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RANDOLPH STOW'S *THE GIRL GREEN*  
*AS ELDERFLOWER*

*The Girl Green as Elderflower* (1980) is both a companion volume to *Visitants* (1979), and a long-meditated statement of the author's current vision, marking a period in his life. As *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* (1965) was the fictional summation of his twenty-five years in Australia, so *The Girl Green as Elderflower* reflects the years in England which followed. The two books then are completed, complementary chapters in the spiritual autobiography of the author: *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* celebrating Geraldton, and the death of childhood; *The Girl Green as Elderflower* celebrating Suffolk, and rebirth into maturity. Some of the contrasts that emerge between the two are anticipated in the early poem "Child Portraits, With Background", in which the poet contrasts a girl's childhood, "In Southern Forest", where "all the year was green" and "life was safe and endless", with a boy's childhood "On Northern Downs", where "the year was eternal summer . . . life . . . a white bird . . . to be held" and "the crows cried continually of death".<sup>1</sup> The poem outlines many of the contraries which recur in Stow, and in particular it juxtaposes the two homes to which he, and other Australians of his and preceding generations, have felt contradictory allegiances. The restless Richard Mahony could settle in neither, and Martin Boyd's families move from one to the other with a poignant, lingering regret that neither can satisfy, except, like Proust's Florence and Venice, in anticipation. Stow, however, seems to have found the way home that eluded Mahony. *The Girl Green as Elderflower* celebrates Suffolk with quiet, abiding pleasure, and without the fierce nostalgic sense of loss that embitters the celebration of Western Australia in *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea*.

The connections with *Visitants* are, however, more immediate than the connections with the earlier work. *The Girl Green as Elderflower* is a sequel to *Visitants*, and is, as Stow says: "the optimistic side of the very black story of Cawdor".<sup>2</sup> Crispin Clare is the version of Cawdor who might have survived being "bowled over by tropical diseases, some way from a doc-

tor". He was, he tells Jim Maunoir, "A very raw anthropologist, working for one of the colonial governments" (30), before he came to grief and eventually resigned.<sup>3</sup> As the story unfolds, the similarities between his experience and Cawdor's become apparent. But though they overlap in this way, the characters, and their stories, remain distinct. The echoes are deliberate, but the two remain apart. The book is in fact built on echoes, parallels and overlappings, not only of Cawdor and Clare, but also of Clare in twentieth-century Suffolk and *The Lord Abbott's Tales*, three twelfth-century Suffolk legends which Clare translates and reworks during his convalescence. Suffolk is a haunted land, and Clare is haunted by its legends; but the spirits turn out to be friendly, and their stories have a therapeutic effect. He is able to project his own suffering on to the protagonists of the legends, "in their plight to see an image of my own" (136). When his own experience becomes a story, a history, he is able to shed it, to put it into the past, and so to begin his life again. The emblem of his return from death to life is the Tarot card of the Hanged Man that Amabel uses to tell his fortune, and that Matthew Perry sends him from Iran, with its inscription: "*Your card = Resurrection*". When Clare, who has tried to hang himself, sees the front of the card, "he felt a horror of it" (108), but when he turns it over and reads the paradoxical inscription, the horror recedes into the past, where it belongs.<sup>4</sup>

Clare's Suffolk is not only green and pleasant, and benignly legendary, it is also a peopled place, with all the complex texture of an old civilization. Generations of his ancestors have lived there, and one of them, also named Crispin Clare of The Hole Farm, is buried in Swainstead churchyard. Sharing his name and living in his house, Clare has a sense of belonging to a family and a tradition stretching comfortably back into the Middle Ages. There is a family in the present as well, Clare's recently widowed cousin Alicia and her three children, who enjoy having a newly-returned relative as a neighbour, and who draw him enthusiastically into their family life, and urge him to stay. There are also old friends, like Matthew Perry, who turns up unexpectedly and helps Clare through a memory-haunted night. And there are new friends, like Jim Maunoir, a temporarily retired Jesuit, who helps Clare's recovery more than the priests and psychotherapists who have treated him in an official

capacity. This feeling of presence, of warmth, of being surrounded by people is starkly absent from the Australia of Stow's early novels, a land almost as vacant as the empty planet of the poem "Endymion". Behind a mere four generations of European settlement in Geraldton stretches a vast emptiness — an image of the cosmic emptiness that terrifies Heriot and Cawdor — lit only by the nomad fires of an alien race.<sup>5</sup> Loneliness in the face of the silent bush and the seemingly empty continent runs as a major theme through Australian literature.<sup>6</sup> The people of Australia, the most urbanized on earth, huddle in coastal cities, seeking relief in propinquity from the lonely alienation that their country inspires in them. As *The Merry-go-Round in the Sea* movingly demonstrates, however, that relief does not survive childhood, and dispossessed adults like Rick are more inclined to look across the sea to the Jamesian richness of Europe, than to explore like Voss or Heriot the "great subtlety" of their own country.<sup>7</sup> A descendant of the Australian poets "who died of landscape",<sup>8</sup> Cawdor dies of alienation. Clare, by contrast, is able to make the journey back from alienation, but only in the healing landscape of Suffolk, which has accommodated aliens for eight hundred years.

