fails to grasp the reality conveyed by the photographs :

I find myself fingering the surface of the photograph and being surprised that the rocks are not jagged, that the roughness of the boy's jacket, which the light inside the photograph makes so real, cannot be felt. . . . [The photograph] teases me with the deepest and most physical sense of space, light, weather, of the various textures of things, of a huge and inevitable sadness, but when I try to enter its reality I cannot. (p. 111)

Reality stays at a remove from the beholder : the documents may not provide as im-mediate an expression of it as the terrorist had hoped. The pictures, it appears, confront him with discontinuity, in more ways than one. For example, the photographs of the Piazza Sant-Agostino at P. (where the terrorist plans to accomplish his forfeit) fail to account for the reality of the site in its full-bodied wholeness.¹ First, in order to give a representation of the Piazza as a whole, the photographer had to take seven successive shots, in a swift circular sweep. This, inevitably, left a hole right at the centre of the picture ; so that the presence of the photographer

1 Tony Thwaites gives a post-structural analysis of these pictures in 'The Site of the Beholder : David Malouf's Child's Play', Southern Review 20, No 1 (March 1987), 16-35.

must be taken for granted, 'since these views could hardly exist without him, but [he] is nowhere to be found in them and cannot be traced as their source' (p. 37). Moreover, by some slight shortcoming in his art, even when the pictures are spread out and fitted together a few disturbing gaps and overlaps remain. For example, several of the schoolboys who were playing football in the square while it was being photographed were oddly duplicated since they obviously followed, 'in the disorderly bunching and shuffling of the game' (p. 31), the 'continuous' circle from right to left of the camera. Obversely, one guesses, others must have been simply omitted from the views, and keep existing only in the gaps between the shots, thus irretrievably erased from the terrorist's vision of the world... The same applies to the stone statue which stands in a public garden at the northern end of the piazza :

The statue itself remains mysterious. The path on which it stands is almost perfectly bisected where two views join, but when the two photographs are laid side by side a space of one fifth of a centimetre on the scale of the photographs (nearly half a metre in reality) is missing, and the horse's head and the rider above, all but one hand extended in a rhetorical gesture, are in the gap. (p. 36)

Interestingly, the disjunction is temporal as well as spatial. One of the photographs, the terrorist observes, 'is utterly deserted and the lack of people affects its mood like a change of weather. . . . It is as if one of the shots had been taken on a different day from the rest' (p. 34).

The photographs of the prospective victim prove equally

deluding. When set in chronological order they enable the beholder to trace the straightening of the subject's features over the years ; a particularity that then emerges with peculiar prominence is 'the deepening at the bridge of his nose of two vertical creases like inverted commas -- the imprint of a lifetime's devotion to irony' (p. 48). The Great Writer appears as a quotation in the flesh : the photographs thus draw attention to their own textuality as a discourse : they constitute a reading of reality and not reality itself, as the narrator takes them to be.

Fragmentation of reality emerges in Child's Play in various other ways. Another representation of the world is the work of the Great Writer, whose volumes fill two shelves in the terrorist's office. While the narrator claims to be studying them to gain more insight in the personality of his potential victim (with a kind of perverse perfectionism, as it were), it soon becomes clear that his true interest lies in the account they give of reality as a whole, in their continuity with it : 'Essayist, philosopher, author of a dozen monuments to the art of narrative, he has created so much of our world that we scarcely know where history ends and his version of it begins' (p. 40). Typically, though, the Great Writer's version of history is made available to the narrator not as a single text but as a set of fragments : a series of novels, essays, newspaper articles, letters, honorary degrees and ambassadorial regalia (see p. 57). Furthermore, this surface fragmentation of reality goes hand in hand with a 'deep structure' disintegration as it becomes apparent that while the narrator reads the world through the

Author's eyes, the latter owes his own vision to his older brother : '"Through my brother's eyes", he tells us, "I saw. That was the vision. And having seen could never forget"' (p. 46). Vision, then, explodes in a variegation of strata and substrata which interpose, as it were, between the beholder and the object of his scrutiny. Or, to put it differently, the world which he attempts to construct as univocal turns out to be, quintessentially, intertextual.

The terrorist, then, teased by documents which fail to reveal the world except as an amalgam of fragments, decides to break out of his isolation and hurls himself, in brief infrequent incursions, into the 'real' world. One of these incursions is the dance outing that the members of the cell all take together at regular intervals. However, even then (even after they crossed the frontier with the real world) the kind of universe they discover strikes the narrator as dream-like and unreal : the 'lights, music, faces, the endless parade of oddly-dressed figures . . . [are] part of a private hallucination' (p. 85). The categories of dream and reality collapse : one becomes a duplication of the other. In Derridean terms, this is a classic situation of differance : dream contains contaminating traces of its opposite, and vice versa. Dream invades reality, which can then no longer be seen as homogeneous. It is therefore significant that the place should be simultaneously perceived as utterly fragmented : 'The floor-space of the disco is divided into several dancing areas, some on one level, some on another, with open screenwork between' (p. 84) ; the light itself

disintegrates into particular sections of the spectrum as rays of red, blue and green wash over the darkness of the scene (p. 84), and the sense of fragmentation incurred is even increased when the strobe lights begin to play and 'figures disintegrate under your gaze, all their movements broken up into disjointed fragments with spaces of dark between . . . ' (p. 85). In this sense, the terrorist's attempt to bridge the rift separating him from the world 'out there', is defeated. Whatever his efforts to prevent the process, reality keeps disintegrating under his gaze.

Yet he infringes the law of isolation in one more instance. Antonella, one of the members of the cell, fails to arrive one morning at the appointed time : she has been called upon, the narrator surmises, to perform her 'duty' at last. But her unexpected disappearance from the surface of his life provokes an upset of the major kind ; the self-contained, autarchical little community of the cell suddenly breaks open to the world at large : 'We set to work in an atmosphere that had been breached. It was as if one whole wall of the apartment had been torn away and was open to grey, slow-moving clouds' (p. 96). Once again unity falls apart : the protagonist sets out to restore it. Seized by the urge to check if Antonella managed to bring about (and survive) her own particular 'event', he rushes headlong through the opening, in new defiance of the ban set on the outside world. He then tries to eavesdrop on people who gossip in the streets, in buses. But, typically, all he manages to pick up is bits and pieces, 'between talk about hair-styles, boyfriends and last night's television programmes' (p. 112-13), of a story too disjointed to be woven in a coherent sequence. His next move,

then, in absolute disregard of the Organization's explicit interdiction, is to cast a glance at the headlines of a newspaper displayed on a bookshop newsboard.

The newspaper, for the Maloufian quester, seems to constitute the ultimate reference. It is appreciated for its bare, journalistic objectivity -- yet again a document construed as a transparent, accurate reflection of the world. Johnno, for instance, when faced with Dante's shrugging disbelief of his past exploits, summons the Brisbane Courier-Mail as the one authority that will dispel all doubts : "Well you can check the bloody papers," he said, "The Courier-Mail, you'll believe that I suppose" (Johnno, p. 137). And Dante also yields, eventually, in front of the paper's unquestionable assertiveness : '[Johnno] too had submitted himself at last to the world of incontrovertible event. Johnno was dead. The Courier said so. It must be so' (p. 153). Ironically, of course, the image of reality offered by the Courier-Mail has actually been undermined in the course of the novel as inaccurate and unreliable : what the paper reports in a Monday issue as one of the weekend's many road accidents is in fact, as Dante knows, a disguised collective suicide in which Johnno refused to take part at the last minute (see p. 146, 150). Apparently, though, this patent discrepancy between the truth and the report is not enough to lead Dante to recant his faith in newspaper reliability.

The protagonist of Child's Play seems armed with a similar faith when he reaches for a newspaper as the one document that will best enlighten him as to Antonella's fate in the world of

incontrovertible event. As a terrorist, he endows the newspaper with a particular significance too ; it is the very medium through which his perpetrated crime will be given its full impact, its actual substance, its raison d'être :

The crime will achieve its final reality at a point long past the moment of its occurrence either in [the victim's] life or mine ; at the point, I mean, when it is reported. . . . The crime becomes real because it is reported, because it is called an act of terrorism, an assassination, because it threatens mindless violence and anarchy, because it breaks into the mind of the reader as a set of explosive syllables. These are language murders we are committing. (p. 91)

The association of the newspaper with the phenomenal world is thus made clear ; not only does it purport to reflect reality as faithfully as possible : it also acts upon it directly, shapes it, creates it. It thus seems to constitute an ideal instrument by which to retrieve a grasp on the world.

Yet for all that the picture it presents strikes one as fragmented and elusive, as ultimately ungraspable. The terrorist, when he takes a furtive glimpse at a news bulletin sequence from display television sets exposed in a shop window, is literally assailed by the same picture 'repeated five times over' (p. 113) : again, his perception of the world proves not one but multiple. He then gets himself a newspaper and is struck by the way the photographs tease the eye : 'Newspaper photography. Far from catching life it disintegrates and dissolves it, . . . reducing it to a pattern of tiny dots and areas of patchy light and dark...' (p. 113). Moreover the pictures are terribly distorted,

the figures already dissolving as they move quickly on out of life. With their edges frayed, great holes for eyes, they have been endowed with a fuzzy insubstantiality, a flat black-and-white quality that marks them as figures from the news, fighters at the edge of history who have, as it were, broken up in casting themselves against solid print. (p. 113).

The dilemma, then, originates from the nature of the documents themselves, from the need to 'work through a medium . . . whose very nature is to deprive whatever it reports of life and power' (p. 114). The photographs used to construct the world as one, absolved from fragmentation, tend to inscribe discontinuity into the text of reality, of which they are no more than a distant, discursive representation -- despite their deceptive transparency. Therefore the documents involve a major loss : the loss of reality. In Child's Play the terrorist is deeply aware, for all his restlessness with it, of the essential precariousness of his own condition ; he is teased by the tantalizingly ethereal quality of his own perception of the outside world, while he strives to bring about a substantial reunification of subject and object, through the production of his carefully created 'event'.

There are also [the bomb expert's] long absences in the Signora's bedroom, where he is constructing a 'device'. At any moment, should those slim fingers make an error, we might be blown to smithereens. That is the shape of reality. I must be chosen next. It angers me that I adjust so slowly. If Carla were to go now, or even Enzo or Arturo, I might break completely. And that too is the 'shape of reality'. (p. 100)

But there is more to this. The fragmentation of reality

would not be complete if the narrator himself managed to resist the divisive process which he sees at work in the world at large. I have suggested that his initial decision to step out of his own ordinary existence and to steep himself in the reality of the crime, represents a kind of disruption of identity. Other such disruptions are bound to occur still. For example, when the terrorists go out for their dancing party the narrator specifically mentions that they 'all have special clothes for these occasions' (p. 83). This change of clothes begins to look like a disguise when Carla decides that the narrator should not appear at the disco without wearing make-up :

I look. She has heightened the colour of my cheekbones with a touch of make-up and put a dot of it at the corner of my eyes. Somehow it changes the whole shape of my face, emphasizes the darkness of the moustache and sideburns, makes me, I decide, look more aggressively masculine, in the ambiguous style of masculinity that actors project and the models in fashion magazines. Instead of protesting as I might have done a month ago [!] I find myself grinning. . . . I look at myself in this odd fancy-dress and feel extraordinarily liberated. The picture I present, which seems so right for my physical type and generation, is so utterly unlike my real self. (p. 84, emphases mine)

It seems, then, that the narrator's 'real self' is characterized by a protean capacity to assume various forms. This is further emphasized by the terrorist's identification with the hero of the Great Writer's current 'Work in Progress' : 'He fascinates me, this hero, this mirror figure whose every step to the right is a step I take to the left, this angel of anti-death' (p. 89). Interestingly, this hero distinguishes himself by his 'infinite disguises and transformations, his impudent refusal to stay

within the bounds of "character" (p. 89) : he is 'a formula-one racing driver and ex-mercenary who in the last episode was preparing, with a touch of colour on his cheeks and a spot of it at the corner of his eyes, to become the mistress -- yes, the mistress! -- of a Venezuelan oil-magnate' (p. 89, emphasis mine). The make-up, obviously, links the two characters in the same passion for role-playing. This passion may account for the narrator's fascination for the Great Writer who, for the sake of his career as a novelist, has also had to 'acquire and cast off a dozen different personalities' (p. 90). This metamorphic ^{quality} / of his is dramatized with peculiar vividness in the 'Work in Progress', which the Author has entitled "Child's Play" (p. 79), and in which the terrorist recognizes 'the savage and beautiful intensity, the impersonal truthfulness of a child at play' (p. 90, emphasis mine). The game in which the narrator of Child's Play is seen to indulge so readily, then, consists in attempting to reconstitute his own being to the polymorphic fullness of his childhood self. Like a child, he roams into alien selves, in imagination, while (allegedly) keeping truthful to his own being. This, unmistakably, makes the novel thematically akin to Johnno. What, better than a child, could embody the unaccounted potentialities, the doomed possibilities not yet discarded to which Johnno devotes his life? The reality which the terrorist yearns to break back into is the 'real being', larger than life, that is still intact in childhood and that transcends the limitations and fragmentations of his 'normal' self. One thinks here of what Jacques Lacan called the 'mirror-phase' of childhood development : the narrator attempts to identify with an image

exterior to himself. This urge to 'conquer' the Other is in essence hegemonic, it is a wish for unity. This links the novella with Randolph Stow's Visitants, where (as we have seen) the protagonist similarly strives to embrace unity as an all-pervasive principle. Stow presents this as a decreative impulse ; the context of terrorism in Child's Play points to something comparable. In fact, as I intend to show in Chapter 3, much of the terrorist's quest is a wooing of death.

But again this emerges as a paradox. Terrorism is embodied in Child's Play by the Organization, yet it is by transgressing its rules that the narrator proves to be embracing decreativeness. We have seen that the Organization's metaphoric discontinuity is systemic with the discontinuity (differance) of language, since language is acknowledged as the medium through which the crimes are committed. However, paradoxically, the narrator's search to produce his own 'event', to interweave in the narrative continuity of history and so influence its course, emerges as an expression of mystical unity which negates the notion of difference. This apparent contradiction can be accounted for by the way in which the Organization is presented in the novel, and defined always in terms of its absence. All the reader has access to, through the rendering given by the narrator, is the 'fictive unity' of the fragment, of the cell which is experienced as whole and self-contained. The multiplicity of the larger system has to be inferred from its traces inside the fragment, which are signs of absence : one thinks of the elusive Signora Rizzoli, who lives in the

terrorist's flat/office yet remains unseen :

She fascinates me this Signora Rizzoli, who sees that the kitchen is supplied with the makings of a good lunch and whose grey hairs I have examined in a hairbrush but who herself remains mysteriously invisible. By the time we appear in the morning she has already left. We just miss her; though only, I suspect, by minutes. Have we passed in the street below without recognizing one another? Or was the ignorance on one side only? Does she perhaps keep watch on us, our appearance, our times of arrival and departure, and file a report?

It is in the nature of things that I have no answer to these questions. I know nothing of the structure of our organization and its agencies, or the part that might be played in it by a Signora Rizzoli. . . . [She], like so much else that occupies me here, both fascinates and eludes me. (p. 16)

Thus the Organization symbolizes fragmentation (or differance) but at a remove : fragmentation made absent. In this sense it too privileges the undifferentiated, unity, death -- like the terrorist himself.

CHAPTER 3

THE HOUSE OF SELF

IN

STOW AND MALOUF

1 The house transplanted

To construe the architecture of the house as symbolic for the structure of the self is an intellectual step that has become rather commonplace, and has been taken by many a psychologist. Sigmund Freud himself sees the house as an adequate tool of analysis of the human psyche ; he describes the process of repression as an elaborate play of flap- and trapdoors, and he builds his psychoanalytical house along a vertical axis determined by the cellar-attic polarity. Carl Gustav Jung also refers to the image of the house when presenting the notion of the collective unconscious :

We have to describe and to explain a building the upper storey of which was erected in the nineteenth century ; the ground-floor dates from the sixteenth century, and a careful examination of the masonry discloses the fact that it was reconstructed from a dwelling-tower of the eleventh century. In the cellar we discover Roman foundation walls, and under the cellar a filled-in cave, in the floor of which stone tools are found and remnants of glacial fauna in the layers below. That would be a sort of picture of our mental structure.¹

Such a symbolical construction, of course, reveals itself as a typical product of the European consciousness. Most Australian houses have no cellar -- let alone Roman ruins. What happens to this 'house of self', one could then wonder, when it is

1 C.G. Jung, Contributions to Analytical Psychology, New York : Brace & Harcourt, 1928, p. 118-19.

transported from the Old World into the New? Russell McDougall has delineated the answer to this question in highly condensed terms : it sprawls.¹ In an Australian setting, the vertical plane characterizing the European house transmutes itself into a horizontal one. Indeed Robin Boyd isolates horizontality as the primary distinctive feature developed in Australian architecture :

In the Old World, houses were usually two-storeyed; in Australia the pioneers had enough difficulty in keeping upright as much as a single storey with a ceiling height as low as seven feet. . . . Even if they could have built a second floor, there was no need here to huddle into a box to conserve heat in winter, and plenty of space was available to spread out horizontally.

In this way the first characteristic habit in Australian houses was formed: the single storey habit, which before long shaped the big, wide, comfortable country homesteads, and a full century later was to set the pattern for the sprawling suburban areas round every Australian city and town.²

This conversion to horizontality symbolizes the Australian's adaptation to a new environment, as it is encoded in architecture. In fact, the house is a common emblem of the colonial condition, illustrated in literature in various

1 See R. McDougall, 'Sprawl and the Vertical', in R. McDougall & G. Whitlock (eds.), Australian/Canadian Literatures in English. Comparative Perspectives, Sydney : Methuen, 1987, 205-37.

2 R. Boyd, The Walls Around Us, Sydney : Angus and Robertson, 1962 (rpt. 1982), p. 3-4. Quoted in McDougall, 'Sprawl and the Vertical', p. 218.

permutations. (One thinks of V. S. Naipaul's A House for Mr Biswas, for example, where the quest for house represents a search for roots, a long and halting process of reconciliation with spiritual homelessness.) Elizabeth Ferrier considers the house in post-colonial literatures as a primarily cultural structure, a conceptualization of colonial settlement, which comments on its dweller's adaptation (or, as the case may be, inadaptation) to 'alien' conditions.¹ A house can thus emerge as the distant (vertical) bastion of a far-flung culture or, on the contrary, as an authentically Australian (a sprawling) space. Let us now consider instances of both structures in the work of Stow and Malouf.

1 E. Ferrier, 'From Pleasure Domes to Bark Huts : Architectural Metaphors in Recent Australian Fiction', Australian Literary Studies, Vol 13, No 1 (May 1987), 40-53.

2 The house enclosed

David Malouf refers to the incongruous, almost surrealistic effect produced by the Victorian mansion when (dis)placed against the background of a mangrove-strewn river.¹ Clearly the Australian house, in so far as it tends to reproduce a European architectural archetype, stands in a contingent, discontinuous relationship to the environment where it has been transplanted. It emerges as an enclave of alien culture written within a space of otherness (or 'wilderness'), completely sealed off from it. It is significant that Malouf's standard house, the Queensland one-storeyed weatherboard, should be raised from the ground on a forest of stilts : instead of plunging its roots deep into the subsoil of human, Jungian history it stands high afloat in the air, cut off from the ground by a layer of cool darkness. This severance of the house from its (spatial and temporal) foundations is further emphasized by the role of the verandah, an unclosed boundary opening onto the realms of the winds. Russell McDougall defines the verandah as a kind of buffer zone, a 'blurred boundary' between civilization and wilderness, between self and Other, which allows for some degree of interaction between the two.² The verandah spreads out from a central structure towards the bush outside : it is a gesture of

1 Jim Davidson, 'David Malouf' [Interview], Meanjin 39, No 3 (1980), p. 327.

2 'Sprawl and the Vertical', p. 219.

reconciliation with the environment. However, in 12 Edmondstone Street David Malouf seems to conceptualize the verandah in completely different terms, as a symbol of discontinuity (not reconciliation) with the environment. He comments : 'As for verandahs. Well, their evocation of the raised tent flap gives the game away completely. They are a formal confession that you are just one step up from the nomads'¹. The Australian's nomadic, fortuitous attachment to his country is also alluded to in Johnno where Dante, given as he is to viewing Brisbane as a primarily makeshift affair, reminisces :

I was reminded sometimes of ghost-towns in the north that had once had a population of twenty thousand souls and were now completely deserted -- the houses one morning simply lifted down from their stumps, loaded onto the back of a lorry, and carted away to create another town a hundred miles off. In my childhood I had often seen houses being carried through the streets, creaking and swaying on the back of a truck. (p. 83)

The evocation of the ghost-town calls to mind Randolph Stow's Western Australia. In The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea Rob Coram makes the acquaintance of a youth called Mike Ashcroft who 'had come to Geraldton because his town had died. It had died in the night, Mike said' (p. 196). Tourmaline itself, though not dead yet, 'lies in a coma' (Tourmaline, p. 8). It provides a good example of the fractured, discontinuous plane on which the

1 D. Malouf, 12 Edmondstone Street, Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1986, p. 11. All subsequent references are to this edition and given in the text.

colonial house is built. The people of Tourmaline inhabit 'shanties rented from the wind' (p. 7) : they are deprived of the spiritually nourishing potentialities of a fruitful interaction with a soil perceived as 'archeologically' fertile. As the epigraph of the book¹ suggests, the townspeople's attachment to Tourmaline fails to find nourishment in the past of the place or their own history ; in this sense their presence there is anachronistic, a mere irrelevance of existence. That their allegiance should go to the wind in the first place testifies to the utter transience of their condition. Their passage leaves no footprint in the 'sun-struck miles' (p. 7) of red sand, and the town of Tourmaline lies in perpetual danger of being buried by the sand-dunes, exactly like the neighbour town of Lacey's Find which 'died in the night' (p. 55) and was swallowed by a stretch of desert apparently only too keen to erase alien, flimsy corrugated-iron excrescences and resume a virgin, 'untrodden' appearance :

I too was remembering, not for the first time, the broad street of Lacey's, the two-storied hotel, the several stores. I imagined the gentle tidal encroachment of the dunes, the soft red sand, wind-ribbed and untrodden, mounting, mounting. . . . until, in the end, what would be left but a chimney or two of the hotel, dully moaning in the red wind? And those two, of course, the wind would have silenced by now, and the sand would lie unbroken and printless over all the places that knew me. (p. 33-34)

Thus, when transplanted into an alien environment, the house

1 'O gens de peu de poids dans la mémoire de ces lieux' (Saint-John Perse).

tends to be wiped out by the forces of Nature. Its cultural foundations lie elsewhere, so that its anchoring in the new land strikes one as absurd, fortuitous, or merely transient.

The flimsiness of the transplanted house is stressed again in Visitants. MacDonnell, the planter, has been living as the only white man on Kailuana island for several decades. He built his house entirely with his own hands and after the Dimdim fashion : the natives find it strange.

When I first came from Wayouyo I said to Naibusi : This house is too hollow, too loud. Because a house among palms is like a house at sea, and the leaves are in it all around you, night and day. A house should be like a cave, I said, closed and dark. But Naibusi said : No, that is not the Dimdim custom. They like the wind in their houses, she said, and to look out on the sea, and I think he listens to the palms, because he planted them in the time when he was strong and young. (p. 5)

The strangeness of the house, in fact, reflects that of its inhabitant ; as opposed to Cawdor whose skin looks dark, almost like a native, MacDonnell is white to such a point that even Dalwood, another white man, is struck by it : 'He was white like a woodgrub, and something of the same texture' (p. 33). In fact, the emphatic whiteness of his skin makes MacDonnell an adequate symbol for the European colonizer. Significantly he refers to himself as 'The King of Kailuana' (p. 113) : a pretension to royalty scarcely reconcilable with the presence on the island of the venerable Dipapa, hailed by the natives as paramount chief of the tribes. Also, while the shape of the house replicates a structure obviously uncongenial to native architecture, it is in keeping with this that the organization of the household should

reproduce the authoritarian, hierarchical structure of power inherent to imperialistic rule : Naibusu, in more 'glorious' times MacDonnell's mistress, now tends him as a servant ; sexual and political domination are thus characteristically brought together. It is appropriate, then, that Dipapa's rebellion against the King's authority should be directed at the house itself, which he planned, unsuccessfully, to bring down during the war (see p. 157).

However, what Dipapa has failed to achieve is being accomplished by the island itself : the house is crumbling and rotting, eaten from within by white ants and assailed from the outside by the humidity of the climate. This provides still another parallel between MacDonnell and his house : the ramshackle state the estate is patently in mirrors the physical decrepitude of the man :

Grey, he said. See, Salib', my trees are grey.
And your hair is grey, I said, and he moved his head. (p. 5)

The house 'eaten by the rain' (p. 5) is called 'Rotten Wood', and it slowly reverts to the rainforest on whose territory it impinges. The presence of the forest pervades it already. The light that falls through the shutters is tinted with the green of the palm leaves, so much so that the house is declared 'full of leaves' (p. 7) ; and indeed the onslaught of vegetation is described in fairly literal terms : 'The palms wander in the bare wooden passages, in the gaunt living room wide open to the sea' (p. 7). Also, the constant rustling of the palms affects the

atmosphere of the house, fills in the least bubble of silence : 'The palms above the house submerge the rooms in their surf of sound. Creakings and susurrations drop from the air' (p. 7). The house, then, is ostensibly caught up in the warm ebullient process of life in a tropical forest. Its apparent stability is deceptive : 'Under the palms, the house lies turbulent and still' (p. 8) ; it participates in an all-encompassing movement that takes it inexorably, along with its inhabitant, towards the moment when the 'sad mouldering castle' will suddenly collapse, 'as suddenly as Jericho, with a slow dank crunch into mud and leaves in the rain' (p. 27). This is the process by which MacDonnell the planter, together with his house of imported design and inspiration, is being obliterated from the surface of the island. The flimsiness of the house, in this particular case, symbolizes Western man's inability to relinquish inborn (and inadequate) conceptions while attempting to transplant his roots ; the landscape, as a result, simply refuses to accommodate him. Randolph Stow's fictional universe is fraught with those derelict or demolished homesteads, which attest to the utter vanity of European expansive pretensions. Dipapa adequately sums up the transiency of those visitants passing by on alien shores by contrasting it with the permanence of native settlement :

"They come, they go," Dipapa said, sucking his gums and looking towards the sky, like a man half asleep. "Black men, white men, canoes, steamers. They bring their somethings. But we -- we stay and watch, that is all. Every day the same." (p. 88)

Thus, the colonial's failure to adapt to the new environment is encoded in architecture. The house, transplanted without its roots, encroaches only superficially on the territory of the Other, and eventually disappears from it. ^{Failure to} / adapt: to new circumstances is also evinced by the fact that the house retains its original, alien architectural characteristics. Malouf's Queensland weatherboard mansion is raised on stumps: although one-storeyed, it is still constructed on a vertical plane. In Visitants MacDonnell's house departs from local building standards, and we have noted that its physical structure parallels a cultural (or ideological) one, imported into a 'new' country despite its obvious irrelevance there. In this sense the colonial house signifies imaginative rigidity, blindness to the specific demands of a different environment, bondage to alien thought processes. Randolph Stow affirms that the image of imprisonment pervades Australian literature,¹ and indeed a study of the house metaphor corroborates this since the house emerges, very often, as a structure of confinement. This can be linked up with the long tradition of convict literature that flourished in Australia. Gillian Whitlock shows how Australian and Canadian novelists of the colonial period were led by political and cultural circumstances to conceive of the house in the new

1 R. Stow, 'The Southland of the Antichrist: The Batavia Disaster of 1629', in A. Rutherford (ed.), Common Wealth, Aarhus : Akademisk Boghandel, 1971, p. 162.

societies as a carceral space¹ : when transplanted in the new continent the institution of British authoritarian rule spontaneously assumed the architectural structure of the prison. Such a metamorphosis was at once historically accurate (it reflected the reality of the transportation system) and metaphorically appropriate : the Englishman, in the face of the colonial landscape, found himself imaginatively imprisoned as it were in the rigid categories of the discourse to which he stubbornly stuck, and hence unable to see it for what it was. In the same line of thought, one can consider The Law's ramshackle prison in Tourmaline as symbolic of his incapacity to emancipate himself from imported, obsolete patterns of thought or perception. That this image of imprisonment should be in ruins suggests, as proposed above, that the Law's obstinate attachment to irrelevant cognitive codes made it impossible for him to accommodate himself to the new country. Like the house in Visitants, the Tourmaline prison symbolizes an order of culture and power which pertains to Europe, yet was imported (imposed) in a foreign landscape. It stands for a now inappropriate way of seeing which still fetters the Tourmaline imagination : 'My gaol, to which I am constantly returning, the shrine and the museum of law in Tourmaline' (p. 41). Significantly it used to be a tower (the epitome of verticality), a structure which articulates the concepts of imperial domination and power, and a space closed

1 G. Whitlock, "'The Carceral Archipelago" : Marcus Clarke's His Natural Life and John Richardson's Wacousta', Australian/Canadian Literatures in English, p. 49-67.

upon itself, circular, carceral, which confines the gaze of its dweller and blinds him to the reality of the surroundings. Other buildings in Tourmaline similarly echo the structure of the carceral space. Kestrel's hotel, for example, is depicted as an enclosed place. The windows have been blinded, there is no opening onto the world outside : 'The window-panes were painted over, the air was close, but cooler; the smell of sweat was overlaid with the clean and bitter tang of dust' (p. 10). The association with the prison is reinforced by the fly-traps lying on the bar of the hotel : 'On the long bar of Kestrel's hotel (that day and every day, you must imagine) were three fly-traps. And the prisoners climbed and fell back continually with a soft, intermittent, sickening fizz' (p. 10). Clearly, the condition of imprisonment symbolized by the flies is shared by Kestrel as well, as the Law recognizes : '. . . I began to have a good deal of pity for him, because he was the man he was, trapped in his own selfhood as the flies in the bar were trapped in their small cages' (p. 108). The captive flies, then, stand for the condition of confinement which characterizes the colonial consciousness, forever enmeshed in alien thought processes.

In his later novels Stow takes up the theme of the house as an image of confinement. For instance Alistair Cawdor, the protagonist of Visitants, stands out as yet another of those Stow aliens who feel unable to escape from the castle of their own selves. His unbreached, pathological detachment in the novel, as well as his anxious urge to communicate with the visitants from the stars, almost make him a kind of emblem for existential solitude. At the end of the book, he only manages to 'reconcile'

himself with his condition by committing suicide : he has to bring down the prison of his body in order to achieve at last some sort of contact with the universe at large ; only then is he allowed a glimpse, 'down the tunnel' (p. 179), in a scheme of things that makes room for himself. In Stow's two last novels to date almost all the alienated characters tend to erect their house as a redoubt, a barrier supposed to protect them from the aggressions of the world outside. Although these novels are not set in a post-colonial society, the dichotomy which arises between self and Other (established in terms of inside and outside) has considerable conceptual bearing on the question of post-colonial (in)adaptation to an alien environment. Because the Other is expelled, kept at bay beyond the walls, the house emerges as a space of unity -- as opposed to the dialectics of views that could be generated by a conversation with the Other. The relevance to the post-colonial context is obvious : unity stands out as a production of European hegemonic discourse. The walls of the house have to be opened, broken through, to permit emancipation from European cognitive codes.

In The Girl Green as Elderflower the somewhat neurotic Crispin Clare of the first chapters takes sanctuary in his old ancestral cottage with ostensible relief when driven to near-panic by unwanted questions about his past put to him by some pub-companions. 'The cottage had only one door. When it was closed behind him, he stood for a moment with his back to it. The drawbridge was up' (p. 34). However, fortunately enough the cottage is not imperviously sealed off from the outside world ;

indeed, Clare kept from his sojourn in the tropics the habit of leaving his bedroom window open at night. In fact, he aligned the bed right in front of the window so as to have, from his pillow, the beautiful Suffolk scenery in his field of vision. It is through this opening onto the world that he then observes, every morning, the landscape's gradual transformation from wintry deadness to springtime lushness, a process that appears to echo his own spiritual rejuvenation and psychic recovery. The open window is the fragile channel through which Clare manages to re-establish, tentatively at first, some kind of inter-relationship with reality out there. This renewed 'conversation' is described in the novel as a gentle invasion of spring through the framed opening, in a way that recalls (but contrasts with) the destructive intrusiveness of the rainforest in Visitants :

At the edge of each window the apple tree, agitated by bullfinches, intruded branches of tight flushed buds. . . .

He thought on one such morning, listening to the cuckoo, that his provisional happiness had put down roots, that the fact of it would endure. (p. 65)

In The Suburbs of Hell (1984) Stow makes much of the image of the house as a refuge from the world. The citizens of the little Suffolk town of Old Tornwich, in their fear of the random killer who roams through the district, all seem to retire to the (illusory) safety of their houses, to bolt the door and draw the curtains close, and set out to tremble there behind their thick medieval walls. One of them in particular, the young Greg Ramsay whose brother has been inexplicably shot through the head in his own living-room, endeavours to barricade himself thoroughly

within the dead man's house, and to deter his considerate neighbours (even the postman) from paying him any visit.

He became increasingly disturbed about the postman, and formed the habit of always waking before he came. It worried him that this stranger could intrude objects, could even perhaps intrude his hand or arm, out of the world into his private space.¹

Obviously, Greg's preoccupation with isolating himself from the outside world soon becomes obsessive, and looks like a withdrawal into a private world of his own ; the house as a space then comes to delimit at once a physical and a spiritual entity. It stands for the mind of its inhabitant. Again, this reminds of Visitants where Cawdor's illness (a bout of cerebral malaria) is referred to as an intruder in the 'house' of his skull :

I am mad now, Naibusu, and I will not be better. It is like somebody inside me, like a visitor. It is like my body is a house, and some visitor has come, and attacked the person who lived there. (Visitants, p. 183).

Madness, in The Suburbs of Hell, seems to derive from an exaggerated concern with one's spatial integrity rather than from the actual violation of it. This is made ironical here by the consistent presentation of the house as a basically inadequate demarcation from the domain of the Other which surrounds its walls. The renovated Georgian mansion which Greg Ramsay attempts

1 R. Stow, The Suburbs of Hell, London : Dent & Sons, 1985. All further references are to this edition and given in the text.

to seal off utterly is actually 'draughty as arseholes' (p. 13), and most buildings in Old Tornwich prove to be creaking and pitching affairs, in inevitable contact with the howling north-easterly outside which '[searches] out every chink' (p. 61) and cranny in the old brick façades. Also, the whole little town appears to be built on a dense network of underground passages carved in the legendary days of smuggling, so that every house lies in danger of being broken into through the cellar. In fact, the novel undermines completely the notion of the house as a safe, cosy, private space, as it is presented in the first chapter where Harry Ufford, the main protagonist of the book, is seen enjoying the privacy of his own living-room. The character of Ena is aware of a change in her perception of the house : 'Something like this changes you, somehow. When you think of your house, normally, you think of doors and windows that lock and walls that are solid. But suddenly you find yourself thinking about windowpanes that break and bolts that don't hold and smugglers' tunnels into the cellar' (p. 29). The permeability of the house is of course best epitomized in this novel by Death's voyeuristic ability to read the inner life of those he prepares to take, which is accompanied (more often than not) by his breaking into their house.

Thus, the house of unity is presented not only as a false, illusory ideal, but as a de-creative structure as well. Isolation from the outside world leads to alienation, madness, death. Hence the redeeming, regenerating effect of Clare's open window in The Girl Green as Elderflower : the house is viable only when kept

unclosed, in deep interaction with reality outdoors. A similar, negative valuing of unity emerges in Malouf's Child's Play. Not unlike Greg Ramsay in The Suburbs of Hell, the narrator-terrorist of the novella tends to conceive of his dwelling-place (a small, one-room apartment which he rents in an old Italian palazzo) as completely cut off, severed from the outside world. Although the room is actually part of an inextricable tangle of dark corridors, passages and inhabited suites, the terrorist wishfully ignores this patent dividedness and prefers to think of his own quarters as isolated, unrelated, suspended inside the building. 'I have no clear picture of how the rooms and passageways in this part of the builing are connected or where my room sits among them. . . . It is better like that' (p. 5-6).

In this sense the flat is made to reflect the monolithic sense of his own being, freed from fragmentation, which the narrator himself strives to achieve. Indeed, we have noted in Chapter 2 how he tended to conceive of his own existence in isolation from any kind of context whatsoever, whether spatial or temporal. He views his commitment to the assassination as a neat, complete withdrawal from the confusing and overwhelmingly complex flux of life, and as a stepping out of his ordinary self. We have observed, too, that this toying with identities is aimed at the restoration of an original, complete, comprehensive personality similar to that of a child -- potentially whole. Interestingly, this (thwarted) impulse towards homogeneity seems to go hand in hand in the novel with an unqualified (albeit oblivious) embrace of anti-creative principles. Indeed, the very identity of the

terrorist's chosen victim, his indisputable representativeness of the constructive powers of the imagination, suggests that the issue at stake may bypass a mere questioning of the established social order. He intends to destroy the art as much as the artist : what his action ultimately questions is the notion of life itself. Therefore it seems appropriate that he should suicidally include himself in the major breakdown he undertakes to bring about, since he comes to see his own self as a character in a fiction he wants to destroy :

In entering so completely into his world, in training myself to respond, minute by minute, to the subtle shifts of feeling and sudden bold intuitions that created it, I am fitting myself to become at last one of his characters, the one whose role it is to bring all that fictive creation down about his ears and to present him with his end. (p. 92)

Thus, the overall thrust of the novella is a decreative one, a wooing of death. In fact, much of the irony that pervades the story emerges from the protagonist's consistent failure to assess the full implications involved in the course of action he has decided to take : indeed, he sincerely hopes to resume his 'standard', unscathed self once the murder is accomplished. In symbolical terms, he remains unaware till the end of the presence of time and change inside his 'house', which he sought to exclude as part of his revocation of multiplicity -- he ignores the imminence of death despite his (unconscious) dedication to its advent.

Yet, someone does try to alert him. Coming back from the office one evening he meets, quite unexpectedly, one of his

faceless neighbours in the form of an old lady who has fallen in a dark stairway of the palazzo and whom he helps, half reluctantly, to get back home. The old woman, who mentions her age 'as if fifty years were no more than the little space of darkness between us' (p. 102), ushers him into a flat that immediately assails his ears with the shrillness of birdsongs : the place, it appears, is full of birds of all kinds, either stuffed and rigid or dizzily fluttering in cages ; every spot in the room that was not made available to a birdcage is occupied by a clock, a combination that almost nauseates the narrator :

There were also clocks: tall grandfathers in walnut and mahogany, inlaid or plain, with painted dials and wheels, chains, pendulums; slim grandmothers suspended; standing pieces in gilt and porcelain, their globes supported by naked nymphs or eighteenth-century shepherds; carriage clocks, water-clocks, clocks with a mechanism that went up and down like a sewing-machine needle, all ticking and tinkling. It was, I decided later, the mixture of shrill birdsongs and chiming of the clockworks that most unnerved me -- I couldn't imagine what kind of collector could have mixed them all up like this, the alive and the mechanical. It seemed profoundly crazy. (p. 103-04)

This powerful image of animal life in its crudest form ('They have to be fed special kinds of seed and their cages have to be cleaned -- a terrible business!' [p. 105]), immersed in the flow of time, seems particularly repulsive to the narrator, not least so probably because of the idea of death which it evokes : 'I hate the noise [the clocks] make, but I couldn't bear it if they stopped and just sat there with all their works going to rust' (p. 105). He finds it intolerable that this nightmarish process should have been going on within the walls of the very house in

which he lives : 'And the thought that it had been here all along, just metres away from my own room, changed the whole place for me. The plainness of my cell seemed violated by the proximity' (p. 104).

For the terrorist, then, to isolate oneself so thoroughly from the outside world and withdraw into a bare, austere room, is an attempt to get exempted from the normal condition of all ordinary living beings : from subjection to the action of time. Clearly, freedom from the tyranny of time could only be reached in death, and it is therefore appropriate that the Grim Reaper should be present inside the cocoon of the cell. But, typically, he remains unaware of this, draws no conclusion from his discovery of the birds and clocks. All he perceives is a vague, increasing sense of unease, a danger threatening his isolation from reality : 'Another breach in my perfect isolation in the world about me' (p. 101). He also has to half-acknowledge the undeniably heterogeneous quality of the house even when he longed to see it as one and apart :

The glimpse into the life beyond one of those doors has thrown the whole palace into a new light. I had thought of my own room as hanging up there detached and in darkness, arrived at by its own set of stairways and utterly sealed off. Now it is part of a system that also contains, just below and to the right, . . . that room filled with clocks and songbirds . . . (p. 106)

'Part of a system' : the narrator catches a fleeting glimpse here of what he refuses to see in any case : he belongs to a community (a principle of heterogeneity) whose demands may not be so easy

to deny. Nevertheless, he remains faithful to his dedication to unity (associated with ego and the thrust of terrorism) -- and although the idea of death is never overtly faced or recognized it constantly torments him from this point onwards, disturbs him in his dreams.

I think of this encounter as being the first of my 'dreams' -- a dream that I cannot interpret. The fact is that till then my nights in that little box of a room had been mostly dreamless, as if my sleep reflected the blankness of its walls . . . These last nights have been not troubled exactly, but coloured by extraordinary fantasies. (p. 106)

He tries to convey the mood of his first dream by referring to a photograph whose light and atmosphere evoke the same emotion as the one felt when waking up. The picture, which he finds puzzling and hard to interpret, portrays five expectant figures waiting for a boat on a deserted shore. Its strangeness resides in the attitude of the characters, none of whom seems to acknowledge the existence of the others ; some of them are young, others older ; their respective clothe-styles suggest appurtenance to different social classes, and surprisingly enough to different epochs altogether. It is this disconnectedness, the isolation of the figures inside the photograph, that accounts for the immense sadness with which it fills the narrator : 'It is a sadness that seems inevitable, and to be in the very nature of things' (p. 111). The figures, quite clearly, belong to the dimension of history and the picture, which fails to make sense to the terrorist, is an evocation of death, the great equalizer. The boat awaited will take them (take him) across the Styx to the

Underworld...

Also, as a mode of representation the photograph has some conceptual bearing on the notion of death. Photography freezes time, provokes stasis. As Roland Barthes comments :

If photography is to be discussed on a serious level, it must be described in relation to death. It's true that a photograph is a witness, but a witness of something that is no more. . . . This is an enormous trauma for humanity, a trauma endlessly renewed. Each reading of a photo . . . is implicitly, in a repressed manner, a contact with what has ceased to exist, a contact with death. I think that is the way to approach the photographic enigma, at least that is how I experience photography : as a fascinating and funereal enigma.¹

In a sense, then, the picture stands in the same relationship to the concept of multiplicity as the terrorist's room. It is a fragment out of flux, whereas the room is constructed as a fragment out of space. Both structures tend to evoke stasis, to revoke heterogeneity, yet the room is literally 'invaded' by the complex architectural system to which it belongs (by the building as a whole), and the frame of the picture by the photographic content, by history and time (initiating change and multiplicity). In both cases the fragment is invaded by the system of which it is a part : unity contains within itself the seeds of fragmentation : as an ideal it is inaccessible : only multiplicity provides a context for survival.

In a later dream envisioned just before the assassination is

1 R. Barthes, 'On Photography', in The Grain of the Voice (Transl. L. Coverdale), New York : Hill and Wang, 1985, p. 356.



due to take place, the narrator sees himself leaving the shore of the photograph and wading into the sea -- which slowly turns into blood : 'The water was thick and warm, and I had the sick sensation that if the fog were to lift and light fell upon it, it would be red' (p. 134). Death, it seems, accompanies the narrator all the way in his flight from a world perceived as intolerably fragmented, even though he never consciously acknowledges its relevance ; his constant yearning for unity exemplified in the novel by his withdrawing into a private world of his own that he attempts to seal off imperviously from the context of reality, emerges as a denial of life that can find resolution only in death. When he eventually leaves the room to perform his killing the terrorist is actually marching, weapon in fist and future in mind, towards his own end.

3 the house fragmented

The house can also symbolize successful adaptation to the environment, emancipation from the homogeneous premises of European discourse. As I suggested in the first section of this chapter, attunement to landscape is encoded in architecture in that the Australian house tends to outgrow its former (vertical) structure, to expand horizontally as a conciliatory gesture towards the Other outside. In Tourmaline, for example, Stow does propose alternatives to the derivative notion of water-dependent, urban prosperity idealized as a pattern of 'tree-lined streets' and 'buildings . . . shaded with vines' (p. 74). One of these is exemplified by the character of Dave Speed, who relinquishes the idea of a house altogether and sets about to learn the same 'tolerance of deprivation' (p. 67) as the natives ; he lives in the bush, in an open camp 'radiating out to the horizons, aglare with broken quartz' (p. 67). This is horizontality par excellence : the constricting structure of the European house is broken through, walls are simply done away with.