The visitants that Cawdor is so anxious to meet in the hope that they would relieve his isolation do not come to his rescue. Heriot finds no islands, except those of his own vision, Random finds no water in the desert, only golden cargo, and Dalwood and Cawdor find no souls in the cave of the dead at Budibudi. The star people, if they exist, are shy of human contact, and whether through reluctance or indifference, they offer only enigmatic evidence that the cosmos is peopled. The visitants in *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, however, though strange, are human enough, and local. They come from the past, from under the earth or the sea, not out of the sky, and, as Robyn Wallace has observed, they bring life: "the underworld, or otherworld, whether it is the country under the sea or the country under the earth or the country under the conscious self, is finally the source of life, and of a life which can accommodate death".<sup>9</sup> They show Clare the way back from death to life, teaching him to accept death, as Malkin promises to go "hand in hand, to the gate" (51) with Osbern Bradwell.

The seasonal progression of the book echoes Clare's psychic regeneration. *The Girl Green as Elderflower* is more

explicitly a seasonal book than any of Stow's novels since *A Haunted Land*. Clare's story does not follow the full cyclic pattern of the year, with its emphasis on repetition, but only that half of it which moves from January to June in the Northern Hemisphere, though the full seasonal range is represented in the inner stories. The change for Clare in the frame story is from midwinter to midsummer, from cold to warmth, from death to new life, from the white of snow to the green of growth, and from the green of the elderbud to the white of the elderflower. As this last reversal of colour-patterning suggests, however, the book is not simply a celebration of new life. While Clare's story is one of recovery, the legends that he translates are heartrending stories of loneliness, loss and alienation. Malkin, the wild man, and the green children are displaced from their native surroundings by accident, cruelty or violence, and they can neither live at peace in the worlds into which they are thrust, nor return in peace to the lives they yearn for and remember. It is this common fate in the stories that Clare responds to, since it echoes his own. Even a close and settled society like Suffolk has its visitants. And even high summer carries with it the memory of the winter which preceded it, and which will follow: "the insistent note of the countryside was white embowered in green" (107). It is the knowledge of death which gives life its mystery, its shape, and its poignancy.

Like so much of Stow's work, *The Girl Green as Elderflower* depicts psychic divisions and conflicts in search of an elusive reconciliation. What is unusual in this last book is its acceptance of conflict and irresolution as part of a divine dispensation. This is evident in Jacques Maunoir's final, moving statement to the green girl as she lies dying:

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

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

"In the garden of God are regions of darkness, waste heaths and wan waters, gulfs of mystery, where the bewildered soul may wander aghast. Do not think to rest in your village, in your church, in your land always secure. For God is wider than middle earth, vaster than time, and as His love is infinite, so also is His strangeness. For His love we love Him, and for His strangeness we ought to fear Him, lest to chastise us He bring us into those dark and humbling places.

"I, even I, have known a prodigy and a marvel, and I have wept for two children, and feared in their plight to see an image of my own. Nevertheless I did not despair, for them or for myself, knowing that even in their wandering they rested still in reach of God's hand. For no man is lost, no man goes astray in God's garden; which is here, which is now, which is tomorrow, which is always, time and time again."

Mirabel's eyes, which had been closed, slowly fluttered open. Into them there seemed to come the paradox of a green flush as she died.

"This I believe and must," said Jacques Maunoir. "I believe, and must." (135-6)

The intense conviction of this powerful credo, with its echo of Dante's *Purgatorio*,<sup>10</sup> represents a significant development from Stow's earlier work. The images of island and garden, of land and sea recur, as do the contrasts of home and exile, the love of mankind and the estrangement of each man from his fellows, and the emotions of love and grief seen against a background of time and eternity. But the emphasis is different, and more hopeful. If God is strange, and human life is bitter, there is nonetheless a home with God to which man may find his way. On his journey to that home he will encounter the Green Man, who presides over the cycle of growth and decay, and who "is neither cruel nor merciful, but dances for joy at the variousness of everything that is" (127). The face of the Green Man haunts Clare from his first, midwinter dream to the end of the book. He represents, as Helen Watson-Williams says: "an affirmation of the beauty, the diversity and the inexhaustibility of the natural world".<sup>11</sup> His garden is literal and natural, and it is all too possible to go astray in it, as the green girl does, before she finds a home with Matthew Pedlar, and later, perhaps, with God. In the world of *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, divided as it is between these two deities, contraries remain, and continue to evade reconciliation. But there is a greater emphasis than before on the Christian virtues of faith and hope. And charity, the love of man, is no longer "a weed of the waste places",<sup>12</sup> but a natural growth in the human heart.