An analogous sense of acclimatisation, of inner attunement to the demands of place, is achieved by the young David in Malouf's 12 Edmondstone Street, an autobiographical reconstruction of the lost house known in childhood. The house at 12 Edmondstone Street, South Brisbane, is recollected as a place hardly closed in, directly continuous with the spirit of the bush outside. As opposed to his father who deplores this state of affairs and keeps conceiving of a 'real' house as a substantial brick construction with 'foundations set firm in the earth', and

made of materials 'expensively imported' (p. 10), the young David takes his environment for granted and absorbs it enthusiastically through all the pores of his skin. The house then ceases to be seen as the poor approximation of a distant model, and is accepted at last as an authentic expression of identity :

Airy, open, often with no doors between the rooms, [weatherboard houses] are on such easy terms with breezes, with the thick foliage they break into at window level, with the lives of possums and flying-foxes, that living in them, barefoot for the most part, is like living in a reorganized forest. The creak of timber as the day's heat seeps away, the gradual adjustment in all its parts, like a giant instrument being tuned, of the house-frame on its stumps, is a condition of life that goes deep into consciousness. It makes the timberhouse-dweller, among the domesticated, a distinct sub-species, somewhere between bushie and brick-and-mortar man. (p. 10-11)

The house is beginning to cast roots. To take up Dave Speed's favourite expression : it is 'coming true' -- like its inhabitants who gradually unlearn the hot, heavy dietary customs they tended to stick to at first (see p. 55). This attunement is temporal as well as spatial. The house links up with the past of the place and defines itself as its immediate, natural continuation. This is why the child David, when he explores the area of darkness wedged between the ground and the floorboards of the house (the equivalent, perhaps, of Freud's cellar), is struck by the truly Jungian depths of the 'foundations' : the house rests on layer upon layer of sediment of human history :

Cinders have been spread over the topsoil, but if you scratch a little you find earth. It is black, rather. And if you scratch further you come upon debris, bits of broken

china, bent forks, old tin pannikins, encrusted nails and pins, which suggest that habitation here might go back centuries. History tells us, of course, that it does not (we discount the abos), but I don't believe it. History belongs to the world of light. The debris under the cinders, under the thin topsoil of under-the-house, bears the same relation to history as the dark of our stump forest to the lighted rooms above. They belong to different dimensions. (p. 44)

Interestingly, the process of adaptation described here seems to run in parallel with a process of fragmentation. Yet, as in Child's Play, the initial impulse underlying the narrative is a longing for unity : Malouf strives to recreate, through the articulation of his memories, a house which would transcend the fact of fragmentation. He attempts to reach back in imagination for the house in its 'prelapsarian' condition of wholeness and integrity, before it was done up by Father and divided into flats, 'as it was in my first experience of it, when I was not yet eight years old; and it is this whole house I want to go back to and explore' (p. 12). The house at 12 Edmondstone Street is thus reconstructed as a tight, reticulated matter : 'Air circulates from room to room through a maze of interconnecting spaces' (p. 22). It is informed by a dense pattern of invisible threads that link its parts together -- which allows Our Burglar to find his way (with amazing, visionary perspicacity) straight to the cashbox. However, fragmentation appears to resist unflinchingly the efforts made by imagination to transcend it. Despite the author's declared ambition to build a house that would be whole, the final picture emerging in 12 Edmondstone Street falls apart in a pattern of definite, separate areas subtly demarcated by invisible yet real boundaries. The maid's

room, for instance, is totally out of bounds, an enclave of alien life within the walls of the house :

Cassie's Room belongs to the life she lives apart from us, across clear boundaries that begin and end at seven o'clock at night and seven the following morning, and other, less clear but equally inviolable, that begin at some point, far to the left along the Front Verandah, where you might get a look into her room. I test the point continually. Can I see? Now can I? (p. 18)

Mother's Room, an Ali Baba's cave 'full of temptations to small hands' (p. 24), and the Front Room, a gaudy shrine exposing the glaring attractions of vices like smoking and drinking and gambling (see p. 49), equally lie under a tacit ban not to be trespassed upon.

Again, as in Child's Play and in Stow's fiction, the house as a space of unity reveals itself as unfathomable, impenetrable, irretrievably lost. This is the conclusion reached at the end of 12 Edmondstone Street : unity as a notion cannot be conceptualized (let alone represented) : the European ideal has become culturally irrelevant. The loss is a physical one. The body that used to experience the microcosmic universe of the house as a natural extension of itself, is one that the adult narrator of the essay has grown out of touch with :

That body is out of reach. And it isn't simply a matter of its being forgotten in us -- of a failure of memory or imagination to summon it up, but of a change in perceiving itself. What moving back into it would demand is an act of un-remembering, a dismantling of the body's experience that would be a kind of dying, a casting off, one by one, of all the tissues of perception, conscious and not, through which our very notion of body has been remade. (p. 64)

Indeed this body, while outgrowing its former, forgotten form, has been fragmented by new experience. There is a suggestion that the sexual experience, among others, may have constituted a salient threshold in this process. The mouth, for example, duplicated itself in another instrument altogether when, 'after its long re-creation of itself as a speaking organ, [it] has become a finger-pad to test the subtlest texture of things, a third eye for seeing colours the rainbow missed, sighting new horizons --' (p. 65).

Thus, although the whole impetus of the essay manifestly tends towards a retrieval of unity, the 'walls' of fragmentation are eventually recognized as unbreachable. The last page of 12 Edmondstone Street points to a newly-conceived possibility : the acceptance of this fragmentation as essential to survival, as the way of the future :

A limit. A wall we cannot go through. . . . [Memory] has drawn us through room after room towards a past body, an experience of the world that cannot be entered, only to confront us with a future body that can. Memory is deeper than we are and has longer views. When it pricked and set us on, it was the future it had in mind. (p. 65)

Memory, as this passage indicates, plays a crucial role in the re-ordering of experience involved in 12 Edmondstone Street. The text of the past is re-membered (as a counter thrust reversing the dis-memberment brought about by imperialism), and memory has to re-structure itself in the process, to effect 'a change in perceiving itself' (p. 64) as a perceptual apparatus. It is

significant in this respect that David should be expelled from the house every evening (a state of affairs which he regrets and rebels against) because he has his cot in the liminal zone of the verandah : the house has to be re-entered time and again, every morning, as so many acts of imaginative recovery. This implies a process of constant reinterpretation, or reassessment, of the house, quite incompatible with a perception of it as one, unified. Through the agency of memory, reality is re-membered as a fragmented, de-centred text.

Perhaps it is this daily experience of being cast out and then let in again that has made the house and all its rooms so precious to me. Each morning I step across the threshold and there it is, a world recovered, restored. (p. 21)

Thus, the house as a symbol for unity of being is made into a space of exclusion, a representation of the inaccessible. Unity is discarded as unviable, culturally irrelevant. A similar movement towards fragmentation is discernible in Harland's Half Acre, and encoded in the house metaphor. As a child, Frank is taken away from the familial house, to be brought up and cared for by an aunt who has just lost her only son. He then feels deprived, very suddenly, of the womb-like quality of warmth and proximity that characterized his father's farm, and agonizes over the clean swept spaces of his aunt's house ; he gets lost in the large bed which, for the first time in his life, he has all for himself. In fact, to be thus expelled from the 'communal warmth and breath' (p. 17) of the fatherly house is to be made aware of new fragmentation : 'His aunt's house had seven rooms instead of

just one' (p. 8). Frank's vision of the world then organizes itself around the poles of the two distant, antithetical houses : one that is deeply congruent³ physically and emotionally, 'the realest place he knew' (p. 13), and one that is devoid of closeness, fragmented, but happens to be the place where he lives : 'His two worlds were quite clear to him. They looked different, they smelled different, they had a different quality of warmth and cold. One was original, it was the place he came from. The other was the one he was in' (p. 10).

Naturally, this polarization between extremes of unity and fragmentation recalls the distinction between the Old World and the New. Frank's first house, from which he is banished from infancy, comes to stand in his eyes for the fulfilment that results from partaking in a community of being ; and, quite appropriately, it is during his stay in the other house that the budding artist, who will devote his existence to celebrating fragmentation, is granted a first moment of vision where he discerns every object in its specific distinctness, and accedes with penetrating lucidity to a recognition of the quintessential dividedness of reality :

It was the quality of his seeing that was changed. Every tree now started out of the earth as a separate object newly made; not a peach tree, one of a row, but this tree and no other, all the trees in their rows utterly separate one from another and casting shadows of individual shape on the sloping earth, which was all rough clods, each one golden brown and also lighted from within, and so real it came to you as if it had been flung clean at your head. (p. 14-15)

This discovery launches Frank on his career as a painter, which

the rest of the novel retraces step by step. However, before he achieves critical recognition and (mainly posthumous) fame, he has to tramp through the Queensland hinterland ^{for years,} in search of the odd job, and to embrace 'the ordinary miseries of the poor' (p.43) ; it is significant that even then he consistently resists the appeal of home :

He might at any moment have gone home. It would have been most natural to him to burrow back into the warmth of his father's house, since he was, of them all, the one best fitted by temperament and inclination to settle and become in time their father's companion and keeper; to do otherwise was to go against himself. But it was the way he went. He had some obscure sense that his life was meant to go crosswise and be led in defiance of his nature rather than in the easy expression of it. (p. 43-44)

In fact, the sense of communal unity embodied by the fatherly house and spontaneously attractive to one's unchecked nature, is perceived as deadly and de-creative, a negation of life's positive potentials. When Clyde, Frank's half-brother, commits suicide, the painter realizes : 'The fact is, we are all too close. We find it hard to stand on our own two feet -- I'm no different, only determined not to be beaten down' (p. 42). Acceptance of fragmentation, however uncongenial and hard to endure, is thus presented in Harland's Half Acre as a necessary pathway to survival. The house metaphor contributes to this effect. In this novel, as in 12 Edmondstone Street, Malouf makes the house the site of a fragmentation which subsumes the simple polarities created by the opposition between the Old World and the New. Not only is the enclosing structure of the European

house (symbolic for imperial ideology) opened, unlocked ; it is also re-ordered in a completely new pattern, reconstructed in de-centred terms, as a way of undermining the centralist, hegemonic assumptions which underlie the metropolitan discourse.

CHAPTER 4

THE JOURNEY TOWARDS UNITY

1 A journey towards emptiness

A first 'itinerary' regularly followed by Stow and Malouf's characters as an attempt to overcome or come to terms with the plight of alienation, consists of an inner journey that takes them away from fragmentation on a quest for some luring notion of unity that seems to be nagging at them constantly, and which they stubbornly pursue against the evidence of reality. In fact, Rob Coram in The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea eventually has to relinquish this yearning for wholeness as incompatible with the demands of the multiple world in which he lives, and to accept the hard necessity of facing existence in its quality of acknowledged dividedness. On the other hand Johnno and the terrorist in Child's Play seem to be pushing much further their journey towards unity, in that they live up to their dedication to it right to the end -- and ultimately sacrifice themselves in the name of its cause. Indeed, quite logically, it appears that in the process of transcending fragmentation they are led in the first place to cancel the fundamental boundary that demarcates subject and object ; reconciliation with the outside world then takes place through the interfusion of self and other. This necessitates on the part of the self-conscious individual a preliminary denial of his own assertiveness, in preparation for the mystical, imaginative experience of communion with otherness; which, in turn, involves death of a kind, a necessary purgatorial disintegration of the ego, that alone will allow the liberated self to flow unhampered into the general flux of the universe. It is therefore appropriate that Johnno and the narrator-protagonist

of Child's Play, who strive to restore to existence some eclipsed aspects of their selves and to integrate them into one complete undivided fullness of being, should both fall victim to their dissatisfaction with the perceived limits of the personality and their consequent restlessness with the successive roles attributed to them in the social scene. The journey towards unity invariably results in a relinquishing of individual existence, an unquestioning embrace of death.

The same pattern is reproduced in two other novels by Stow and Malouf, To the Islands and An Imaginary Life respectively. These can be seen as part of a trend in fiction which draws on the theme of the journey (a metaphor traditionally associated with imperial conquest), at once a physical and psychological journey, to represent allegorically the struggles of a White man to assimilate to himself the spirits of an alien land. To the Islands has been compared with Patrick White's Voss¹ : in both novels the protagonist launches himself on a journey during which a native of the new land inducts him in its metaphysical subtleties. In this process of initiation the White traveller is led gradually to relinquish the concepts and values that are inherent in his own tradition so as to be able to embrace those

1 See Helen Tiffin, 'Towards Place and Placelessness : Two Journey Patterns in Commonwealth Literature', in C. D. Narasimhaiah (ed), Awakened Conscience. Studies in Commonwealth Literature, New Delhi : Sterling Publishers, 1978, 146-63.

of his Black companion. Obviously An Imaginary Life can be seen to fit in the same pattern of journey towards 'selflessness', since in all three novels the same kind of self-denial has to take place, each time at the cost of life. The price to be paid by the White explorers for the ecstatic vision of ultimate unity which they are granted at the end of their quest, and in which they see themselves reconciled at last, in a mystical or communal way, with the land and its native inhabitants, is the death of their old expansive self. It is significant here that both Voss and Heriot (the protagonist of To the Islands) should be depicted initially as strongly assertive, indeed megalomaniac individuals, since this makes the scope of their imaginative journey towards humility all the more impressive. Similarly in An Imaginary Life Ovid's high degree of articulateness, implicit in his position as a writer (which makes him the embodiment, as it were, of the values of a civilization), seems to dissolve gradually as he sets out to unlearn the categorizing structures of language and to embrace, tentatively at first, then more resolutely, the vacuum of silence. The journey metaphor is used in these novels to explode the myth of conquest as it is presented in the Western tradition ; instead of leading to the authoritative imposition upon the new land of an inadequate order of power, language, religion, the journey now results in a paradox of 'decolonization' or emancipation from these structures, and in a newly-conceived receptiveness to the enrichment potentially contained in a communion with otherness.

But this needs to be qualified. Stephen Heriot's journey

towards self-denial is never completed in To the Islands, however intense his longing for reconciliation with otherness proves to be. Yet the process of his inner self-disintegration seems to have begun from the very start of the novel, since he is referred to in symbolic terms as a broken rock : 'He saw himself as a great red cliff, rising from the rocks of his own ruins'¹. In Heriot, the rock-like, old-school missionary who used to resort to the stock-whip to spread civilization and the Christian message among Aborigines, we witness a crumbling of the monolithic as he enters a major period of crisis in his existence and recognizes the inadequacy of the values on which he built his lifework. He defiantly smashes his small crucifix, thus recanting the faith that supported him in the past, and he is seized by the urge to bring down the little mission in the Kimberleys to which he has devoted his entire existence. He does so symbolically by hurling a stone at Rex, one of the Aborigines of the mission whom he has adopted as his own son. In fact, the throwing of the stone re-enacts the massacre at Onmalmeri of hundreds of Aborigines by a few White settlers, which Heriot has attempted to expiate vicariously all his life through self-sacrifice and devotion to the natives. The stone signifies the meaninglessness and failure of his lifelong attempts to atone for the guilt of his race -- indeed he endorses this guilt afresh, reactivates it on the level

1 R. Stow, To the Islands, Woollahra : Pan Books (Picador edition), 1983, p. 2. All subsequent references are to this edition and given in the text.

of his own personal experience. The throwing of 'the first stone' (p. 44) thus initiates the dismantling of the edifice of Heriot's self. Accordingly, he leaves the mission with the apparent intention to commit suicide. This he is prevented from doing by the faithful Justin, another Black man who follows him in his flight and accompanies him to the end in his peregrinations across the 'lost man's country' (p. 91) that lies north, towards the islands offshore which offer sanctuary, according to Aboriginal beliefs, to the souls of the dead. During this pilgrimage Heriot undertakes to review and reassess one by one the values which he has taken for granted and to which he has clung so steadily, values which have led him to overlord with unflinching authority the little mission whose destiny he presided over for years. He begins to see through the assumptions of self-righteousness which dictated his own masterful behaviour in the past. Therefore, it is symbolically appropriate that the only gun of the party, the emblem of the White man's disposition to dominate, should be wrestled over on the first day of the journey :

As he stood up Justin leapt at him and seized the rifle, and they struggled for it, thigh to thigh, in absolute silence, the black man and the white, with the murmur of water drifting up from below the pool and the horses restlessly watching from the sandbank. When the shot came, the cliffs took it and threw it back and forwards between them like a sharp, close crack of thunder, and the men froze. Then Justin stepped back, holding the rifle. (p. 62-63)

Thus, with reluctance, Heriot lets go of the attribute of his leadership and power, which is taken over by the native. This,

naturally, cannot but seem unsatisfactory : even though Justin leads the way with patience and warm-heartedness, the shift of the gun strikes one more as a reversal than an actual dismembering of power structures. Malouf's An Imaginary Life will prove equally unresolved in this respect, even more so perhaps since it will appear that Heriot resists self-effacement with more obstinacy than Ovid does in the other novel. However, from this moment onwards it is Justin who keeps custody of the gun and assumes the guidance, while Heriot apparently accepts this switching of the roles with increasing willingness, up to the point where he seems happy to follow passively, 'like a child' (p. 85). In fact, the extent to which he moves towards acknowledging the validity of Justin's (gentle) rule is indicated by the contrasting lack of reluctance with which he re-enacts the handing over of the rifle at the end of the novel. Significantly, the gun is then intended for Rex, since he is the one who has been wronged most cruelly by Heriot's dictatorial behaviour. But through Rex it is the whole Aboriginal race who acquires the symbol of authority ; Rex, as mentioned above, stands for the victims of Onmalmeri, and therefore, as Heriot's words suggest, he must be the agency through which to effect the reparation : "I know you'd like them [Heriot's watch, knife and rifle], and you've earned them, and you'll have them, too, but say they're for Rex" (p. 121).

Thus, Rex as a character constitutes the structural device by which Stow brings together the personal and social aspects of Heriot's reconciliation. The two levels, it appears, cannot be

dissociated. Heriot's realization that he has hurt Rex not out of hatred but out of love, out of possessiveness in love, is all part of the awareness, gradually achieved, that his dealings with the Blacks generally were blistered by his tendency to impose his will uncompromisingly. This he understands when meeting, in the course of his journey with Justin, an old black woman to whom he decides, somewhat magnanimously, to offer (to impose) his own 'invaluable' friendship. Upon her apparent failure to respond, however, he explodes : "Ah, you thing, . . . you thing of dirt and wrinkles and pubic hair" (p. 75). Till he realizes that the woman is blind, and is then overwhelmed by a surge of compassion in the light of which he sees her, for the first time perhaps, as his own equal :

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. (p. 76)

Only now that he has discovered the power of compassion can Heriot understand, in retrospect, what his own selfishness made him blind to in the past. He acknowledges to himself how unjust to Rex he has been, and how possessive in his love for Esther, his black foster-daughter : 'It had been tempting providence, surely, to have been so proud of her' (p. 99) ; so that when she eloped with Rex, thus challenging her father's own plans for her, and then died later on in childbirth, Heriot laid all the blame on the seducer-begetter, and expelled him from the mission. But

he questions his past attitudes now that he can, freed from the rigidity of his previous assumptions, catch a glimpse of the Other from the inside :

. . . for the first time he remembered Rex alive, and what it must have been to be Rex, to take pleasure in clothes and women, to be sullen and rebellious and know the causes, to suffer injustices and to invent injustices in order to resent them. He thought of Rex dancing by canegrass fire and delighting in the rhythms of his body, or subsiding into sleep under shade at midday, or swimming, or hunting, or sitting round a fire at night talking or singing to a guitar. Rex's life presented itself whole to him, the struggle against sordor, and then the defiant return to sordor, and the bitter pride underlying it; the old tribal grievances, real or inflated by legend; the fights and the humiliations, the quick gestures of generosity and the twists of cruelty; all the ugly, perverse, aspiring passions of a living man. (p.155)

Thus, during his journey through the landscapes of the North-West, Heriot comes to new awarenesses about himself : the exploration takes place on two levels at the same time. His discovery of the land and its ways, to which Justin holds the key, leads him to inner, corresponding realizations about his own personal experience. For example, his noticing that the Aborigines love the animals they have to kill for subsistence ("I've noticed that always about you people, how you love your prey. There's some wisdom there"[p. 101]) clearly parallels his discovery that he too loved the one he 'killed'. The two different planes on which the journey develops are brought together by the imagery of the novel : the landscapes through which Justin and Heriot ride are dotted with boulders 'cast down from the crumbling cliffs' (p. 49), among hills referred to as

'vast crumbling wall[s]' (p. 57), into valleys whose 'floor[s are] covered with broken rocks, the[ir] sides cliffs' (p. 73) ; so that the scenery, while depicted in strictly realistic terms, is made into an image for Heriot himself. Also, those broken rocks and pebbles strewn over the whole range of his itinerary suggest that every step Heriot takes towards self-awareness enhances the process of his own self-disintegration. However, paradoxically, he never comes to terms with his inborn fear of self-annihilation ; this the rock imagery pointedly indicates. Heriot has a dream in the course of the novel, where he is seen to cling desperately to the rock of himself as it is threateningly exposed to a destructive tide of light :

Heriot dreamed, under his dark rock, of a surge of light pursuing him over the plains, crests and combers of flowing light reaching for him as he fled, in astonishment and terror, over the bare earth.

Oh God, cried Heriot, running for the hills, Oh God, preserve me.

A cliff rose out of the ground in front of him, he fell against it, seizing it with his hands . . . but the tide was coming and there was no time to stand, he clawed at the cliff and climbed, his hands shaking, his feet slipping, beyond the 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.

Give me strength, he cried, give me strength against the ravenous light. I am old and weak, too weak to bear annihilation. But his strength was gone and there could be no more climbing, he could only cling and pray as the breakers rose towards his feet. . . .

Now I become nothing, whispered Heriot, now and forever, for ever and ever, I am no more. He closed his eyes, waiting, clinging to the rock. (p. 78)

This passage illustrates Heriot's ongoing recalcitrance to surrender to nothingness, which apparently contradicts his

declared purpose for setting out on his journey : to reach the islands of the dead and offer himself to the embrace of nature, giving up the struggle. Heriot seems to oscillate all the time between his wish for empathy with the Other (whether man or land), possible only in spite of the self, and the unsilenced demands of his irreducible ego. This basic tension is crystallized, in the rendering of the dream, by the phrase : 'Then the intolerable sweetness washed over him' (p. 78). Death, as the oxymoron suggests, is valued ambiguously. In fact, Heriot's nightmare induces in him a suddenly lucid awareness of the distance he has covered since the beginning of his symbolical journey towards self-annihilation, and the imminence of the outcome now fills him with fright. Again, this is rendered in terms of the cliff metaphor : as Heriot starts awake beneath the rock overhang where he had sought refuge the night before, he seems to discern dangerous insinuating crannies in it -- and he sees its inevitable downfall as equivalent to his own destruction.

When he woke again there was the rock hanging above his head, and he remembered all his journeying past cliffs rising out of their ruins, the huge size of the boulders that strewed the valleys, and the debris of vast and ancient landslides. Because of this his eyes fastened apprehensively on the cliff overhanging his sleeping-place; he saw the cracks in it, thought he saw them widen, thought he heard the grating of moving surfaces and sharp sounds of fission. . . .

'Let's go,' Heriot begged, 'before these cliffs fall. Let's go quickly, Justin.' (p. 79)

Heriot, then, keeps shivering at the mere thought of his own dissolution, in spite of the process of self-erosion necessarily

involved in his quest for other values and which he seems to accept, indeed to long for, with part of his being. This ambivalent attitude persists until he meets Rusty in the desert, another murderer who has fled into the wilderness to avoid human justice and expiate his guilt through self-imposed sufferings. The image of the crumbling cliff crops up again in the course of their conversation when Heriot, who obviously has self-destruction in mind, implicitly confesses his sense of powerlessness in the face of death : "If I had strength," [he] said, "I could go to those cliffs and break them. Then there'd be boulders, and I'd break them, and break them into smaller stones, and break them into pebbles" (p. 89). Again, this passage contains unresolved the two contradictory impulses which animate Heriot with respect to death : while the image evidently refers, in symbolic terms, to his own (unwilling) surrender to the forces of disintegration, when considered literally it also implies a strong self-assertiveness, an expansiveness which works to inflict drastic changes upon the world -- and thus contravenes the striving for surrender.

There seems to be no way out of this paradox, which is given expression again at the close of the novel, when Heriot reaches the coast and prepares to lie down at last in acceptance of death. To his considerable disillusion, the sea stretches vast and empty at the foot of the cliffs : 'His dreams and his fears all true, and there were no islands' (p. 125). He then eventually manages to enact the symbolical destruction of himself by throwing yet another stone, a piece of broken rock, from the top

of the cliff, in an attempt to 'give to the sea what the sea through an eternity of destruction was working to engulf, this broken rock' (p.125). This looks like a final acceptance, on Heriot's part, of death, of this self-dissolution which oppressed him earlier on as he dreamed in a cold sweat of a similarly ravenous surge, of a tide of fractious light that was striving to absorb and annihilate him. At the end of his journey, then, Heriot seems to have attained some kind of reconciliation at last with the idea of his own death. As he settles down, at the end of the book, on a rocky ledge overlooking the sea and sets about searching the horizon for the hint of a landfall, Heriot is purged of all human emotions, 'neither hoping nor fearing' (p. 126). Yet, this apparent peace of mind (if that is what it is) is contradicted by the terms in which his last gesture, the throwing of the broken rock, is rendered ; again, it is as though he could effect his ultimate annihilation only by acting decisively. Heriot does not belong with those people who accept their death by gently closing the eyes and floating away as if in sleep. Rather, his flinging the rock of himself into the sea strikes as an expression of 'the momentousness of his strength', of 'his power to alter the world at will' (p. 125), and hence as a last attempt to establish the independence of his own self. His final assessment of the strangeness of his own soul's country could well be a recognition that the paradox of his attitude to death, and to the integrity of the ego, remains ultimately unsolved. Clearly, Heriot's dilemma here anticipates Tourmaline ; one can feel already why Stow should have felt so strongly attracted to Taoism, which will provide at last a framework in

which inaction is possible as a narrative strategy -- as it is not, obviously enough, in a journey novel.

An Imaginary Life compares remarkably well with To the Islands in terms of tension between self and Other. In this regard, Malouf's novel proves slightly at variance with Stow's in that its dynamic is one of a complete swing from an extreme to the other ; contrary to Heriot's, Ovid's acceptance of returning to the earth proves whole-hearted and unqualified.

Yet Ovid, relegated by August^{an} to the outer edge of the Roman Empire (to a small village called Tomis, lost in the Scythian steppes on the shores of the Black Sea), finds himself at odds at first with the vacuum of the landscape :

The country lies open on every side, walled in to the west and south, level to the north and to the northeast, with a view to infinity. The sharp incline of the cliffs leads to sky. The river flats, the wormwood scrubs, the grasslands beyond, all lead to a sky that hangs close above us, heavy with snow, or is empty as far as the eye can see or the mind imagine, cloudless, without wings.

But I am describing a state of mind, no place.
I am in exile here.¹

The scenery, Ovid soon realizes, seems centuries away from the notion of a garden made simply to please the eye. As opposed to Italy which has been shaped into a land of placid beauty by

1 D. Malouf, An Imaginary Life, Woollahra : Pan Books (Picador edition), 1984, p. 15-16. All subsequent references are to this edition and given in the text.

centuries of industrious efforts to impose upon it an artificial order of 'terraces, fields, orchards, pastures, . . . irrigated gardens' (p. 28) and thus mould it to man's image, his place of exile is still unmade by man, *primaeval as it were, and thus* alien to him. Therefore, as a reaction to what he sees as the intractable inhospitality of a landscape that seems wintry at all times of the year, Ovid transposes in imagination the springtime efflorescence of his lost Italy upon the drabness of the native scrub : his sighting a scarlet poppy among stalks of wild corn reminds him so vividly of the Italian countryside that its bright colourfulness comes flowing back into his mind's eye :

Scarlet!

It is the first color I have seen in months. Or so it seems. Scarlet. A little wild poppy, of a red so sudden it made my blood stop. . . . Scarlet. And with it all the other colors come flooding back, as magic syllables, and the earth explodes with them, they flash about me. I am making the spring. With yellow of the ox-eyed daisy of our weedy olive groves, with blue of cornflower, orange of marigold, purple of foxglove, even the pinks and cyclamens of my mother's garden that I have forgotten all these years. They come back... though there was, in fact, just a single poppy, a few blown petals of a tissue fineness and brightness, round the crown of seeds. (p. 31)

This Proustian vision of a past recovered, however ecstatic and exhilarated the rendering given by Ovid as a narrator, is actually disruptive of the primeval blankness of the landscape, of its 'frozen waste . . . without a tree or a flower or a made field' (p. 30). Ovid's critical attitude to the landscape finds further expression, at a later stage in the novel, in his search for aesthetic pleasure in the created patterns offered by a small

garden of his own design which, built from seeds patiently gathered on his excursions through the scrub, attests to his irrepressible tendency to find fault with the 'primordially' of the scenery and to superimpose upon it the more sophisticated contrivances of his own mind. In this he recklessly ignores the tacit disapproval of the natives who consider his gardening activities as useless and 'foolish beyond belief' (p. 67), discontinuous with the natural order of their lives : 'Everything else about us exists purely for use. The women wear no ornaments. What they sew has good strong seams but not a stitch that is fanciful. Only my flowers are frivolous, part of the old time I have not quite abandoned' (p. 67).

Clearly, Ovid's relationship to his country of exile displays far-reaching analogies with the standard attitude of the uprooted, disoriented colonizers of Australia. The imaginative incapacity to visualize accurately the reality of a different world owing to an 'anachronistic' faithfulness to irrelevant patterns of perception, is symbolized in An Imaginary Life by the aperture of Ovid's eyes, neither open nor shut but turned upon themselves : 'The moon rode high over the reeds, its face halved by a line of cloud like a lidded eye -- my own eye, half-waking, and open like an owl's eye, half closed in the dark' (p. 23). Towards the end of the novel, Ovid is seen again 'half-closing [his] eyes against the dazzle' (p. 138) when, crossing the frozen surface of the Danube which then represented the furthest boundary of the Empire, he is poised precariously between two worlds -- thus epitomizing the ambivalent position of colonial man. The crossing of the frontier is of course a symbolically

decisive step since it really means an acceptance on Ovid's part to let go of what is known and enter the territory of the Other. Quite appropriately, then, his reconciliation with the strangeness of the landscape has to take place on the other side of the river, as the outcome of a long journey of exploration.

For obviously Ovid's first rejection of the landscape is all part of his general attitude to otherness. Quite surprisingly perhaps for a poet who has been concerning himself all his life with man's ever-protean capacity to metamorphose himself in various shapes, Ovid conceives of metamorphic transformation at the beginning of the novel not as a meeting with alterity but, on the contrary, as a natural process by which the individual attempts to become himself more fully :

Our bodies are not final. We are moving, all of us, in our common humankind, through the forms we love deeply in one another, to what our hands have already touched in lovemaking and our bodies strain towards in each other's darkness. Slowly, and with pain, over centuries, we each move an infinitesimal space towards it. We are creating the lineaments of some final man, for whose delight we have prepared a landscape, and who can only be god. (p. 29)

Yet, Ovid does encounter otherness, on a number of occasions, in dreams ; every time the experience puzzles him with the realization that something in him, deeply buried, responds, however inconclusive the communication which then seems to establish itself beyond the spheres of language. The first of those dreams confronts him with a horde of fabulous, powerful, gigantic centaurs, who whirl around him while uttering cries of mourning, asking to be allowed back in a world from which they

have been excluded : 'Let us cross the river into your empire. Let us into your lives. Believe in us. Believe' (p. 24). One of the creatures then comes to a halt in front of the dream-persona, and some kind of comprehension appears to start flowing between the two :

I put out my hand, touched it.

And something came out of the depths of my sleep towards the point where we stood facing one another, like a reflection rising to the surface of a mirror. It was there, outside me, a stranger. And something in me that was its reflection had come up to meet it.

I woke, cried out. And the word I uttered was not in my own tongue.

I have tried since to remember that word, but the sound has sunk back into my sleep. If I could recall that sound, and speak the word again, I think I would know what it is I have named, what it is that I have encountered. What it is out there that is waiting to receive me. (p. 24-25)

This passage calls for a number of comments. To begin with, it contains a first implicit reference to the goal of Ovid's imaginative journey : to retrieve whatever it is that lurks 'out there' and waits to be uncovered. Clearly, the object of his quest is the notion of otherness itself, the 'stranger', who stands outside and has to be recuperated, internalized. Also, the excerpt brings forth a suggestion that language, or rather, the unlearning of one's own tongue as a necessary preliminary stage to the imaginative voyage, might provide a possible means of achieving this retrieval through the development of an awareness of the language of the Other. This gradual, liberating dismissal of the categories inherent in any language, all-pervasive in the novel, also informs much of Heriot's quest in

To the Islands (see section 2 of this chapter). Finally, the description of the Other as a 'reflection rising to the surface of a mirror' seems to make 'it' not so much an extraneous entity essentially foreign to the self as an aspect of the identity that has been eclipsed or hypostatized by the self-conscious individual in the process of his development but which lies there still, inside, unbeknown to the conscious self, manifesting in dreams. This notably connects An Imaginary Life with Johnno and Child's Play where, as we have observed, the protagonists also devote their lives to the restitution of some glimpsed notion of a self that would be full, complete ; in Child's Play (and also, implicitly at least, in Johnno) this totality of being is epitomized in the concept of the child -- where all the undismissed possibilities are still gathered in potential. In An Imaginary Life the Child, an imagined boy companion of Ovid in his youth, was erased at puberty from the surface of his consciousness and survived only in his dreams : 'Sometime when my own body began to change and I discovered the first signs of manhood upon me, the child left and did not reappear, though I dreamt of him often enough in those early years, and have done so since' (p. 10). The Child now re-emerges from forgetfulness, appropriately in one of Ovid's dreams, as yet another embodiment of the Other.

I fall asleep thinking such thoughts, and half wake to find myself alone, with only the stars overhead, then fall into a deeper sleep, and dream; or wake again, I cannot tell which. I am conscious anyway that some animal has come up out of the dark and is staring at me. A wolf? Is it a wolf's snout I can feel, a wolf's breath? A deer's? Or is it the Child's? As in that earlier dream I am face to face with something

that is not myself or of my own imagining, something that belongs to another order of being, and which I come out of the depths of myself to meet as at the surface of a glass. Is it the child in me? Which child? Where does he come from? Who is he? (p. 52)

The Other, significantly, transcends the power of Ovid's imagination. Malouf signals in the 'Afterword' to the novel that the whole point in An Imaginary Life is precisely to confront the glib fabulist of the Metamorphoses, who readily peopled his poetic world with mere figments of the mind, unreal creatures invented purely to impress, with a representation of otherness that would compel belief and upset the notion of self as a firm or fixed entity. And indeed Ovid realizes, once in front of the Child, how totally he transcends, in his unimaginable alterity, any picturing of the Other as a simple extension of one's self.

I have invented nothing like it in my poems, that were full of strange creatures caught between man and some higher or lower creature, in a moment of painful transformation. It exceeds my imagining, that sharp little face with its black stare, and I think how poorly my poetry, with its elegant fables and pretty, explainable miracles, compares with the accidental reality of this creature who must exist (if it does exist) not to impress but simply because he has somehow tumbled into being. (p. 50)

In yet another dream of Ovid's, where sleep, apparently, liberates him sufficiently from himself to allow him to adopt in imagination the point of view of a puddle, he discovers through a new confrontation with the Other that communion with alterity will necessarily imply, quite terrifyingly, a previous acceptance of his own self-destruction. Although he enjoys at first the sensual experience of reflecting the warm blueness of the sky,

the soft lightness of the clouds, as soon as the sun sets he begins to dread the bite of the frost or the thirst of the wolf. The Child then arrives, and drinks the liquid of Ovid's metamorphosed self -- a process of absorption into otherness which he still perceives, at this stage of the novel, as frighteningly disruptive :

Another footfall, softer than the first. I know already, it is the Child. I see him standing taller than the deer against the stars. He kneels. He stoops towards me. He does not lap like the deer, but leaning close so that his breath shivers my surface, he scoops up a handful, starlight dropping from his fingers in bright flakes that tumble towards me, and drinks. I am broken again. The disturbance is fearful, a noisy crashing of waves against the edges of me. And when I settle he is gone. I am still, reflecting starlight. I sleep. I wake. (p. 62)

Later on, after Ovid gets the natives to capture the Child and he has to live in his permanent proximity, the closeness of his presence puts the poet ill at ease : 'I must, at first, be the only one he has contact with. I think, strangely, of the wolf in my dream that threatened to consume the whole pool of my being, and begin to be afraid' (p. 77). Obviously the Child, as a symbol for the Other, represents for Ovid at once an object of irresistible fascination and a threat to individuality -- a tension which makes Ovid akin to Heriot in To the Islands. Unlike Heriot, though, Ovid will resolve his dilemma, on the other side of the river, where the Child, the spirit of that place, will initiate him into the nature of otherness by disclosing patiently, one by one, the hidden beauties of the unprepossessing landscapes of Scythia.

Once he crosses the river, the ultimate limit of the known world, and takes stock of the landscape he just left from the vantage-point of the Other, Ovid suddenly sees it afresh, freed from any aesthetic prejudice, so that he is reconciled at last with the desolation of which he complained on the first page of the novel :

Back there in the scrublands beyond the river this lack of objects for the eyes to focus on seemed like deprivation of the spirit, and I spent my whole time longing for something to break the skyline, one of the dark cypresses of my home country, or a chestnut with the sun pouring through it, making every big leaf transparent, a luminous green. Here the immensity, the emptiness, feeds the spirit, and leaves it with no hunger for anything but more space, more light -- as if one had suddenly glimpsed the largeness, the emptiness of one's own soul, and come to terms with it, glorying at last in its open freedom. (p. 141)

Typically, the sense of reconciliation experienced here is arrived at through the matching in the mind of the inner and the outer emptiness ; Ovid comes to terms with the landscape by equating himself with it, by making the universe of his soul a microcosmic reflection of the larger one. What is striven for is a sense of unity, in which self and other merge within a single substance. Paradoxically, for all Ovid's self-effacement this impulse is imperialistic in essence : it tends towards the subsumption of otherness into the bounds of the self. An analogous sense of oneness with the environment is conveyed by another passage, where the same kind of ultimate reconciliation is rendered in terms of sheer self-expansiveness : Ovid's consciousness flows outwards, exceeding the physical limits of

his body, to grow at one with the landscape and fill its entire scope...

[The spirit] expands to become the whole landscape, as if space itself were its dimensions; filling the whole land from horizon to horizon and the whole arch of the sky, its quality now the purest air, a myriad particles of light, each one a little center from which the whole can be grasped at a single glance, and from whose vantage-point, above, I see those tiny figures crawling, who are the Child and myself. From a point far ahead I see us approaching. From a point a whole day's distance behind us, I see us moving away. (p. 142)

This somehow grandiose communion with the world at large also replicates itself on a much smaller scale as Ovid ultimately lies down in utter serenity to offer his body to the embrace of the earth; he then observes so closely the black soil to which he prepares to return, that he catches a glimpse of the subtle vibrations which animate the least of its particles. He becomes aware, while delighting in the delicate balance holding together 'the myriad round grains of the earth' (p. 146), of the all-encompassing process through which their energy transmits itself from the one to the Other. This reminds one of Alistair Cawdor, in Randolph Stow's Visitants, who achieves at the moment of death the same kind of insight into the general organization of the universe. Not unlike Ovid, Cawdor discovers in the atoms whirling in his dying body the image of a grander, cosmic scheme. Both of them are allowed ultimately a vision of essential unity where the infinitesimal is seen to reflect the infinite, and the whole spectrum of creation to be caught in the same movement of time-bound, onward flowing. The individual then comes to terms with

the problem of his place within the overall scheme of the universe, of which he now perceives himself as an organic part, since he integrally partakes in its irresistible flux. This yielding of the self to the flow of nature becomes the very means by which Ovid the exile eventually achieves a sense of place in An Imaginary Life, and overcomes his alienation ; significantly, the last words of his narrative are : 'I am there' (p. 152). Interestingly, too, this final reconciliation with an alien landscape painstakingly 'conquered' is described as a casting down of roots :

I lie down to sleep, and wonder if, in the looseness of sleep, I mightn't strike down roots along all the length of my body, and as I enter the first dream, almost feel it begin to happen, feel my individual pores open to the individual grains of the earth, as the interchange begins. When I wake I am entirely reconciled to the process. I shall settle deep into the earth, deeper than I do in sleep, and will not be lost. We are continuous with earth in all the particles of our physical being, as in our breathing we are continuous with sky. Between our bodies and the world there is unity and commerce. (p. 147)

This achieved sense of unity basically differentiates Ovid's journey from Heriot's which, as we have noted, finally falls short of its purpose. Whereas Ovid is allowed a vision of the reunification of the extremes of self and other, Heriot keeps wavering between the two, perceiving the world from a dual, dichotomic perspective. A close investigation of the way the two protagonists behave with regard to language, particularly the language of the Other, will confirm this observation.

2 A journey towards silence

It has been pointed out that Heriot carried in his head a whole anthology of European literature. In the course of the novel, somewhat out of context for someone who is riding in the bush, he quotes (from memory) or alludes to writers as diverse as Dante, Villon, Pascal, Baudelaire, and others¹. All his quotations have in common a concern with the idea of death, or with the fate of the soul after death. For example, at some stage through his journey into the wilderness, Heriot intones several stanzas of A Lyke-wake Dirge, which all end on the line : 'And Christ receive thy soul'(p. 77). Interestingly, Heriot sings the Dirge as an Aboriginal corroboree tune, and the superimposition of foreign words on the native melody appears to be found disruptive by the black singers whose voices are immediately silenced by the White man's. It seems that Heriot's linguistic (and literary) inheritance alienates him from his environment. In fact, as J. Beston remarks, the effect of the literary allusions is to enhance Heriot's already apparent isolation, since of course he alone can understand them. Words arise as a barrier between him and the world, locking him in his forlorn soliloquy.

Therefore, it becomes obvious that Heriot's reconciliation with the world should go hand in hand with a simultaneous coming

¹ John B. Beston lists them all, and restores the quotations to their context, in his article 'Heriot's Literary Allusions in Randolph Stow's To the Islands', Southerly 35 (1975), 168-77.

to terms with the strangeness of his tongue(s). To some extent, his journey involves a relinquishment of his own native language in favour of the idiom spoken by Justin, his loyal Aboriginal companion, which alone appears to lead to inner attunement to the place. This (qualified) linguistic adjustment, which underlies the (equally qualified) geographical one, makes him akin to Cawdor, in Visitants, who also gains a keener knowledge of his place of adoption by developing a command of the language native to it ; subtle harmonies are then brought to light as he takes stock afresh of a transmogrified, re-born environment. Like Heriot, Cawdor undergoes a whole development towards indigenization, manifest in his very physical appearance; his skin is so sun-tanned that even the natives would come to doubt at times whether he is black or not -- were it not for his white-flashing buttocks under the shower. At the end of the novel, when he gashes his own wrists and throat and his body gets so covered with dark coagulated blood that he becomes unrecognizable as a white man, one of the natives exclaims : 'Now he is a black man true' (Visitants, p. 181). It seems, appropriately, that this process of indigenization can be completed only in death, since it implies a gradual, thorough erosion of the informing structures of the self. In To the Islands Heriot undergoes an analogous development, evinced by his use of language. The tempestuous character who, at the beginning of the novel, quoted somewhat immoderately from the whole corpus of European literature and pronounced the name of the dead in front of the Blacks in ruthless defiance of their superstitions, seems to have

gone a long way when, at the close of his journey, he begins to sing an Aboriginal corroboree song for himself -- using, this time, Aboriginal words to give expression to his concern with death. Yet, in spite of this, Heriot's embrace of Justin's language reveals itself as slightly inconclusive, his progress towards indigenization as halting and tentative. Although he does at times surprise Justin by expressing himself in vernacular (and then declaring himself, with unconcealed pride, 'a blackfellow, son of the sun' [p. 68]), he always ends up by reverting to English. For example, hearing Justin refer to himself as Djanama in his mother tongue, he remarks that his own bush name is Arriet (a local adaptation of 'Heriot' of course), and seems happy to accept it as accurately denominative of his true identity ; yet, at the end of his journey, he appears to be questioning this by asking : 'Who am I? . . . My name was Heriot, son of the sun' (p. 124). Also, at the moment of parting with Justin he teaches him his Christian name, asking him to say it when he is dead :

'Promise you'll say my name.'

'I can't say you name,' Justin said. 'And I don't know all you name.'

'My name is Stephen.'

'Stephen,' said Justin. 'Real nice name, that.'

'Call me that. Say: "I'll call your name, Stephen."' (p. 120)

Again, Heriot stubbornly ignores the Aboriginal custom and insists, ironically, upon his own way even as he tries to break down the last barriers between Justin and himself. This incapacity to emancipate himself from ingrained patterns of

behaviour corresponds, appropriately, with his reluctance to accept his own death since by being called by his name he hopes to come back in spirit to the caller, alive still, from the islands of the dead. Thus, in typical fashion, he manages to combine belief in the native creed and dismissiveness of it. Again, just as he wavers between resistance and surrender to the forces of dissolution, Heriot keeps oscillating between his own use of language and that of the Other.