*The Girl Green as Elderflower* is the first book in which Stow has a writer as protagonist, and we are given some insight into the complex process by which his personal experience and his reading are blended and transformed in his art. Stow has made extensive use of myth in his recent poetry, juxtaposing ancient myth and modern experience so that each echoes the other and a resonance is set up between them. *The Girl Green as Elderflower* uses the same technique, though it is a good deal more complex than poems like "Persephone" or "Penelope", since there are three separate sets of legends which parallel Clare's experience in the novel. Stow has cited a parallel in Janacek's *The Excursions of Mr Brouček* for the adventurous structure that he chooses:

This is an opera about a drunken innkeeper, I think he is, who in his cups has one vision where he goes to the moon, and meets all kinds of strange people; and in another he finds himself back in the middle ages. And some of the people, I think most of the people, that he sees in these episodes are people that he knows in his ordinary, everyday life — we've already seen them on the stage. I was already intending to do *Elderflower* like this, but I was just a bit uncertain as to what people would make of it — if they could understand the device that I intended to use. After seeing that Janacek brought it off with no trouble I was confirmed in thinking that was the way to do it. So I went ahead.

The difficulties are greater in a novel, however, since the author cannot rely on the reader recognizing the faces of the doubled characters:

The structure would be less surprising if it had been a film, if one could see the faces of the characters from the framing story who take part in the inserted stories. It is a rather cinematic way of doing things.<sup>13</sup>

Stow is nonetheless extraordinarily successful in moving the characters of the novel in and out of the frame story and the inserted stories in such a way that multiple resonances are created in an unpretentious and seemingly effortless manner.<sup>14</sup> The personal narrative of Clare is set against the medieval legends he rewrites, peopling them with the family and friends who assist in his recovery. In merging the two, Clare is able to project the burden of his own illness on to the victims of the legends, and so to begin to reify that illness as something past and separate, like the legends.

Clare is able to effect this recovery in Suffolk because he finds there what he has lacked, an identity, a role, and a culture. The gravestone in Swainstead churchyard with his name and address inscribed on it gives him a sense of having come home to a life of continuity, and, since it might be him – or his “dead self” – in the grave, it calms his hysteria about death. Alicia and the children offer him a family role, wanting him as the friend and relative they need to help them through their grieving. Perry and Maunoir offer sympathetic understanding of his ordeal, and a fellow-feeling based on their own related experiences. The local legends not only satisfy his anthropologist’s curiosity, and stir his creative spirit, they also link him to his own origins, and mirror his experience. Thus the Clare who has lost his sense of himself to the point of attempting suicide finds a self waiting for him in Suffolk, a self he chooses to accept.

It is a settled, peopled, haunted land, and both the people and the spirits come to Clare’s aid, breaking in on his loneliness and drawing him back to life. By responding to them, and to their local legends – or myths from the Collective Unconscious – Clare escapes from the terrible isolation of Cawdor, whose star-people never come, and who loses contact with others and ultimately with himself. Cawdor learns only the frigid, life-denying ceremony of Calantha in *The Broken Heart*, to move through the villages “like royalty”.<sup>15</sup> Clare escapes from that fate to the life-supporting warmth of the village of Swainstead, where he learns again to relate to himself and to other people.

How lasting the optimism of the ending of the book will prove to be is an intriguing question. Australians who return “home” have an indifferent record of settling there contentedly, and Stow, who is an enthusiastic traveller, and who has the restless blood of three centuries of colonists in his veins, is unlikely to remain in the same place, or the same frame of mind, for very long. *The Girl Green as Elderflower* nonetheless indicates that he has moved further towards reconciliation, and even a hard-won serenity of sorts, than could have been predicted from his earlier books, and this is clearly related to the experience of settling in England. He remains, however, as he has always been, intensely aware of the dualities of human experience. The divided, overlaid pattern of the book reflects the divided history of Cawdor/Clare, as well as his/their antecedents Rob/Rick and Random/Kestrel. And even in this last, most hopeful testament



<sup>13</sup>Hassall Interview, p. 321. Brouček is not, in fact, the inkeeper, but a standing guest at the Vikára Inn.

<sup>14</sup>A number of reviewers commented on the success of the book's method. Bruce King, for example, says that "without trying," *The Girl Green as Elderflower* "makes many attempts at experimental fiction appear self-conscious, mechanically contrived, and unimaginative." *Sewanee Review*, LXXXIX (1981), 464. John Hanrahan agrees, despite a contrary initial impression: "at first this novel seems a muddle of fragments," but it "develops a finely integrated world that absorbs and convinces." *Australian Book Review*, No. 27 (December 1980), pp. 8-9.

<sup>15</sup>One of the epigraphs to *Visitants* comes from Calantha's final speech in Ford's *The Broken Heart* (V, iii).