Justin himself, as a matter of fact, seems aware of the inadequacies of his own language as a way of relating to the outside world -- and, most significantly, all he can oppose, in the face of the landscape, to Heriot's unquenchable volubility, is the humility of his own silence. It seems that Heriot, if he is to achieve some kind of reconciliation with the landscape, will have to push to an extreme his unlearning of linguistic cognitive codes, and embrace silence, like his Black companion, as the one medium that will give him an intimation of the true nature of the universe. This would be in keeping with a pattern of 'delingualization' established by Patrick White in Voss. Voss is well aware too of the impedimental nature of language in one's quest for a fuller mode of communion with the Other as embodied by an alien landscape or a different race of people ; he knows, better than anyone else perhaps, how to communicate 'by skin and silence'¹ with the Aborigines, and it is rather appropriate that Dugald, one of the native guides of the expedition, should tear

1 P. White, Voss, London : Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1957, p. 182.

to pieces Voss' s last letter to Laura and commit the words to the wind, to the desert whose emptiness absorbs them beyond retrieval. Language is then replaced by the wordless, telepathic empathy which unites Voss and Laura from this point onwards. In Malouf's version of Voss (1986), an opera libretto commissioned by The Australian Opera, the parts allotted to Dugald and Jackie contain no words at all : they appear on the stage as dumb pantomimic figures dancing their role, and contrast Voss's tremulous baritone with the blank dignity of their own silence. Naturally, the transposition of the Voss story in the operatic mode led to a notable paradox : the whole epopee of Voss's conquest through silence of inner and outer alien landscapes had to be conveyed, somewhat clamorously, in dialogues carved in words, with voices made of flesh. This conflict is given expression in the last scene of Malouf's libretto, where the statue of Voss is 'hung with garlands of newspaper prose' as an attempt by nationalist historians to recuperate a story which is ineffable and which only

'the air will tell us,
the air will tell us'¹.

To some extent, Heriot inscribes himself in the same kind of paradox in that all through his journey towards the silence of death he clings to the garrulous reverberations of his voice, its echoes in the wilderness -- as opposed to Justin's more controlled reserve ; in fact his *resistance* to silence, manifest

1 The last two lines of the libretto, which is unpaginated.

in spite of himself in his constant tendency to fill it with words (or, like the Voss of the opera, with 'songs of loneliness and silence'[p. 59]), parallels his unvanquished fear of the emptiness of death, and contradicts the apparent aim of his journey. For Heriot resists the hegemony of silence all along, sees it as the fearsome expression of the vacuum of the landscape : 'And it was silent, too, so silent that again and again he had this urge to sing and drown out the silence, although the sound of his voice was hardly less disturbing' (p. 96). He does, however, succumb to silence from time to time, as when he is awed by the vastness of the universe, or choked by thirst. But on those occasions his natural loquacity soon gets the better of his dejection.

Heriot, then, never quite completes his inner voyage towards silence. Yet he does, like Ovid in An Imaginary Life, achieve a sense of his own destiny, or destination, and recognizes at once the place where the journey must end, as the point towards which he has been moving all the time : "I have come home now," he said. "This is home" (p. 118). The place Heriot comes home to symbolically connects death and silence, the two inseparable objects of his quest ; it is an Aboriginal funerary cave littered with human bones, and dedicated to the god Wolaro, whose figure is crudely painted on one of the walls : 'the crude figure of a man without a mouth' (p. 118, emphasis mine). Even there, however, Heriot keeps expatiating (as opposed to dumb, awe-stricken Justin), and entangles himself in clumsy circumlocutions :

"It would be futile, wouldn't it, to try to tell you how much your companionship has meant to me. And how deeply it's touched me to think that I -- had a hand in turning out a man like you."

"You don't have to say nothing." (p. 121)

So that in the end, his submission to silence seems as inconclusive as his surrender to the void of death. Again, Ovid in An Imaginary Life appears to be pushing his exploration much further than Heriot. On the whole, though, their imaginative itineraries prove remarkably similar -- if it were not that Heriot finally recoils from the end pursued when it is at hand. Ovid is aware too of the alienating effect of his own native language which, once brought to bear on a new landscape, ceases to relate him to the outside world. If language is creative of what it designates, then every word Ovid utters in his own foreign tongue summons an object which stays out of congruence with the landscape -- and thus contributes to emphasize the discrepancy between the landscape he still carries in his head and the one he now has to live in. This 'untranslatability' of language (at least in geographical terms) has long been a favourite of Malouf's concerns, and one he has formulated time and again, either in his fiction or in interviews. In An Imaginary Life, this theme of the essential, lapsarian scission between inner and outer landscape is given superbly poetic expression in the poppy episode : Ovid, wandering through the steppes, immediately recognizes the little flower, its scarlet colour so unlikely in the greyish scrub, as a projection of his own imagination, blown into existence on the breath of his

own tongue :

Poppy, scarlet poppy, flower of my far-off childhood and the cornfields round our farm at Sulmo, I have brought you into being again, I have raised you out of my earliest memories, out of my blood, to set you blowing in the wind. Scarlet. Magic word on the tongue to flash again on the eye. (p. 31)

The poppy, as remarked in the previous section of this chapter, symbolizes Ovid's absolutist attitude to landscape ; an attribute of the poet's lost paradise, its being forcibly grafted upon a different scenery makes it emblematic of his inflexible attachment to an obsolete order of aesthetic perfection. The tool used to enact this subjection of otherness to an irrelevant but glorified discourse is (of course) the word : Ovid sticks to his own language (at first) as the one instrument that will help him best to substantialize his own inner vision of the world, to inscribe it on the tablet of the land whose actual meaning he chooses, alleging illiteracy, to disregard : 'The landscape itself . . . is a vast page whose tongue I am unable to decipher, whose message to me I am unable to interpret' (p. 17). Ovid's tongue, then, is truly 'active in the world, like a hand among objects, grasping, pushing, shaping, remaking' (p. 81), and thus provides an appropriate complement to his gardening activities.

Ovid's totalitarian stance also manifests itself in his arrogant confidence in his own tongue's natural superiority to the 'crude lingo' spoken by the natives, and as soon as he achieves the necessary command of the latter he readily sets about (in classic Prospero-like fashion) teaching Latin to the

village headman's grandson. Little by little, however, as he begins to gain insight into the hidden harmonies underlying the raucous guttural sounds of the vernacular, he realizes that its logic of reconciliation, which starkly contrasts with Latin's tendency to distinguish and polarize (its 'every ending defines and divides' [p. 98]), may hold a key to inner attunement to the landscape :

This language is equally expressive, but what it presents is the raw life and unity of things. I believe I could make poems in it. Seeing the world through this other tongue I see it differently. It is a different world. Somehow it seems closer to the first principle of creation, closer to whatever force it is that makes things what they are and changes them into what they would be. I have begun to find my eye delighted by the simple forms of this place, the narrower range of colors, the harsh lines of cliff and scrub, the clear, watery light. (p. 65)

Ovid's next step towards emancipation from his own language (and, consequently, towards recognition of the autonomy of the local landscape and tongue), is taken with his decision to teach the Child not Latin but the language of the natives which, deriving as it does from a continuity of interaction between man and land, contains the password to an accurate, unimpeded understanding of the place.

Quite surreptitiously, though, the Child brings about a reversal of the roles, and slowly takes over the business of teaching -- not unlike Justin in To the Islands. He gradually initiates Ovid into the language of nature, the language of the earth, which seems to consist in a wordless intuitive identification with the thing referred to or imagined. When the

Child imitates the cry of a bird, for instance, he grows at one thoroughly with the creature's innermost essence :

He stands with his feet apart, hands on hips, head held back to the light, and his lips contort, his features strain to become those of the bird he is mimicking, to become beak, crest, wattles, as out of his body he produces the absolute voice of the creature, and surely, in entering into the mysterious life of its language, becomes, for a moment, the creature itself, so that to my eyes he seems miraculously transformed. (p. 90)

This capacity for imaginative communion with the environment proceeds from the Child's total lack of self-consciousness ; the most fundamental characteristic of his mode of apprehension of the world is the conspicuous absence in his mind of any kind of distinction between the inner world of subjective feeling and the outer world of objective perception. This blurring of the boundaries between self and Other, between subject and object, is inseparable from an obliviousness of the structures of language which sustain the framework of the consciousness, and Ovid realizes that his own tendency to think of the world in terms of subject-object oppositions derives from his being, in the first place, a creature of language :

I try to precipitate myself into his consciousness of the world, his consciousness of me, but fail. My mind cannot contain him. I try to imagine the sky with all its constellations, the Dog, the Bear, the Dragon and so on, as an extension of myself, as part of my further being. But my knowing that it is sky, that the stars have names and a history, prevents my being the sky. (p. 96, emphasis mine)

The Child's mode of communication, in that it contrives to

bridge at last the fission between the word in the mind and the designated object out there, emerges as the necessary solution to Ovid's linguistic dilemma -- as the perfect reconciliation with the landscape. Yet, he seems unprepared at first to embrace it wholeheartedly, as incompatible with the demands of the self-assertive ego :

It rains and I say, it rains. It thunders and I say, it thunders. The Child is otherwise. I try to think as he must : I am raining, I am thundering, and am immediately struck with panic, as if, in losing hold of my separate and individual soul, in shaking the last of it off from the tip of my little finger, I might find myself lost out there in the multiplicity of things, and never get back. (p. 96)

Ovid begins to realize that if he is to achieve, like the Child, this stepping out of himself, this defiance of 'the heaviness of [his] own flesh, the solid bones' (p. 97), he will have to release himself from the imprisoning rigidities of formal speech and enter the freedom of being that lies beyond, in the realms of silence. Ironically, his banishment to the confines of the Empire precisely aimed at quelling the voice of a poet judged by some intemperately talkative ; but, not unlike Heriot raving in the wilderness, Ovid found himself unwilling at first to grow still : 'I am relegated to the region of silence. All I can do is shout' (p. 27). On the Child's instigation, however, he eventually accepts the linguistic vacancy that is silence as the highway to ultimate communication, or communion, with the universe :

The true language, I know now, is that speech in silence in which we first communicated, the Child and I, in the forest, when I was asleep. It is the language I used with him in my

childhood, and some memory, intangibly there but not quite audible, of our marvelous conversations, comes to me again at the very edge of sleep, a language my tongue almost rediscovers and which would, I believe, reveal the secrets of the universe to me. When I think of my exile now it is from the universe. (p. 97-98)

Ovid's linguistic evolution is now reaching completion : his initial attachment to Latin proved irrelevant to the reality of the surroundings, and was discarded in favour of the local idiom which, it appeared, led to a closer harmony with the landscape ; then, as a further step, this reconciliatory tongue was itself rejected, or transcended, in a groping move towards silence which alone would allow one to apprehend and come to terms with the true nature of the universe. This (rather regressive) swing from language to silence, from articulateness to diffusiveness of being, parallels very closely the (equally regressive) process of gradual disintegration of the self which finally led Ovid to surrender his body to the un-making forces of nature (which was traced in the first section of this chapter).The two regressions, obviously complementary aspects of the same process, are brought together in the following passage :

Wandering along together, wading through the high grasses side by side, is a kind of conversation that needs no tongue, a perfect interchange of perceptions, moods, questions, answers, that is as simple as the weather, is in fact the merest shifting of cloud shadows over a landscape or over the surface of a pool, as thoughts melt out of one mind into another, cloud and shadow, with none of the structures of formal speech. It is like talking to oneself. Like one side of the head passing thoughts across to the other, and knowing in a kind of foreglow, before the thought arrives, what it will be, having already received the shadow of its illumination.

I am growing bodiless. I am turning into the landscape. I feel myself sway and ripple. I feel myself expand upwards

toward the blue roundness of the sky. Is that where we are going? (p. 145-46)

An Imaginary Life and To the Islands, then, can both be seen as revisionary rewritings of the myth of conquest presented by the metropolitan discourse, since in each novel the protagonist sets out on an exploratory journey across the vast expanses of a strange country, where he is accompanied by a native of the place who endeavours to initiate him into his own values and modes of perception, which alone prove conducive to a spiritual understanding of the environment. In the course of its journey in the wilderness the voice of the imperium is progressively led to relinquish its own discourse and language, and in Ovid's case it is even silenced altogether: so that the conquest is shown for once to eventuate not in possession but in 'possessedness', not in hubris but in humility, and in the shedding finally of all the shells of being that had gone into the shaping of the would-be conqueror. However, it is a spiritually excruciating experience, which tends to be resisted by the self-assertive individual. In both novels the tension between sense of self and selflessness plays a major 'informative' part, and only Ovid seems able to resolve it, in favour of the latter. Therefore, the paradox of Heriot's ambiguous attitude with regard to self-integrity in To the Islands gives way in An Imaginary Life, where the process of self-erosion is undergone to its furthest imaginable stage, to but another paradox: Ovid the poet manages to solve the basic dichotomy between language and reality, which manifestly accounted for his alienation from the world, only by

evolving a kind of 'un-language' (so to speak), a negation of the word which leads to wholeness of being but, quite disturbingly, only in death -- albeit an ecstatic death. This is why Veronica Brady sees the novel as siding with 'the forces making for tyranny, the forces of mere being which oppose the long and patient discipline of measured expression'¹. In fact, this remark could almost apply to To the Islands as well, since in this novel too the protagonist's relentless (if halting) pursuit of reconciliation goes hand in hand with a yearning for unity, and silence, which can only find fruition in death. To embrace silence is to deny or evade signification, which is based, significantly, on difference -- as Saussure pointed out in his time. In this sense, both protagonists more or less tend towards the eradication of difference : a very imperialist attitude indeed.

This points to the desirability of an alternative interpretation of the two narratives. The two protagonists' devotion to the retrieval of unity could be read as a representation of their (unconscious) faithfulness to the ideological authority of the Empire -- provided one accepts that the concept of unity is a metaphoric extension of the monolithic character of vision in its imperialistic mode. Stow and Malouf's exploration of the journey metaphor, which in itself remains so unflinchingly reminiscent of the historical reality of conquest,

1 V. Brady, 'Making Connections : Art, Life, and some Recent Novels', Westerly 25, No 2 (June 1980), p. 66.

would then strike one as a reactivation (rather than an actual revision or questioning) of the logic of imperial coercive expansion ; significantly, the journey towards unity purports to meet and merge with otherness beyond the boundaries of the self -- which could be construed as yet again an attempt to absorb, or colonize, the Other, within the bounds of a redefined selfhood. Whereas an attitude that would consist in upholding the fundamental distinction between subject and object would at least retain the virtue of allowing otherness the freedom of itself. Frank Harland, in Harland's Half Acre, offers a good example of this alternative stance ; as Chapter 5 still has to demonstrate, he too catches a glimpse, on several occasions, of the essential unity which seems to underlie the whole structure of creation, and of the insignificance of his own place within the overall scheme, but unlike Ovid he resists the appeal of unity which he sees as potentially destructive of the self. This, to some extent, links him to Heriot in To the Islands, who is also aware of a fascination exerted by the prospect of a reconciliation with the Other, but shirks the implications involved. Stow will take up this dialectic in Tourmaline, where it is given expression in terms of the Taoist philosophy. This, too, will be made clear in Chapter 5. What will then appear is that Tourmaline and Harland's Half Acre, instead of bluntly inverting, like An Imaginary Life, the logic of colonial conquest -- which, as suggested above, can be read as the replication of an imperialistic strategy --, subvert it much more subtly by designing an 'alternative' image of the world which questions the viability of unity and presents a plurality of visions without

ever attempting to reconcile them. This plurality, in that it opposes (and thus relativizes) the idea of the monolithic such as it is inevitably attached to the ethos of colonial expansiveness, offers a possibility to (re)construct the world in terms that are freed from European cognitive codes -- in a way which the metaphor of the journey towards unity never offered.

CHAPTER 5

A COALESCENCE OF VOICES

1 Tourmaline : The fragmented narrator

Helen Tiffin calls Tourmaline 'a novel of philosophical debate between two opposing systems'¹. Indeed, the book dramatizes in fresh form the conflict (already considered in To the Islands) between two radically different attitudes to the world : namely, either to coerce the cosmos or abstain from interfering in its scheme. The opposition between these two stances is given expression in the novel in philosophico-religious terms, through the allegorical confrontation of two contrasting systems of belief and thought : the expansive, proselytist ethos of a messianic creed such as Christianity and the more humble or submissive ideal of Taoism which propounds contemplation and non-intervention as the highest ethic values. Considered in a post-colonial context, these two systems allegorize different attitudes to imperialism and power. In fact, the philosophy of the Tao (expounded in the Tao Te Ching, in the 5th century B.C., by an anonymous sage traditionally referred to as Lao-tseu) proves at variance with the Christian message in at least two major respects². First, it rejects worldly ambition or

1 H. Tiffin, 'Tourmaline and the Tao Te Ching', in K. G. Hamilton (ed.), Studies in the Recent Australian Novel, St. Lucia : University of Queensland Press, 1978, p. 100.

2 I am relying here on the summary exposition of Taoist philosophy given by Paul D. Higginbotham in '"Honour the Single Soul" : Randolph Stow and His Novels', Southerly 39 (1979), p. 383-85.

thirst for power as incompatible with the need to 'honour the single soul' (Tourmaline, p.172) and allow every individual the mastery of his own will and destiny. One can see how this clashes with the very notion of the messiah, who usually presents himself as the inspired mouthpiece of a particular doctrine which must be accepted unconditionally as emanating from the divine. Instead, the leader of the Taoist tradition (the sage) strikes one as unobtrusive and hesitant, and as remarkably silent too, since he never explicitly voices the essentials of his (undogmatic) credo but embodies them through his own humble contemplative attitude. Secondly, because the philosophy of Tao is one that shuns polarizations and tends towards the comprehension of opposites, it seems appropriate that this dedication to the individual should run in parallel with an apparently contradictory veneration for creation as a whole, which is accepted in its totality and in its alterity as the sum of being with which the self, as a small part of it, strives to identify. Stow himself has touched upon this in 'The Testament of Tourmaline', a sequence of poems conceived as 'Variations' on particular verses of the Tao Te Ching and as a key to the meaning of Tourmaline -- written, probably, in 'a fit of authorial desperation'¹ at the slowness of critics to come to terms with the philosophical content of the novel. He writes :

This is the ideal: to embrace with the whole soul
the One, and never, never, again to quit it.

1 H. Tiffin, 'Tourmaline and the Tao Te Ching', p. 84.

To husband by will the essence of light and darkness,
to grow passive and unselfknowing, as if newborn.¹

This stanza contains in a nutshell what cannot but strike a Western mind as a paradox : it is only by an act of the will, and therefore through an assertion of one's independence, that the Taoist sage can reach the ideal state of passive, innocent, unselfconscious unification with the world. This section will first demonstrate that such an ontological tension, which recalls Heriot's duality of being in To the Islands, is given expression in two various ways in Tourmaline : at once through the opposition between Christianity and Taoism (representing, respectively, self-assertiveness and selflessness) and through the essential duality which is itself inherent in the latter. Secondly, quite interestingly, it will appear that the novel is no longer striving towards a resolution of this dichotomy -- as To the Islands may be said to be. Instead, since it is in the very psychology of Taoism to include opposites within one's apprehension of the world, the narrator's perception of the allegorical 'debate' between Christianity and Taoism is accordingly informed by influences or assumptions characteristic of each of these systems. The narrative which then stems from his

1 R. Stow, 'From The Testament of Tourmaline: Variations on Themes of the Tao Te Ching', Variation X, in A Counterfeit Silence, Sydney : Angus and Robertson, 1969, p. 73.

ambivalent perception of the issues at stake emerges as what Wilson Harris calls 'a poetry of de-centred being'¹, which stands out for its conspicuous intertextuality. The pretensions to centrality or absoluteness evinced by every single discourse (but more congenial, perhaps, to the messianic ethos particular to a Christian-like doctrine) are then subtly undermined by the way in which each is presented : while writing his 'testament' the Law draws systematically on myths and images typical of both doctrines, thus holding them in balance all the time.

Christianity is presented in the novel as an embodiment of the imperium : as an expansive, aggressive religion which seeks to promulgate its message at all costs, and which demands of its adepts a total relinquishment of responsibility for their own existence, a willing renunciation of any kind of free thinking or living -- one thinks, of course, of Heriot evangelizing Aborigines with a stock-whip. The diviner is immediately identified as Christ on his arrival in Tourmaline (a connection which is unobtrusively established by the characters' use of colloquial language : "Ah, Christ," Kestrel said. He had moved back a little, very gently. "Ah, Jesus Christ, the poor bastard" [p. 16]), and his apparition in this guise seems inseparable from the idea, apparently conceived by all the citizens of the town,

1 W. Harris, 'On The Beach', Landfall, Vol 39, No 3 (September 1985), p. 336.

that one can entrust another person with the charge of one's life :

'Tourmaline seems to have taken charge of him. When he wakes up he's going to feel he's not his own property any more.'

'He mightn't want to be his own property,' Byrne said. 'Why would he?' (p. 20)

Michael Random's association with Christ is further emphasized in a number of ways in the novel. Rescued at the last minute from death by thirst in the desert, he is hosted and nursed in Mary Spring's house, from which he only reappears after three days, as if resurrected, and his skin all 'coated with unguents' (p. 31). From this moment onwards almost everybody in Tourmaline seems to give in to his irresistible charisma, and in his eagerness to be chosen as one of the disciples Bill Byrne names himself in such a way that the other townspeople 'were mildly surprised by this reminder that he had a Christian name' (p. 26, emphasis mine). Kestrel acknowledges too the fascination exerted by the diviner's aura, by saying to him : 'Get me to the river Jordan . . . You've made a lot of converts here' (p. 47). Finally, at the climax of the passionate worship cults which he initiates in the old derelict church of the town, Random is directly hailed as a messiah figure by the members of the newly-formed 'congregation' : Charlie Yandana, one of the natives, sees him as the reincarnation of Mongga, the Itinerant Creator, whereas the Law exclaims in trance-like ecstasy : '"He is Christ"' (p. 138).

However, this modern version of the Saviour can hardly be

called a well of love and compassion ; his lust to control and dominate other people's lives soon begins to show through behind the aureate halo of sanctity with which Tourmaline invests him a little too easily, as when he almost allows a seance of arm-bending with Byrne to degenerate in a deliberate, ruthless crushing of his opponent :

At last Byrne began to weaken. Very slowly his arm was forced downward. Then it hurt him, and he bit his lip. The diviner watched him intently.

'Give in, Byrnie,' Rock said.

'Yair,' Byrne whispered. 'Okay, give in. Give in, give in.' His voice suddenly rose to a yelp. 'I give in. Mike. Mike.'

Then Rock prodded the diviner in the ribs with the toe of his boot. And he, almost reluctantly, it seemed, let Byrne go and stood up, brushing his dusty trousers.

'You don't want to hurt him, do you?' Rock said, as if he were not too sure.

'No,' said the diviner, panting a little. 'No. You all right, Byrnie?' And suddenly he was recognizable again, he was prepossessing. (p. 50)

In fact, Random's prepossessing (or charismatic) personality and his (apparently) irrepressible urge to bring other people into subjection, seem inseparably related in the novel ; his being consecrated as mystical leader by the denizens of Tourmaline gives him sway over the souls of a whole people -- so that religion and power are, quite simply, equated. Again, this point is first put forward in a devious, unobtrusive manner through the characters' use of colloquial expressions. Byrne, recovering from his arm-bending contest with the diviner, enquires :

'What'd you want to hurt me for, Mike?' He groaned.

'For the love of Jesus,' Kestrel prayed, 'someone put him to bed. . .' (p. 51, emphasis mine)

Dave Speed also implicitly associates religious with political power when referring to the diviner as both an 'archbishop' (p. 69) and an 'emperor' (p. 70). But the imperialistic strain of Random's creed probably manifests itself at its most obvious in the very core of his doctrine, which proposes to relieve mankind from the 'burden' of existence by entrusting it to God (the standard prayer informing his cult consists of the words : 'Take charge of my life, father. I'm close to breaking' [p. 156]) -- while it is clear all the time that he, the diviner, is 'to have the real dominion' (p. 132).

Also, appropriately, the messianic worship cult which he engenders among the inhabitants of the town emerges as an expression of their sense of unity, of what the Law calls their 'esprit de corps' : 'You must join us. If you could feel the power - the esprit de corps. A whole population with one idea --' (p. 146). A word like 'power', here, sounds ironical, and it is interesting that it should occur precisely on one of the Law's attempts to proselytize ; already on a previous occasion, at the height of Tourmaline's adoration for the diviner, the Law referred to 'the power of our unity' (p. 136), thus significantly (if unconsciously) bringing together such notions as oneness of feeling and coercive imposition of the will. As suggested in Chapter 4, the very concept of unity is a Eurocentric one, and as an ideal it appears to be largely informed by the centralist discourse produced by the metropolis. Therefore, it may not be fortuitous that the diviner should exploit this sense of unity by

creating the 'brotherhood', a kind of cooperative society involving all the townspeople and set up for the (very imperialistic) purpose of hoarding riches on a large, systematic scale :

It was a way, I suppose, of keeping alive by daylight the spirit of the firelit church. The idea emanated from the diviner; but he himself took no part in it. . . . This brotherhood or society we were all, in the same message, ordered to join.. . . What the diviner proposed was simple and uncommon: it was hard labour. We were to attack the reef and tear from it every pennyweight of gold it would yield to such methods as we should have to use. (p. 150)

Random thus skilfully perverts what Tourmaline evinces of religious fervour for his own selfish ambition and greed, and is allowed to do so, Stow suggests, by the close ideological concurrence existing between a religion dedicated to the worship of an all-powerful leader, dictatorial in his urge to 'convert' others to his own views and ideas, and the expansive reality of imperialism itself. As soon as the diviner falls out of favour with the people of Tourmaline for failing to provide them with the water he promised, Kestrel takes over the whole dowsing enterprise, and he too seems to consider the church as the one obvious focal point on which to centre his incipient empire :

'What will you do, Kes?' Mary was wondering.
'Carry on where he left off.'
'And the church?'
'The same. It can survive without him.'
'And you'll be high priest,' said Tom, contemptuously.
'Someone will. That - power - is worth having.' (p. 171)

Such power rests entirely on a whole people's willingness to

embrace one particular doctrine or cosmology as its common ideal (such as, for example, the water-oriented conception of the world proposed by Random and Kestrel), so that when Tom asks Kestrel to 'honour the single soul' (p. 172) the latter predictably replies : 'I think in thousands . . . and tens of thousands' (p. 172).

Thus a religion like Christianity, with its intrinsically messianic and unitary ethos, is elaborately constructed in Tourmaline as a metaphor for the imperium and the way it tends to assert itself ^{at} the expense of the individual's freedom of thought or opinion. This metaphoric connection is further enhanced in the novel through a number of other, symbolic devices. One of these is the 'ecclesiastical oleander' (p. 74) planted in front of the Tourmaline church, which is said to be 'impossibly persist[ing] in flowering' (p. 8) in spite of the drought. This clearly makes it out of congruence with the landscape as a whole, not unlike Ovid's poppy in An Imaginary Life which, as we have seen, stood out somewhat intrusively as the far-off, displaced extension of an alien scenery and sensibility. In a sense, the church of Tourmaline with which the oleander is metonymically associated stands in the same kind of discontinuous relationship to its environment since it represents, as a building in ruins, the relative failure by foreign missionaries to transpose their alien religion into the New World. Relative indeed, for the church has been lovingly tended, over years of religious neglectfulness in Tourmaline, by a native woman surprisingly faithful to the creed and called, ironically enough, Gloria Day (Gloria Dei!). But this is

precisely the point : Gloria's devotion to a strange divinity seems ironical, or 'unnatural' (and contrasts with Charlie Yandana's tendency to see a reincarnation of Mongga in the diviner), and similarly the surge of mystic fervour induced in the White population of Tourmaline by the apparition of a messiah emerges as a blatant expression of their cultural displacement.

The centrality of the water in the cult they establish (an element hardly present at all in the arid landscape), testifies to this too. Indeed, God and water are almost identified as the objects of Tourmaline's adoration ; in her most intense moments of prayer Gloria Day 'ask[s God] to make it rain' (p. 77), and she laid on the altar of the church, next to the 'impossible' oleander flowers, 'two round black pebbles, unnaturally smooth' (p. 77, emphasis mine) : "rain stones," she said. "He can make rain if he want to" (p. 77). In fact, Michael Random's whole charisma seems to depend on his capacity to find water ; as soon as his divining powers appear to fail him he loses his aureole : 'One last flicker of his flame before it died. Then all was over. He was nothing' (p. 163). The diviner's symbolic connection with water is emphasized time and again by the narrator, who seems to associate the intense blueness of his gaze (or of his clothes, for that matter¹) with memories of the sea :

1 Helen Tiffin has drawn attention to this blue 'halo' forever enveloping the diviner, and which seems to rub off on such characters as Byrne or Deborah (always dressed in blue), thereby attesting to their receptiveness to his influence. See 'Tourmaline and the Tao Te Ching, p. 101.

Tom had dressed him in blue dungarees, with a blue shirt, such as most of us wear, and as he faced into the light that fell through the open door I was struck again by the deep cloudy colour of his eyes, like the Timor Sea, as I remember it, long ago. Something about him always recalled to me the sea, the coast, many things I have not known since I was young. There was so much hope in the look of him. (p. 31)

This hope-inspiring image of the sea, which appears to be haunting the consciousness of Tourmaline (as embodied by the Law, who refers to himself as 'the memory and conscience' of the place [p. 42]), goes hand in hand with the dream of natural lushness and luxuriance which such a profusion of water would enable to come true.¹ The garden of Tourmaline, a rather miserable and dessicated affair (at least, by 'traditional' or European standards) laboriously kept alive by Rock the gardener with whatever waste water he could collect daily from the other townspeople, unfailingly fills the Law with melancholy thoughts of a past richer with sap and chlorophyll :

. . . I have this faint memory, more like a dream, of the old garden at home among the figs and the oranges, with a swing under the olives and a little pool full of frogs and lilies, and those other lilies, the pink ones, that come for a few weeks, before the rain. That's the only complete happiness I can remember, if it is a memory and not a dream. And that's what he's always made me think of, from the time I first saw him. (p. 140)

1 H. Tiffin discusses Tourmaline's water-mania in terms of a myth-dream comparable to that inspiring a Melanesian Cargo Cult, in 'Melanesian Cargo Cults in Tourmaline and Visitants', Journal of Commonwealth Literature 16 (1981), 109-25.

The vagueness of the Law's recollection, his very uncertainty as to its actual essence -- whether oneiric or mnemonic -- suggests that the image of the past revered by Tourmaline may well prove primordially mythic in nature, part of a collective unconscious evolved under greener latitudes and then grafted upon an alien country. This view would be supported by the fact that nearly all the citizens of Tourmaline seem to share in the common dream (and indeed dutifully participate in the water effort by conscientiously handing over to Rock their kitchen slops and dregs), and by the Law's representativeness of the town's communal psyche. His 'remembrance' of 'the easter lilies in our old garden . . . that sprang up leafless from the baked ground, before the earliest rains' (p. 76) could then be construed as the languorous evocation of a mythic, lost paradise rather than an actual personal reminiscence.

Also, the blue-eyed diviner fits so well in this imaginary landscape that he somehow emerges as its symbol and mouthpiece, as the living embodiment of the myth. More than a fully-fleshed character, he may then be considered as the spirit of Tourmaline's utopia, the allegorical representative of an ideology, summoned up out of thin air by the sheer intensity of the town's yearning. Stephen Slemon points out that allegory is a particularly popular (and appropriate) mode in post-colonial literatures, in that thanks to its 'inherent investment in history'¹ it provides the writer with a means of exposing the

1 S. Slemon, 'Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History' [unpublished article].

ways in which history is constructed into an ideologically conditioned mode of discourse. In Tourmaline the diviner emerges at once as the epitome of Tourmaline's alien dream and as a pontifical figure forever courting power. Clearly, what mainly characterizes his water-oriented, Christian-like doctrine is the utter intransigence with which it seeks to make converts (Deborah's conversion is effected only at the price of her deep humiliation), based on the evangelizer's unshakeable faith in the universality, and indeed superiority, of his own convictions. The townspeople's unquestioning attachment to a lore of images and ideals which so obviously belong elsewhere, seems to attest to a similar kind of imaginative rigidity, and to predispose them to re-enact the atrocities, 'all those terrible things' (p. 133), to which Tom alludes and which refer, as one can surmise, to colonial conquest and massacres. The diviner, then, stands at once for the actual process of imperial expansion and for the assertive, ineradicable ideology from which it springs. By bringing the two under the same symbol Stow skilfully highlights the mechanisms of imperialism, and exposes the dangers inherent in a too one-sided (or intransigent) reading of the world.

In an equally skilful way, Stow himself avoids the pitfall of unilateralism by having the Law inscribe his narrative at the crossroads between two distinct discourses. The double-voicing which he then orchestrates is well exemplified by his treatment of Byrne as a character, who appears in the novel as a subtly ambivalent figure. A closer look at the way he is perceived and presented by the narrator will throw light on the novel's general

logic of compromise between conflicting perspectives.

Among the inhabitants of Tourmaline Byrne definitely emerges as the most subservient and obsequious, humble to the point of abjectness. He confesses that he willingly renounced the control of his own life and, dog-like, accepts the most humiliating of treatments at the hands of Kestrel whom he acknowledges as his master. This 'canine' nature of Byrne's is consistently emphasized all through the novel. While he openly recognizes that '[he] was meant to be someone's dog' (p. 20), the terms in which the Law refers to Byrne seem to concur with this. Upon meeting the diviner he stands 'dark and expectant, like a shy dog gauging a stranger' (p. 31) ; his eyes are bright and black, 'like a clever sheepdog's' (p. 42) ; and throughout the ritual of Random's divining for gold Byrne 'follow[s] in a doglike silence' (p. 74). Kestrel himself, far from appreciating his cousin's shows of affection, regularly bursts out in deprecating comments about his cringing, self-abasing fidelity : "He thinks a lot of everyone, . . . like one of those dogs that'll follow any old gin home" (p. 49). Kestrel's remarks, however unsympathetic, prove irrefutably correct, for Byrne appears to be imitating very strictly the behaviour of Jock, the mongrel which alternately bestows its love on varying masters according to their respective availabilities. Besides, he is aware of the affinity : "A dog's got to have a master. If the one he's had walks out on him he just has to go and look for another. So - I was lucky. I found one to take me on" (p. 146). In fact, Byrne's readiness to allow a 'master' to take charge of his life is symptomatic of the

attitude of Tourmaline as a whole, as the Law seems to recognize when he describes the welcome extended to Random by the citizens : 'We had leapt upon him like eager and loving dogs' (p. 27). Also, such a degrading 'gift' of oneself cannot but strike one as a subscription to the patterns of dominance and power embodied and exalted by the diviner ; this, as we have seen, is inseparable from the unrelenting, shackling grip exerted on Tourmaline's consciousness by a strongly assertive ideology. This connection is established through the association of the dog metaphor with the stereotype image of Tourmaline's myth-dream. The fictive Cyclopedia of Western Australia displays a photograph of Tourmaline in its past splendour, which the Law proudly shows to the diviner, but curiously enough the town seems solely inhabited by a dog :

When I had concluded this lesson, I carried the book to him and let him gaze upon the photograph of Tourmaline in its pride, the main street thronged with stores and pepper trees, a handsome street lamp prominent in the centre foreground. I don't know why, but the town was deserted except for a black dog on its way across the road. (p. 34)

Thus, by associating the image of Tourmaline's cherished past with that of the dog in search of a master, Stow reiterates the point (made already, or simultaneously, by different means) that the townspeople's uncompromising attachment to a particular cosmology tends to make them dangerously receptive to power structures.

As a character, the Law undeniably partakes in the mainstream of the town's general allegiance, and among all he

reveres the past with most devoutness : 'Let me confess it, I am half in love with ruin' (p. 110). Nonetheless, his narrative occasionally strikes echoes of a different voice, of suddenly jarring tones. For example, his reaction to Byrne's dog-like self-abasement proves ambiguous, interestingly so :

For a moment I rebelled. Ah, I thought, let me hear no talk of humility, of abnegation. This self-disgust is spitting in the face of God.

But the heretical thought passed. He was right, after all. He was marred, and knew it. (p. 146)

The Law's first rebellious impulse is actually reminiscent of Tom Spring's indictment of the diviner's religion as 'a bloody wedding' (p. 147) which extols the love of God but at the price of self-hatred -- as opposed to his own Taoist ideal which honours the single soul and thus reveres the whole of creation through respect, not hate, for the infinitesimal :

'Is nothing sacred?' I burst out; in despair, because without bearings.

'Everything,' Tom said. 'Because nothing exists that isn't part of his body.' (p. 120)

However, this slight unorthodoxy in the Law's thinking is soon repressed, and it is significant that his 'ab-errant' thought should be labelled 'heretical' (p. 146) so readily -- a telling illustration of the repressive and authoritarian nature of the ideology which, for the time being at least, keeps prevailing in his divided mind.

Still, as attested by his (repressed) outburst, the Law

seems to be slowly moving towards the edge of his own ingrained discourse, as if intermittently allowing another voice to speak through his lips. A further instance of this is (again) provided by his perception of Bill Byrne as a character. Somewhat paradoxically for so meek a figure, Byrne is presented from the start as satanic in his looks :

. . . drunk, his eyes in their cavernous sockets obscure with it, satanic eyebrows bent like a pair of kylie. Kestrel's cousin, poor Byrnie, with his devilish face and no vice in him. (p. 12)

What makes 'poor Byrnie' the object of so much compassion in *Tourmaline* is the ravaged state of his face, its skin 'pitted with craters, like a dead dark moon', ruined by 'some adolescent complaint [that] robbed him of whatever beauty he might have had' (p. 20). There is a suggestion in the novel that Byrne's devastated looks might be the stigmata inflicted upon him by some sort of fire ordeal he had to go through, symbolically at least, like Milton's Lucifer ; the connection with Lucifer, intimated already by Byrne's 'satanic eyebrows', becomes obvious as the Law directly refers to Paradise Lost :

I looked sideways at him as he strummed away. A ruined face, dark and scarred; a face that had been through fire. A memory stirred in me of my grandfather, on a Sunday afternoon, reaching between the Bible and Pilgrim's Progress for his father's battered copy of Paradise Lost and dutifully reading aloud, while I, dutifully, listened, half-comprehending. 'Why did God spoil the look of him, Granddad, if he was all that beautiful?' 'Because he was evil.' 'Then why did God make him, and why did he make him beautiful to start with? And will he get back to heaven in the end?'

No, said my grandfather, not in the foreseeable future.

I grieved for Byrne as I grieved for Lucifer. Surely,

under that distinguished ugliness, the marred beauty still showed. (p. 145)

Thus, Byrne emerges as a kind of Luciferian figure, damned, disfigured, and rather pathetic because innocent : "I haven't sinned," Byrne said. "I was damned without that" (p. 170). Byrne's damnation, his expulsion from paradise into the parched inferno of Tourmaline, makes him (again) an epitome of the town's population at large, and it seems typical in this respect that the Law should extend his compassion for Byrne to the whole of his world : 'Poor Byrnie,' I murmured. 'Poor Deborah. Poor world' (p. 146).

Also, quite appropriately, it is Byrne's damnation which seems to draw him so irresistibly towards the diviner, whose promises of water-paradise appear to hold a key to some possibility of redemption ; this is first made clear during one of Byrne's drunken bouts, in which his love for Mike Random shows through rather transparently.

The yellow lamplight gave [the diviner's] eyes a greenish tinge, more sea-like than ever. 'What's the matter with you?' he demanded, softly, but with an angry insistence. 'Why are you like this?'
'I'm damned, Mike,' said Byrne, crying. 'I'm damned.'
(p. 52, emphasis mine)

As Wilson Harris has suggested,¹ Byrne and Random can be considered as two sides of a coin since the latter too, enveloped

1 W. Harris, 'On The Beach', p. 336.

as he is all through the novel with 'a nimbus of fiery gold' (p. 137), emerges as Luciferian in essence. In fact, Random seems to control the fire element with remarkable, numinous ease -- and to use it with consummate skill for his own political purposes. For example, he manages to quell the brawl instigated by Kestrel on the night of the party by extinguishing the huge bonfire which was flooding the scene with its red light. Conversely, he sustains the elated spirit of his worship cults by keeping a fire alight in front of the church entrance, and makes a point of wrapping himself in its halo every time he appears. In a sense, then, the devouring, propagative and destructive flame irradiated by the diviner can be contrasted with the cold dead inoffensive fire of Byrne's moon-cratered face. Interestingly, the Law seems (at least dimly) aware of this dichotomy, as when he perceives Byrne's hidden beauty underneath the fire scars :

I stood near him, looking down, observing the thick black hair, the gaunt hollow of his cheeks as he bent over the guitar, the one satanic eyebrow that was in my line of vision. In that faint light he looked melancholy and even distinguished. One could not see the ruined skin. (p. 20)

The Law's recognition of the ambivalence of Byrne's 'fire', of the potential beauty underlying the scars, includes the inner fire of the poet's inspiration as well. Byrne's songs of sadness and melancholy are all concerned with the spiritual barrenness of the landscape, and concur in this respect with the general trend of dismissiveness of the place implied in the diviner's water-myth ; nonetheless, the fact that the Law should acknowledge, on the somewhat meagre evidence of Byrne's improvised (and drunken)

songs and strums, that he is 'the poet of Tourmaline' (p. 167), reveals a secret confidence on his part in the poet's latent power to come to terms with the landscape in more positive terms. Thus, Byrne's body of 'poems' or songs suggests at once acceptance and criticalness of the landscape, which makes it akin to the text of Tourmaline itself, which addresses itself to the question of the townspeople's dismissal of the place while continually hinting at alternative (or redemptive) ways of gauging it. Stow achieves this kind of effect by shaping his narrative so as to disclose, against the trend of the text, unexpected vistas of the Tourmaline mindscape to which the Law is mostly blind as a character. In other words, the Law is split, fragmented, into two separate entities -- narrator and character ; the strictures and inadequacies of the old stuttering policeman are contrasted with the comparatively richer perspectives he opens up as the writer of Tourmaline's testament. We have noted how the Law's presentation of Bill Byrne tended to be informed by this essential duality. An analysis of the novel's imagery will confirm these observations.

The most pervasive image in the novel is that of the water which, as I have said, emerges as the primordial element in the townspeople's alien cosmology. All Tourmaline's dreams of happiness and prosperity, intent as they are on grafting upon the 'bare' landscape an image of luxuriant beauty, seem to feed on the prospect of water, which is simply equated with material wealth. Tourmaline would like to become 'a town paved with gold

and murmuring with sluices' (p. 30). As we have noted, the citizens' need for wish-fulfilment systematically assumes the form of a longing for water and the structures, carefully delineated for them by the diviner, of a messianic worship cult which exalts water as the ultimate power principle. Indeed, Michael Random's capacity to sway the souls of his 'sheep' seems to depend entirely on his potential mastery of water ; his failure to 'divine' corresponds very strictly with his demise as the town's mystical leader. The association of water with the divinity is established by Gloria Day decorating God's altar with her rainstones, and by the diviner himself who (rather self-consciously) considers the water as a manifestation of God's spirit :

'What is the water,' I asked (all bearings lost), 'that's supposed to flow through me to Tourmaline?'

'Real water, he said, 'in the ground. And rain as well. And the spirit of God, in and above all that. The spirit that works through me. It speaks through me now; and it'll work through my hands and my rod when I bring the water from the ground.' (p. 132)

Although it is typical of the Law's loss of bearings (acknowledged on two occasions, in his successive confrontations with both the diviner and Tom Spring) that he should keep wavering between acceptance and dismissal of Random's water-myth, he too subscribes to it whole-heartedly with that elegiac part of himself which is forever turned on the past, and yearns for 'our wild garden at home, and [for] tough frail lilies breaking open the ground, before the earliest rains' (p. 28). There seems to be good reason here for dissociating the Law's personal and

collective memories : while the one remains fondly dedicated to recollections of lost gardens and water-lilies, the other has to take into account the presence within Tourmaline of a dissenting, Taoist 'school' (represented by Tom Spring and Dave Speed) which values water in different terms. Indeed, Speed demonstrates the vanity of Tourmaline's dream by actually surviving on a minimal water supply, whereas Spring reinterprets the water in Taoist terms as an embodiment of the sage's supreme value, passivity : 'He talked of becoming a stream, to carve out canyons without ceasing always to yield' (p. 148). Interestingly, then, the water emerges as a major symbol in two antagonistic discourses, a seeming contradiction to which the 'collective' voice of the Law gives expression through its ambivalent textuality. As Helen Tiffin suggests,¹ the lily flower itself (so far considered as the emblem of the Law's water-mania) can be construed in Taoist terms as yet another symbol of strength in passivity since it is at once 'tough' and 'frail' (p. 28), and for all its weakness manages to break the hard sun-baked ground and burst into blossom. Another image constructed in a (deliberately) ambiguous way, is that of the stone. Gloria's rainstones, two pebbles worn smooth by the action of water, symbolize her devotion to a foreign God whose bounty resides in his capacity to 'make it rain' ; at the same time, however, the worn pebbles suggest a passive, 'Taoist' immersion in the stream of time, strangely reminiscent of Tom Spring's ideal of 'being a rock to be shaped

1 H. Tiffin, 'Tourmaline and the Tao Te Ching', p. 93.

by winds and tides' (p. 148). In fact, to become a rock appears to be Dave Speed's life ambition too, as Tom perceptively recognizes :

'You want us all to go native,' Tom said. 'That's what you've got against [the diviner]. Just enough food and water to keep us alive and no distractions. Dave Speed's Utopia.'

'And what's wrong with it?' Dave demanded. 'I know what I'm talking about. All the years I spent when I was the town drunk, wanting to be a tree.'

'Seems to me you've got there.'

'So now I want to be a stone. And I'll get there too.'

'Won't we all?' Tom said. 'It's death you mean.'

'Maybe,' said Dave. 'Well, you can't get much quieter than that.' (p. 68)

In the light of this, Gloria's rainstones appear to be acquiring new connotations ; although they symbolize the townspeople's critical attitude towards Tourmaline as a place (implicit in their 'thirst' for water), the very process by which the pebbles were worn into what they are presupposes an acceptance of the tide of life, a submission to it, irrespective of particular junctures or circumstances -- whether arid or moist. Again, then, the duality of the stone symbol derives from the narrator's double-voicing. Also, the treatment of the stone image differs interestingly in this novel from that in To the Islands, where the rock's solidity symbolizes the protagonist's incapacity to divest himself of ingrained patterns of perception and thought, except at the price of sheer self-destruction. In Tourmaline the stone still signifies the same kind of imaginative rigidity but at the same time it stands for the ideal of identification (and hence reconciliation) with the Other -- as embodied by an alien

landscape. In fact, more accurately still, the ideal state of stone-like passivity pursued by Speed involves the combination of a strong sense of self (as implied by the hard, compact solidity of the stone) and an organic sense of interaction with otherness (as suggested by the erosive process to which it is submitted). In its ambivalence, then, the stone (like the water) is an image that reflects the kind of contrastive discourse by which the novel as a whole is articulated.

Thus, characterization and imagery emerge as two major structural devices used to activate the ideological debate dramatized in Tourmaline. However, over and above these particular devices, point of view plays the major part ; as noted before, both characters and images are perceived through the eyes of the Law, and elaborated in his narrative into ambivalent symbols. As suggested above, narrator and character could be considered as separate (though related) entities, or identities, of the Law, so that his precarious position at the juncture of two systems of thought manifests itself through both his disorientation as an old man and the subversive strain of his discourse. Hence, he will contribute to puncture the water myth either by a blunt affirmation of his personal doubts (such as : 'To tell the truth, I was beginning to be bored with the water' [p. 126]) or, much more cryptically, by unconsciously subscribing to an ambivalent (half-Taoist, half-Christian) terminology and/or sensibility. Let us now consider a few instances of the latter strategy.

It is very often when the Law fails to understand what he

insists nevertheless on reporting that the gap between his personal and collective awareness seems to open the widest, and brings forth the most dramatic irony. For example, at one stage in the novel he feels haunted by a persistent childhood memory whose message he cannot quite interpret :

There is a book I remember, from the days of my schooling; a child's book, a school book, from which I began (I didn't succeed) to learn French. And it had a picture that haunts me still. I knew that picture long before I could read, for the book had been my mother's, and I was struck, as illiterate children are, by the strange image. So for years I returned and returned to it.

There was a well beneath a great tree. And in the tree was a princess, in hiding. And by the well, a hideous, pathetic, ludicrous negress, with a pitcher on her shoulder.

The negress was gazing into the well; which reflected not her, but the face of the princess among the leaves. The black woman's vast teeth showed in delight.

'Ah, comme je suis belle!' s'ecria la negresse.

A joke, then - was it?

Oh you in the branches.

I don't find that funny. (p. 84)

Here the Law seems to arrive at some kind of covert, allegorized understanding of the particular affliction which plagues the Tourmaline imagination : the townspeople too tend to identify with a false, deceptive image of themselves floating on the water, and to ignore, because unable to pierce through the flickering reflection, their truer features. The image of the well exposes this attitude as typical of a displaced sensibility, since the well of the picture stands in implicit contrast with its Tourmaline counterpart : the old stock route water-pit from which Dave Speed draws sustenance in the desert, and whose murky waters reflect nothing -- or, at most, the colour of Tourmaline's soil...

'There's a well,' Jack said. . . . He laughed. 'You ought to see it. They pull up half a bucket of mud, give it a day to settle, and then skim off the water. About a cupful.' (p. 56)

The dramatic irony consists in the Law's spontaneous dismissal of the negress's misdirected narcissism ('I don't find that funny'), while he as a character readily indulges, along with his fellow citizens, in equally self-deceptive water-gazing. This typical tension between the explicit stance and the implications of the Law's discourse can be seen in a number of other passages, where favourite Taoist images are subsumed in the narrative. The text then reverberates with echoes of Tom's voice, and indeed it may be him speaking through the Law, attempting to express his own personal version of the 'law' of the universe :

I stepped out of my door to look once more at my garden. I have said before that the sky is the garden of Tourmaline.

The much-praised, the inexhaustible stars above me. Islands, ice-cold and burning. The burning ice-cold purity of God.

Love inexpressible, inexhaustible. My love for him, it, them. No matter if such love is not returned. In the contemplation of stars, in the remembrance of ocean and flowers, in the voice of the lone crow and the jacaranda-blue of far ranges, I have all I need of requital.

When I think that before the world began to die I did not know this love, I can praise the manner of its dying. On the tomb of the world, ice-cold, burning, I reach out with every nerve to the ultimate purity. . . .

Love, love, love; like an ache, like an emptiness. Dear God, my gold, my darling. (p. 82)

This passage, although it strives to give expression to the Law's love for a God referred to in possessive terms ('my gold' recalls

the diviner's exploitation of religion for capitalist purposes ; 'my darling' might remind one of Kestrel's love affair with Deborah, whom he once envelops 'like an octopus' [p. 23]), is truly Taoist in essence, a lyrical evocation of one's wordless ('inexpressible'), contemplative admiration in the face of creation. It is a condensed assemblage of opposites too. The possessive strain of the Law's love contrasts with his saying : 'No matter if such love is not returned' -- an echo, perhaps, of Tom's earlier affirmation that 'If we believe we exist, that's enough' (p. 38). Also, though still intent on cultivating his 'remembrance of oceans and flowers' (a typical activation of the town's water-myth), the Law's 'praise' of the world's dying manner strikes a note of 'Taoist' acceptance of the great scheme. The reference to the night sky as 'the garden of Tourmaline' strikes one as a similar move towards passive (but positive) resignation, since it substitutes for the impossible 'green dream' of the townspeople a more real (and beautiful) garden -- yet another ambivalent symbol in the novel. All these paradoxes, or contradictions in terms, are epitomized in the opposition : 'ice-cold and burning', which reactivates the Lucifer image embodied by the couplet Byrne-Random which, as we have seen, reflects in a nutshell the antagonism, central to the novel, between divergent ways of assessing the world.

This passage, then, provides a good illustration of Stow's strategy : he defuses two opposed ideologies by diffusing their proposed discourse, by holding them in a kind of mirror relationship where the one is considered in terms of the other. It is one among many too ; the whole book could be likewise

decomposed in its two ideological constituents, which meet in the text to form one single utterance, at once unified and fragmented. I shall cite one final example. The Law's enamoured reverence for the past, his being 'half in love with ruins' (p. 110), emerges in the novel as part of his general dedication to an obsolete, water-centred image of Tourmaline, which he tries to superimpose on the dry 'vacancy' of the landscape. However, this 'imperialistic' trend is counterbalanced in the novel as his passion for the past is reassessed in Taoist terms as a manifestation of wise passivity :

Ah, the love of ruin is insidious. In the middle of regret, in the middle of complaint, it is growing on one. There is ease in dereliction. Action becomes irrelevant; there is no further to fall. Or if, by any chance, falling is possible, then only action can make it so; and action is therefore suspect, even frightening. And that I was frightened by the diviner I have not denied. I was not alone, I was with Tom in this. (p. 161)

The Law is indeed with Tom in this, since it is obviously the Taoist part of his consciousness which speaks here, advocating inaction as the wisest of all politics. Again, it appears that a distinction must be drawn between the Law's personal and historical memory, between his individual and collective consciousness, since an excerpt like the one just quoted clearly derives from a larger awareness than the one he usually evinces as a character.

This suggests an explanation for his name as a narrator, 'the Law'. Since the larger consciousness encompasses antagonistic attitudes to the world, characterized respectively

by inaction or coercive expansion, by acceptance or rejection of the landscape, it seems reasonable to consider the Law as the allegorical embodiment of two different 'laws'¹ : he is at once the law of the land, the subtle, primeval balance which holds together all elements of the landscape in its natural state, and the alien or artificial order grafted upon it by an imperial 'government', institutionalized in such authoritative structures as the church, the prison, or even the mine which operated revolutions in the configuration of Tourmaline's subsoil and landscape. Thus the Law is both the policeman of the town, whose keen experienced eye soon detects in the diviner 'a criminal of quite extraordinary distinction' (p. 163), and the immemorial spirit of the place who refers to his age in geological terms : 'Ah, my age, my age is incalculable, my age is to be measured in terms of annual rings or sedimentary rocks, or by the changing atoms of unstable elements from which, aeons ago, I was created' (p. 131). Significantly, these two aspects of the Law's 'personality' are brought together in his initial presentation of himself, in the first chapter, where he appears as both a martial policeman and a reflection of the land :

And I myself appearing, pacing the road from my prison with long authoritative strides. My hair grey and streaked like last year's stubble, my face like an aerial landscape of the most barren ranges in the land. Imagine me well. (p. 13)

1 I am indebted to Dr R. McDougall for this distinction between the two 'laws'.

As we have seen, the clash which ensues between the two 'laws' embodied in the narrator, informs much of the novel ; in fact the water-based ideology proposed by the one threatens the integrity of the other -- since the land in its original state is a mainly waterless one. This 'conflict of interests' is manifest in the following passage, where the Law indulges in introspection while the diviner is out prospecting for water :

Did I, in spite of our hope, want him to fail? Did I resent him? It was, after all, pretty clear that he had come to take my place, and I was not prepared to resign my charge to the first comer, without remark or question. I was the Law of Tourmaline. This was no light matter. And yet, for the sake of Tourmaline, I believed myself capable of humility. (p. 161)

The Law's 'humility' here, his open-minded receptiveness to others' views or beliefs, is largely what makes possible the ideological dialogue that Tourmaline is. His fragmentation as a narrator, which gives him access to two several 'voices', accounts for the complex fabric of the novel, where specific discourses interweave, thus questioning (and relativizing) one another, while nonetheless retaining their distinctiveness as discrete stances. It is important in this respect that the Law should keep vacillating between the two considered positions, without ever definitively opting for either one of them. Interestingly, the novel ends in a duststorm which seemingly blots out the whole landscape ('There was no town, no hill, no landscape. There was nothing' [p. 174]) -- except, as the wind drops for a moment, the Law's prison-tower : 'Then the wind

dropped for half a minute. And I saw my tower, the boundary of Tourmaline, waiting' (p. 174). This sums up in condensed, symbolic form what the novel as a whole has been trying to do : to wipe out the world as it is constructed through particular, uncompromising ideologies, and reconstruct the edifice, 'my tower', on the 'boundary' between two discourses. The incantation that follows (and which closes the novel) reconciles again the diviner's terminology ('my gold, my darling') with a Taoist message of acceptance, and hence provides a last example of the novel's general philosophy of compromise :

Beware of my testament!
(Ah, my New Holland; my gold, my darling.)
I say we have a bitter heritage.
That is not to run it down. (p. 174)

Such a decentering of narrative discourse seems to constitute a kind of response to the plot of the novel, which draws on the rivalling influence of two conflicting ideologies (a struggle manifest at once on the outward plane of actual events and in the inner dimension of the narrator's mind) and thus tends to make Tourmaline a metaphor for the colonial condition. The form and content of the book thus appear to converse with each other : while the plot and imagery give original expression to the plight of colonial man (using, in unprecedented fashion, religious metaphors in order to represent the cultural schizophrenia which characterizes his position), the mode of the narration offers a possibility to neutralize this predicament by resorting to the post-colonial strategy of subverting the

imperial authority (embodied by the diviner's aggressive, evangelical religion) not by rejecting it outright but by maintaining it alongside another, contrasting ideology. In Tourmaline, the Law never chooses one perspective, or religion, at the cost of the other -- at least not as a narrator, since his discourse remains ambivalent to the end, imbued with assumptions typical of both stances. The imagery plays an important part in this process of deflating the absolutism of any given discourse ; many images in the novel progressively become, through association with conflicting values or ideals, highly ambivalent symbols which call two contrasting meanings to mind. Thus the novel upholds a conjunction of contraries, deliberately unresolved, and so perfectly balanced that the evocation of one pole of the relationship necessarily summons its complementary aspect. In this sense, Tourmaline differs fundamentally from To the Islands where the (thwarted) impulse was to transcend polarities through a relentless quest for unity. In the later novel the attitude to fragmentation is an essentially Taoist one, which consists in accepting each fragment integrally and individually, as at once a part of the whole and a whole in itself. Unity, as an ideal, is rejected as unviable, and fragmentation is embraced as a new vantage-point from which to (re-)read the world.

2 David Malouf's antipodean dialogue

The Law's insistence on his need to 'imagine and invent', to 'place in a framework the bare narratives' (Tourmaline, p. 73) given to him by the townspeople, suggests that the whole enterprise of reconstructing the world in original terms involves a major feat of imagination. Artist figures, then, may hold a privileged position in this respect. We saw, however, that Ovid in An Imaginary Life makes a poor impression as an artist since the poet embraces, in his quest for unity, 'that other form of words, the anti-breath of a backward-spelled charm, the no-name of extinction'¹. The narrator-terrorist of Child's Play similarly dedicates himself to the advent of a decreative principle, as his commitment to the assassination of a Great Writer clearly signifies; the patient construction of his imaginary world, which purports to smooth out the rifts observed in reality and impose a unified pattern upon it, emerges as the manifestation of a death wish. Even Johnno eventually falls victim to his tendency to create for himself a fantasy world that would be whole, complete, and undivided. At the other extreme, the main protagonists of Malouf's last two novels to date, Fly Away Peter (1982) and Harland's Half Acre (1984), reverse the pattern in that their imaginative itinerary takes them away from unity

1 D. Malouf, Fly Away Peter, Ringwood : Penguin Books, p. 114. All subsequent references are to this edition and given in the text.

towards fragmentation (like Rob Coram in The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea), and they recognize in the latter a potential life force which opposes the destructive drive latent in the former. It is therefore possible to align these two novels with Stow's Tourmaline, where fragmentation also emerges as an important structural device. A similar kind of narrative tactic is applied in Fly Away Peter and Harland's Half Acre, where differing outlooks on the world are also considered one next to the other, as alternatives rather than in a hierarchy of views.

Patrick Buckridge suggested that Jim Saddler's cataloguing activities in Fly Away Peter could be read as a metaphor for writing in a post-colonial culture.¹ Although, strictly speaking, Jim cannot really be called an artist (he is, in fact, scarcely literate), he is indeed involved in the writing of a book : 'The Book' (p. 44). A young Queenslander with a passion for birds, Jim devotes most of his time to watching the native birds of the coastline marshlands, and to consigning his observations in a big heavy ledger purchased for the occasion. This he was appointed to do by Ashley Crowther, a young well-to-do estate owner educated in England, who recognized in Jim a visionary gift, an imaginative capacity to commune with the place in word and spirit, which made him ideally fitted to the task :

There was also, on Ashley's part, a recognition that Jim too

1 P. Buckridge, 'Colonial Strategies in the Writing of David Malouf', Kunapipi, Vol. IX, No 2 (1987), p. 56.

had rights here, that these acres might also belong, though in another manner, to him. Such claims were ancient and deep. They lay in Jim's knowledge of every blade of grass and drop of water in the swamp, of every bird's foot that was set down there; in his having a vision of the place and the power to give that vision breath; in his having, most of all, the names for things and in that way possessing them. (p. 7)

Thus, when asking Jim to 'rewrite' the landscape by transposing it in his book, Ashley hopes to liberate it from the alien order which his own ancestors sought to bring to bear on it :

But Ashley saw things differently from his father and grandfather. They had always had in mind a picture they had brought from 'home', orderly fields divided by hedgerows, to which the present landscape, by planning and shaping, might one day be made to approximate. But for Ashley this was the first landscape he had known and he did not impose that other, greener one upon it; it was itself. (p. 11)

In this sense, then, Jim's lists of items in The Book can be construed as a re-creation of the world, a reordering of reality into a new, alternative version of it more precisely representative of the landscape. Significantly, some degree of artistry goes into the making of The Book, as attested by the neat beautiful flourish with which Jim shapes the rounded capital letters. Also, it is duly stressed that he needs to be 'in a particular frame of mind' (p. 44) -- that of inspiration, probably -- to do his calligraphy. The result stands out for the strict accuracy with which it reflects the outside world :

Out of air and water [the birds] passed through their name, and his hand as he carefully formed its letters, into The Book. Making a place for them there was giving them

existence in another form, recognizing their place in the landscape, or his stretch of it : providing 'sanctuary'. (p. 44)

Jim's gift, as these excerpts suggest, lies principally in his power to name objects, in his command of a language continuous with the reality it designates -- of which Malouf's Ovid would be envious! He is presented in the novel as a numinous wizard of the word, a linguistic demiurge able to conjure a whole world out of nothing simply by naming the birds, 'in a whisper out of the mists before creation' (p. 30) -- and then to move freely into it as when he smoothly glides, in his flat-bottomed boat, among the creatures he just called to life. This makes for a sense of unity with the landscape, a feeling of harmony with it, of which Ashley Crowther seems well aware when he reminisces ^{about} his first meeting with Jim : 'The young man had simply started up out of the earth at his feet' (p. 14). Ashley himself, in fact, feels estranged from the landscape (and the birds in particular), and has to resort to Jim's vision (and hence to his book), as an intermediary, in order to retrieve some grasp on it :

[The birds] shocked him each time he came here with the otherness of their being. He could never quite accept that they were, he and these creatures, of the same world. It was as if he had inherited a piece of the next world, or some previous one. That was why he felt such awe when Jim so confidently offered himself as an intermediary and named them: 'Look, the Sacred Kingfisher. From Borneo.' (p. 32)

Ashley, then, is cut off from the outside world, kept at bay from it for lack of a language fit to bridge the gap, so that the birds remain for him 'extravagantly disguised spirits of another

order of existence' (p. 30) -- as opposed to Jim whose perception and expression of reality are one : 'He lifted his eyes in admiration, and at the end of the sentence, his voice as well, to follow [the ibis's] slow flight as they beat away' (p. 31). Thus, the two young men stand for different, complementary visions of the world : Ashley's multiple and composite ('There was more to [his] image of the world than his formal clothes might have suggested' [p. 11]), and Jim's whole and unified, unfallen. Ashley can thus be seen as Jim's alter ego, his world a reflection of Jim's world but on the other side of a broken looking-glass, a fragmented variant on Jim's 'pre-classical, pre-historic and primaeval' universe, suspended as it is in 'the mists before creation' (p. 30). What accounts for the integrity (and onesidedness) of Jim's vision (referred to in the novel in terms of a myth of innocence) is his obliviousness of Europe as a world of experience. (Typically, he does not know what a Swede is.) This makes his assessment of the world from the vantage-point of Australia somewhat uncompromising, a kind of reversal (not dismissal) of imperial arrogations of universality. This is clearly illustrated by the dunlin episode : as World War I breaks out in Europe new cohorts of birds, of 'refugees', begin to migrate to the Pacific, so that Jim 'rediscover[s]' (p. 49) the dunlin (a red-backed sandpiper), an alien for which The Book has failed so far to provide sanctuary :

. . . a creature that he recognized and then didn't: the beak was too long and down-curved, the body too large for any of the sandpipers. He stared and didn't know what it was. He couldn't have been more puzzled, more astonished, if

he'd found a unicorn. (p. 46)

Interestingly, by naming the new bird Jim somehow appropriates it, in truly colonizing fashion, and perverts its essence when providing it with an item in his own biased version of 'The Book' :

He took the glasses and stared at this rare creature he had never laid eyes on till yesterday that was as common as a starling.

'Dunlin,' he said.

And immediately on his lips it sounded different, and it wasn't just the vowel. She could have laughed outright at the newness of the old word now that it had arrived on this side of the globe, at its difference in his mouth and hers. (p. 47)

However, Jim's vision of the world develops in the course of the novel, and eventually comes to mould itself on the fragmented model embodied by Ashley. Significantly, this upheaval in his conceptions occurs as soon as he is brought within the magnetic field of Europe, and takes in like 'the echo of a shot' (p. 35) the news that an international conflict has begun there. His sudden growth of awareness is then referred to as a fall : 'in a last moment of innocence' (p. 36) Jim feels that 'the ground before him, that had only minutes ago stretched away to a clear future, had suddenly tilted in the direction of Europe, in the direction of events, and they were all now on a dangerous slope' (p. 36). He joins up, and goes to fight in Flanders. Then, once on the battlefield, his unified vision of the world disintegrates with the suddenness of a shell's deflagration :

Overhead the sky was split. A livid crack appeared in the continuity of things, a line of jagged light through which a new landscape might have been visible. The crack repeated itself as sound. Jim's head was split this time and the further landscape in there was impenetrably dark. (p. 90)

The 'further landscape' of which Jim catches a glimpse leads him to revise his simplistic conception of the world, and to allow for hitherto unsuspected complexities. The tight congruence of his Queensland bird paradise then gives way to a dialectical vision of reality which takes the two sides into account, and acknowledges its intrinsic multiplicity :

Jim saw that he had been living, till he came here, in a state of dangerous innocence. The world when you looked from both sides was quite other than a placid, slow-moving dream, without change of climate or colour and with time and place for all. He had been blind. (p. 103)

Also, the split which rends Jim's head apart is inseparable from a dissociation of the word from the thing. It seems that Jim's fall from innocence has to be linguistic too to find full consummation. It is significant that Jim, who used to be unaware of any disjunction between language and reality, should now prove unable to conjure up his world on the breath of his mouth. The actuality of Europe, its unimaginable difference as the other pole to the vision embodied in 'The Book', appears to make obsolete or irrelevant the creative powers he was endowed with in times of innocence :

Jim would have liked then to speak of the swamp and the big seas that would be running at this time of year, king tides they were called, all along the beaches, threatening to wash them away.

'Golly but I'm cold!' is what he muttered instead. (p. 60-61)

It appears too that Europe at war is per se a world where language and reality stand on discontinuous terms with one another. When Stan Mackay, a soldier of his regiment, disappears, Jim feels worried 'that he couldn't fit a face to the name even when Clancy described the man' (p. 79). The names of the landscape have lost all relevance too :

Even the names they had given to positions they had held a month before had been changed by the time they came back Marwood Copse one place was called, where not a stick remained of what might, months or centuries back, have been a densely-populated wood. (p. 101)

The sophisticated, discriminating, fragmented vision of the world which Jim gradually evolves is symbolized in the novel by his 'double view', or faculty to apprehend the landscape, in imagination, as the birds must, from high up in the sky. This visionary gift, inchoate in Jim from the start of the novel, becomes effective only when Bert (one of Ashley's friends) takes him up for a spin in his aeroplane, and Jim gets a confirmation of what he had visualized already from below, 'the long view in which all this part of the country was laid out like a relief-map in the Shire Office' (p. 2). The birds, as previously noted, are considered by Ashley as 'spirits of another order of existence' (p. 30) -- one more embodiment of the Other in Malouf's work --

and indeed their connection with overseas territories (for those among them which follow migratory patterns) enhances their alienness. So that Jim's access to their mode of vision, which he achieves without necessarily relinquishing his own, makes him one of those rare characters in the whole Malouf corpus (or in Stow's, for that matter) who manage to combine two discrete perceptions of the world, to compare two constructions of it, without attempting to subordinate the one to the other :

He moved always on these two levels, through these two worlds: the flat world of individual grassblades, seen so close up that they blurred, where the ground-feeders darted about striking at worms, and the long view . . . [of] surf, beach, swampland, wet paddocks, dry, forested hill-slopes, jagged blue peaks. (p. 2)

This ambivalent envisioning of the world is reminiscent of Stow's Tourmaline, where the Law is depicted as both an ordinary, 'down-to-earth' policeman and 'an aerial landscape of the most barren ranges in the land' (Tourmaline, p. 13). In this novel too two 'views' of the landscape are examined side by side, and held simultaneously by the narrator-protagonist. In the same line of thought, Jim's capacity for 'bird vision' in Fly Away Peter appears to lead him towards emancipation from the imprisoning structures of the particular discourse in which he inscribes himself at first, while writing 'The Book'. It is in keeping with the logic of the narrative -- with Jim's development from innocence to experience -- that he should associate his glimpse into otherness with the war and Europe : 'Later he was to think of that view from Bert's plane as his last vision of the world he

knew, and of their momentarily losing sight of it when they turned to come down as the moment when he knew, quite certainly, that he would go [to the war]' (p. 55). Europe, as the anti-hemisphere of Jim's unified world, had to be come to terms with in his groping for a fuller code by which to read reality, and it emerges in the novel as the locus of a fall, or fragmentation, that is both linguistic and visionary.

So that at the end of his quest, when his consciousness has reached full growth -- just before death --, Jim evinces a dialectical, fragmented, conciliatory mode of apprehension of the world, which acknowledges the respective importance of both his own and the Other's perspective. This imaginative dialogue between opposites is epitomized in the novel by the consciousness of the birds, whose mapping of the world takes the two hemispheres into account. Significantly, Jim gains insight into the dialectical relationship which must involve the 'antipodes' when he catches a glimpse, from high up in Bert's plane, of the world as constructed by the Other :

But what came to him most clearly was how the map in his own head, which he had tested and found accurate, might be related to the one the birds carried in theirs, which allowed them to find their way - by landmarks, was it? - halfway across the world. It was the wonder of that, rather than the achievement of men in learning how to precipitate themselves into the air at sixty miles an hour, that he brought away from the occasion. And the heads so small!

So it did give him a new view after all. (p. 54)

At the moment of death Jim evinces again the same kind of 'negative capability' ; he sees himself at once from above and below, and holds the two views in perfect balance for a while:

He was perfectly awake and clear-headed, aware of the rough cloth of his uniform, the weight of his pack, the sweat and stink of himself that was partly fear; but at the same time, even as he heard the whistle and scrambled over the lip of the ditch, taking the full weight of pack, rifle, uniform, boots, and moved on into the medley of sound, he was out of himself and floating, seeing the scene from high up as it might look from Bert's bi-plane, remote and silent.

He saw it all, and himself a distant, slow-moving figure within it: the long view of all their lives, including his own - all those who were running, half-crouched, towards the guns, and the men who were firing them; those who had fallen and were noisily dying; the new and the old dead; his own life neither more nor less important than the rest, even in his own vision of the thing, but unique because it was his head that contained it and in his view that all these balanced lives for a moment existed. . . (p. 116-17)

Jim's rewriting of the world from a colonial, Australian perspective in *The Book* could be compared with Frank Harland's 'repainting' of it in Harland's Half Acre. In fact, there is a whole range of characters in this novel who attempt (not unlike Johnno) to design a new, critical version of reality through the self-conscious legitimation of their dreams and fantasies : Aunt Roo, Uncle Haro, Pearsall, Clem Harland. They are all inveterate liars, dedicated to 'redeem[ing] their shameful untruths by making them real' (p. 134), to reshaping the world with their subversive tongues. One thinks of Aunt Roo's treadle-machine, with which she untiringly produces theatrical costumes (and identities) for herself -- an activity associated with her verbosity : 'She herself was full of talk, and between bursts of the machine in which she guided the needle expertly between middle-finger and index, would give me good evidence of what it

was to have an imagination' (p. 87). In a sense, Roo is weaving and stitching together a world of make-believe density, yet palpable as attested by the sewing-machine itself, a piece of 'solid furniture' from which drapes and tissues fall out 'cascading . . . as from an object possessed' (p. 88).

Clem Harland, Frank's father, emerges as the stereotype of these passionate word-weavers. An insatiable, self-indulgent talker, he creates a whole reality out of words :

He made himself up out of it. He made the world up out of it. His cloudy speculations, the odd questions he put, the tales he told of experiences that had come to him at different times and places, were flesh and spirit to him because they touched on what he was most deeply moved by, the mystery of himself. (p. 5)

As a child Frank soon comes to recognize the shaping, creative quality inherent in his father's talk, to such a point that he cannot conceive of himself, of the mystery of his birth, except as an outpouring of words from his father's lips :

Breath - that was the sacred thing. Even the Bible said it. Hence the clear silences and bare swept spaces of his aunt's house, which was entirely secular, and on the other hand his father's talk, the endless flow of words on that caressing breath that must itself, Frank decided, be the creative medium. He could only have been breathed forth in a great bubble or spat bodily from his father's mouth. (p. 12)

What the fatherly voice appears keenest on evoking, is the large body of tales and legends which recount the story of the Harlands' settlement at Killarney : their easy (and bloody) conquest of the land against the Aborigines, and their subsequent

loss of it through bad luck and mismanagement. It is a tale of melancholy and deprivation, and it seems typical of Clem that he should seek solace in dreamy evocations of the forgone, once princely estate, thus making up for the drabness of the patch of scrub from which he now has to scrape a living. In this sense the telling is an act of repossession, an imaginary perpetuation of the conquest of the land such as it was enacted by his ancestry.

Interestingly, the whole purpose underlying the release of Frank's incipient talent is to effect the same kind of spiritual retrieval. From his earliest pictorial scribblings he learns to attune the movements of his pencil to the voice of his father : 'Frank listened and drew' (p. 20) -- so that his drawings emerge as another attempt at capturing the lost landscapes of Killarney :

He was setting down all the places, as he knew from his father's stories, that had once been Jack Harland's share of the triple empire, before it was lost in a card game by that Gem Harland, his great grandfather's eldest, and drunk away by Gem's brother Sam and schemed or stolen out of the hands of others by sly cousins, envious brothers-in-law, fly neighbours His pictures were a reminder and inventory. They were also a first act of repossession, which made them charms of a sort and their creating an act of magic. The idea scared him a little but he was stubborn. He had chosen a course and would stick to it. For life - if that is what it came to. (p. 31)

This devotion to the restoration of a lost paradise, and referred to as an 'empire', reminds one of Tourmaline again, and the voice of Frank's father, associated as it is with 'a feeling for continuity in the remembrance and recording of things' (p. 28), echoes the nostalgic accents occasionally struck by the Law,

the memory of Tourmaline. This feeling for continuity, for the perpetuation of a past order intent on expansion or conquest, makes them both the talkative, unquenchable representatives of the imperial discourse -- with the reservations, that is, which we saw were applicable in the case of the Law. Frank, however, gradually demarcates himself from this discourse, and allows discontinuity to inform his perception, in a way which links him closely to Jim Saddler in Fly Away Peter. As was the case with Jim, the sense of revelation which Frank experiences involves an encounter with Europe.

Although Frank never actually goes to Europe, Europe comes to him in the guise of Knack, a Polish refugee whose acquaintance he makes in Brisbane during World War II. Knack, severed from the place of his birth and cut off from the historical tradition of which he is the product (his family, of noble lineage, used to possess lands and forests on the shores of the Baltic), represents discontinuity and fragmentation, or the unsettled, free-floating state which typifies most of the characters of the novel, who are set adrift by the depression or by the war. This is made clear by the description of the junk shop which he manages and inhabits in Melbourne Street :

Everything was higgledy-piggledy, a parody of settled existence that suggested some final break in the logic of things or a general disruption in which every stick had worked loose or floated free of its old use and meaning and would acquire a new one only when it was resurrected into a second (or was it a third?) life. (p. 105)

Knack, as this passage suggests, finds himself precariously

suspended between two (or more) worlds, a position in which survival might very well depend on one's capacity to initiate the process of 'resurrection' alluded to in the text, and reassess the fragments and vestiges of the past in completely new terms. But Knack proves imaginatively unable to free himself from the condition of disaster, and sticks stubbornly to his own defeated, onesided perspective on the world, to which he gives expression either in downcast talk of home or through his contorted, tortured music ; in either case Frank is struck by the strangeness of the evocation, 'of a gloom he had never encountered in all his travels up and down the state, and might not exist on this continent or on this side of the globe' (p. 114). He then conceives of a brilliant idea : 'To convert the man to another point of view' (p. 114), and do this by means of a picture designed as a kind of counterweight to the despair of Knack's view of the world : 'He held in his mind, against Knack's talk and the enfolding music, one of his landscapes, and wondered if that would do it' (p. 114). More than an actual (or dogmatic) conversion, then, Frank's painting provides 'an alternative, he liked to believe, to the concrete yard and to Knack's own gloomy views' (p. 115). Its aim is ostensibly to establish a kind of dialogue, a dynamic of conflict, between opposing perspectives, so as to invigorate each one of them with new possibilities :

It pleased him to have his painting in that particular spot, and to think that he had, for his friends' sake, changed the room and its perspective in the same way that Knack's music could change it, opening the walls, even at night, on to a new sort of weather. (p. 115-16)

Knack, however, though not actually dismissive of the picture, proves unable to enter in dialogue with Frank's landscape, owing to what he apparently perceives as the intractable alienness of it :

'But it is this country,' Frank said.

'You think so?'

Knack looked.

'No, Frank, I don't think it is. Not yet, anyway. It has not been discovered, this place. The people for it have not yet come into existence, I think, or seen they could go there. .

. . (p. 116)

He and Frank, then, react differently to the reality of fragmentation : whereas Frank begins to sense in it a possibility for overcoming the abyss, Knack fails to see this and commits suicide, after having shot his Australian mistress Edna through the chest. Arriving on the scene later on, Frank is shocked to find blood smears everywhere on the walls, and on his picture in particular, which is transformed altogether by this wave of blood :

The whole room shook with changes. His picture for instance - the one thing that was near enough to his own experience to offer him access. Changed! Extraordinary. Such reds! What painter would have dared? He was frighteningly dazzled by the possibilities, as if, without his knowing it, his own hand had broken through to something that was searingly alive, savage and triumphant, and stood witness at last to all terror and beauty. (p. 126)

The dialogue of views which he sought to establish has taken place at last, and quite unexpectedly Frank realizes that his own

vision of reality had to be altered as well. By forcing changes upon it Knack opened up for Frank new, dazzling 'possibilitites', and the 'long view' which is then achieved proves more satisfyingly complete, in that it encompasses opposites like terror and beauty, savage^y and triumph. The painter acknowledges the inadequacy (the intransigence) of his earlier landscape : 'How had he failed to see the rising of such a tide of red?' (p. 127), and accordingly destroys the whole of his work to date -- which now affrontingly falls short of his larger vision : 'He slashed at them, tore them in strips. They lay in heaps on the floor' (p. 126). He then gives expression to his enlarged awareness in a painting which allows at last for the 'reds' of Knack's views, and indeed represents the scene of his suicide :

It was a big picture, mostly red, but slashed all over with feathery blue. There were figures in it, two of them, and they appeared to be dancing or swimming or supporting each other against a fall - there was no clear indication and they were hard to disentangle, you couldn't tell where one figure ended and the other picked up. (p. 57-58)

Interestingly, this crucial passage from unity to fragmentation is referred to as a fall (this links the novel with Fly Away Peter), which only the painter manages to go through unscathed since the figures in the picture die in the ordeal, and indeed refuse to embrace fragmentation, as attested by the desperate energy with which they clutch to each other, 'hard to disentangle'. The painting strikes the narrator as 'joyfully undismayed' (p.62) in spite of its grim subject matter : it

appears that Frank, reconsidering in retrospect the antagonism of views contained in the confrontation of the two landscapes in the junk shop (his own picture and Knack's music), assesses it more positively than Knack and Edna who were driven to suicide by it.

The image haunted him; and he was haunted too by the music, which she it seems had understood in one sense and he, if he understood at all, in another. As something equally compelling but which led to strength and sunlight. . . (p. 127)

Frank's move towards fragmentation is completed later on when his nephew Gerald, the last of the Harlands and therefore the prospective inheritor of the empire which he is still putting together piece by piece, commits suicide as well, thus interrupting irreversibly the so far continuous, linear history of the dynasty. On the death of his nephew Frank sinks into a kind of sleepless torpor, and hears voices which turn out to be those of his ancestors : the voice of his father, concerned as it was with the continuity of things, has now disintegrated in a coalescence of voices (among them his own) which tell the same story but from a multiple perspective...

In a series of discontinuous dreams that were all voices, out of a delirium broken by days and sometimes weeks of mere existence, or spells in which he was engaged body and soul with a mess of paint and paper, he heard things. . . .

Most of these voices he had not known. Others he could identify by what they told. It was what his father had told. (p. 175)

The landscapes evoked by these voices, which Frank will couch in

colours for the rest of his life, differ strikingly from the dream of reconquered empires which launched him on his artistic career. The portion of land which he now pursues, itself a gathering of fragments, emerges as ultimately divided, halved beyond integration :

The quilt was green beyond green, an island continent in the dark of his sleep. He had news of it and the news now must be spread. In colour, in colours. When all was done and the fragments gathered and laid side by side, he would have laid bare say half an acre. It wasn't much, no more than a glimpse. But as much as one man might catch sight of.
(p. 178)

The tone is one of total acceptance. Frank's rewriting of reality thus emerges as an alternative, a variant on the unified uncompromising image of it proposed by his father, and offers new strategies for survival in a world where intransigent attitudes appear to lead to imaginative (and actual) death. It is significant too that Frank should now no longer be 'accused . . . of tracing' (p. 177) -- as he was, as a child, by his aunt. Indeed his work no longer strives to conquer by image the world around him, but, on the contrary, to free it from the conquests to which it was subjected.

Harland's Half Acre shares with Tourmaline a concern with apocalypse. The 'tide of red' which washes over Frank's landscape echoes 'the red flood' which obliterates the town of Tourmaline at the end of this novel. A similar Yeatsian tone is struck in Fly Away Peter, where Jim has to go through the convulsions of a war (the decreative principle) to revise his perception of the

world. In fact, all three novels represent a world submerged in chaos, poised on the hinge between two eras. In each book, the wastelands of the imperial imagination have to be abandoned, discarded like 'a heap of broken images' (one thinks of Frank Harland tearing his pictures in strips, 'which lay in heaps on the floor'), and then reinterpreted from a fresh, dialectical perspective. The new picture that emerges departs from the rejected one in that its underlying structure 'falls apart' : it takes fragmentary, contrasting views into consideration with no intention of reconciliation. It is a picture freed from the frame : the world is now looked at from two different angles -- neither of which can be taken for granted any more.

CONCLUSION

The last fragmentation to emerge is the discontinuity discernible between one's reading of the world and one's (re)writing of it in de-centred terms. A brief study of the way Stow and Malouf's characters relate to their environment, as either readers or writers of it or both, will provide a recapitulation of the various strategies deployed in their work to revolutionize the pre-text of metropolitan hegemonic discourse.

The use of pathetic fallacy in To the Islands tends to make Heriot, in the first instance, a 'writer' of the world. As we have noted, the alien landscapes through which he journeys in the novel are dotted with broken rocks which can be considered as a symbolic extension of himself. More generally, the scenery as a whole reflects the utter 'strangeness' of his soul, glimpsed at the close of the book. Similarly, the outbreak of 'Vailala madness' in Visitants has been interpreted as the outward projection of Cawdor's inner turmoil.¹ Landscape and character are thus involved in a kind of mirror relationship with each other, in which the character (not the other way around) exerts the primary shaping influence. In other words the character colonizes the landscape, invests it with his own substance, instead of allowing its otherness to interrogate him. Ovid comparably moulds the environment to his own image in An Imaginary Life, as when he projects the desolation of his own inner exile onto the steppes of Scythia, or grafts an imaginary poppy flower upon a patch of scrub. It is probably not fortuitous

1 Anthony J. Hassall, Strange Country, p. 138.

that these should be the characters who emerge most prominently as representatives of the imperium : they fail, all of them, to open up a fruitful dialogue with the Other, or turn it into a sterile monologue for lack of self-effacement.

To some extent, the citizens of Tourmaline evince a similar imaginative rigidity. They equally seek to cast the landscape in a mould of their own, an impulse which Stow explicitly condemns as imperialistic by associating it inextricably with an expansive, aggressive 'religion' of power. However, Stow also says that 'Body is land in permutation',¹ as indeed attested by the reference to the Law as an 'aerial landscape of the most barren ranges in the land' (Tourmaline, p. 13), or to Horse Carson's 'mallee-root fists' (p. 43). Landscape here shapes character. Hence the Law, as the memory and conscience of the townspeople, proves at once writer and reader, coder and decoder of reality. This is in keeping with the general ambivalence of the novel : as an old policeman the Law embraces the dominant, imperial cultural discourse (he inscribes a water-myth on a desert), yet as a narrator he deflates it through the ambitextuality of his story (he reads, intermittently at least, the message of the land).

The protagonists of Fly Away Peter and Harland's Half Acre, Jim Saddler and Frank Harland, similarly transfigure the received text of reality through an inspired reading of it. Jim's visionary capacities are symbolized by his binoculars (bi-

1 'From the Testament of Tourmaline', Variation VII, p. 72.

noculars), which are 'screwed firmly into his head - they might have been a fixture' (Fly Away Peter, p. 19) ; the radical scrutiny to which he then submits the world generates a split, a duplication of discourse, which transcends the monolithic code initially informing The Book. In Harland's Half Acre, Frank's pictural reconstruction of the Australian landscape involves a comparable reinterpretation (a fragmentation) of the hegemonic narrative of conquest voiced by his father. Fragmentation thus stands out as a conceptual mode, a discursive strategy used to destabilize the arrogant fixity of an epistemological code which tends to resist self-interrogation and transformation.

Another keen reader of the world is Dante, the first-person narrator of Johnno, whose constant ironical stance (he stands forever sidelong to the occasion) makes an ideal, detached observer of what is going on about him. Dante is first prodded into relating (writing!) the story of his dead friend Johnno by an apocryphal picture which ostensibly falsifies the truth. His primal urge is to set the record right, out of loyalty for the image of the world sabotaged by the spurious photograph. Such a belief in the absolute hegemony of the 'realistic' text, in its indisputably higher accuracy or representativeness, strikes one as quintessentially imperialistic. Dante's 'authoritative' stance namely finds expression in his tendency to expurgate from his own discourse any mediatory element functioning as sign. The pictures supposed to document the story are exposed as deceptive and unreliable ; Dante then presents his narrative as the only adequate reflection of the reality reported, faithful because unmediated and thus directly conversant with it : 'I had been

writing my book about Johnno from the moment we met' (p. 12). However, this monolithic (unfragmented) image of reality slowly disintegrates as Dante realizes, while elaborating his narrative, that truth transcends circumscription : 'Twenty years later I am still [trying to explain]' (p. 11). He comes to recognize its utter inadequacy : 'Maybe, in the end, even the lies we tell define us' (p. 170), and eventually embraces an epistemology of the manifold as better apt to account for the unfathomable complexities of reality.

In The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea, Rob Coram undergoes a similar development. As he sets about to 'learn the country' (he endeavours to decipher, with great enthusiasm, both its historical and geographical texts), he becomes aware of the multiplicity of the infrastructure which in-forms the world : 'His world was not one world' (p. 79). His encounter with vestiges of Aboriginal culture in Western Australia gives him insight into the relativity and inadequacy of history as written from the particular vantage-point of the European consciousness, which builds the text of the Past along a determinist, teleological axis finalizing the achievements of White conquest and settlement ; simultaneously the congruent, circular world which he used to think of as centred upon himself progressively turns out to be 'a mere municipality' (p. 215), utterly fragmented. As in Johnno, it is a recognition of the world's multiplicity which brings about this de-centering in the perception. Also, significantly, Rob's growth in awareness runs in parallel with his gradual emancipation from the influence of

his cousin Rick, who is associated with Europe in the novel. This separation, then, however traumatic and painful, proves ultimately creative of (and necessary for) a new construction of the world as essentially manifold, totally at variance with its (now discarded) unified counterpart.

A similar dynamic of transformation and reinterpretation informs Stow's novelistic 'dyptich', Visitants and The Girl Green as Elderflower. The overall impetus of Visitants is a realistic one, in that the novel (which has the form of a justice inquiry report) attempts to reconstitute (to read) a sequence of events which occurred on an island in the Trobriands. Again, such a narrative impulse seems to imply unqualified confidence in the document's true representativeness of reality, in its continuity with it : an assumption which the novel thoroughly undermines by exposing the ultimate cripticality and fragmentation of the phenomenal text. Reality resists reading in Visitants, not least so in view of the mosaic of perspectives presented. The Girl Green as Elderflower provides an appropriate pendant to this since the visible world is exploded again here, in a number of mythologies which all offer a different reflection (or distortion) of the original, phenomenal text. In this sense the dynamic of the novel concurs with the politics of post-colonialism : it endeavours to subvert a discourse which presents itself as irrefutable by appending it with various critical alternatives.

In Child's Play too the protagonist's attentive perusal of the world around him proves revealing of unsuspected crevices in the fabric of things, brought about by the very documents he

utilizes to construct reality. Clearly, to gaze upon the world is to circumscribe it, to confine it, to impose upon it the frontiers of a particular discourse or imagination. Every act of reading thus appears to affect (to shape) the considered text. It is significant that David's attempt to read his childhood house as whole and unfragmented should be ultimately defeated in 12 Edmondstone Street : to embark on such a quest for unity is to make oneself the mouthpiece of a conscripting ideology, and (paradoxically) to inscribe discontinuity on the intact, unwritten page of reality. To read the novels of Stow and Malouf is to be made aware of this, to grope one's way towards deeper understanding of the mechanisms of ideology, and to free oneself from the hegemony of homogeneous, restricting codes.

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