

**Dorothy Green**

**ON NOT FALLING  
INTO THE GAPS**

Anthony J. Hassall. *Strange Country*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1986. 213 pages. \$29.95. Casebound.

It is interesting to note that a novel of Randolph Stow's and the first comprehensive study of his work by Anthony Hassall have attracted two of the most extraordinary reviews ever written by respected Australian critics. To compare them might serve as a cautionary tale against succumbing too readily to fashions in critical theory. One critic *castigates* Stow as a symbolist; the other *praises* Stow as a symbolist and castigates Hassall for allegedly attempting to enrol him in the realist camp. Meanwhile Stow has described himself as a hyper-realist.

In *Southerly*, No. 2, 1964, Leonie Kramer reviewed the first four of Stow's novels, concluding that "*Tourmaline* was the *reductio ad absurdum* of the symbolic novel". In her assessment of *To the Islands*, she assumes the central character Heriot was intended as a Christ-figure and the novel as a vehicle of "quasi-Christian mythology", without wondering how the head of a mission, obsessed by hatred and resentment, who goes bush after stoning a man in a rage, because he is incapable of forgiving him, in any way resembles Christ. She manages to discuss the novel at some length without anywhere telling us what it is about. The word "aboriginal" occurs once, in the sentence: "In the belief that he had killed a man, he (Heriot) wanders into the wilderness to seek the mythical aboriginal islands of the dead". We are not told who the man is, what is his relationship to Heriot, or anything else about him. We do not know what wilderness is referred to — it might as well be the Kalahari Desert or the Nullabor Plain — and although we are told Heriot is a missionary, we do not know to whom, nor where the mission is situated. In short, the Aborigines, for Kramer, are totally invisible, even the one who accompanies Heriot on his wild journey. The massacre at Onmalmeri, which Hassall regards as existing at the core of the book, is never mentioned, though it was based on the real massacre at Umbali, in 1927, still the subject of government enquiries years afterwards. This blindness is all the more astonishing<sup>1</sup> as Kramer takes Stow to task for "eschewing social

background” and creating characters who live in isolation “remote from the pressures of social institutions” — this in spite of the fact that specific social institutions are shown near the beginning of the novel to contribute considerably to Heriot’s disturbed psychic condition. In fact, in spite of the youthful stylistic flaws to which Kramer rightly draws attention, there could hardly be a novel which makes more imaginative and more subtle use of important social issues in Western Australia in the 1950s, or a review more oblivious of these issues. Information about the real-life basis of *To the Islands* (which Kramer insists is indispensable to characterisation) was available before the review was written, notably in Stow’s “The Umbali Massacre: As told to him by Daniel Evans” (*The Bulletin*, 15.2.61). It is also alluded to in a note on page 56 of the novel (Penguin edition).

An important critical task, therefore, which Hassall performs admirably, was to analyse and evaluate the transmutation of fact into fiction.

The stylistic inconsistencies objected to by Kramer (though she is mistaken in describing them as “schizophrenic”) were for the most part rectified by Stow in his revised version of the novel. The revision is ably discussed by Hassall both in his book and in his interview with Stow, published in *Australian Literary Studies*, May 1982. In the latter, Stow objected to academics who described him as a symbolic novelist:

although I don’t think any of them has ever said what anything I have written is supposed to be symbolic of; because symbolic is not a self-explanatory word, it has to be explained in every context. But I think it is because I concentrate very much on the realities of things that it looks as if I have some ulterior intention, and they assume it must be a symbolic intention. Well, it’s not.

In her review of Hassall’s book (*Westerly*, No. 2, June 1986) Veronica Brady, unlike Leonie Kramer, seems to prefer all writing, including criticism, to be “symbolic”. She is careful, however, to have a bob each way since she takes Hassall to task for being too exclusively “literary” and “introspective”, for ignoring “social, historical and even linguistic factors”.

She also accuses him, in spite of extensive evidence to the contrary in his book, of imposing too “rational” an interpretation on Stow’s novels, “deflating the weird and ecstatic into moral and emotional cliché”.

Yet on page 29 we find Hassall approving of Stow’s resistance to critics who deplored his attempts “to combine . . . realism with mystery and poetry”:

Young as he was *he was wise enough* to ignore such advice, sharing what Dostoevsky described as “an understanding of reality and realism entirely different from that of our realists and critics . . . what the majority call almost fantastic and exceptional signifies for me the very essence of reality. (Italics mine)

Brady’s misrepresentations of what Hassall says are too numerous to rebut *seriatim*, but one at least deserves to be singled out. On page 94 of her review, after asserting, but not establishing, Hassall’s alleged inability to understand Stow’s questioning of the self and of the existence of a personal god, she writes:

At the very least, there might have been some mention of the insights of critics like Helen Tiffin, for instance, who point to Stow’s affinity with non-Western systems of thought like Taoism. This is a pity because Professor Hassall is evidently someone for whom questions of this moral and metaphysical kind matter. Unfortunately, he seems to be a prisoner within a limited and inflexible definition of reality and value (! ! see above), unaware of the significance in Stow’s work of the word and more importantly, the concept of “nothing” and its concomitant silence . . . The great weakness of this study, then, is the failure to recognise the power of language to deceive at a metaphysical level, a power which is rooted in the process of abstraction.

This paragraph is breath-taking, in view of the fact that Helen Tiffin is referred to on page 54; that on page 187, her article on “Tourmaline and the Tao Teh Ching” is coupled with another as “the best discussion of the Taoism of *Tourmaline*”, and that she is referred to again on page 194 as the author of an article on Stow’s use of the cargo cult entitled “Melanesian Cargo Cults in *Tourmaline* and *Visitants*”.

Moreover, the whole of Hassall’s chapter on *Tourmaline* is informed by his own study of Taoism and by his comparison of its philosophy with fundamentalist Protestant Christianity, as indeed it could hardly help being, considering the subject of the novel. There are fourteen references to Taoism in the Index, beginning with page 4, and the notes to *Tourmaline* and *Visitants* show that Hassall’s study of the subject extends far beyond the couple of articles alluded to above. This sort of misrepresentation, unlike Leonie Kramer’s, can only be described as wilful.

Far from being unaware of the significance of the “word” in Stow’s work, or of the concept of “nothing” and silence, Hassall is at

pains throughout his book to stress their importance, though he does so generally by means of quotation from Stow's work, instead of presuming to speak for him. For instance, on page 68, the passage describing the Taoist Way of cultivating the single soul leads to an illustration of Brady's point about "the power of language to deceive at a metaphysical level", by using the dialogue between Dave Speed and Tom Spring in *Tourmaline*, — the very point she accuses him of failing to recognise! A few pages earlier, the Taoist conjunction of water and silence is illustrated by quotation from the poem "From the Testament of Tourmaline". Does Veronica Brady seriously suggest that Hassall quotes these and other passages without being aware of their import?

She is insistent early in the review on the connection between literary criticism and other disciplines like anthropology, history, political science and psychology, though she does not stop to make the connection clear, or to question the roles of extra-literary studies. But Hassall does point out these connections, though perhaps he does it so unobtrusively and modestly that Brady overlooks the fact. Later on, however, Brady, on page 89 of her review, seems to doubt the efficacy of this attention to the "real" world, suddenly remembering that Roland Barthes has decreed that literature is "intimidation, not communication, an assertion of the ego and its destruction, the annihilation of the social and historical and their objectification which also constitutes an exposure to understanding". What this understanding might be, the purveyors of this kind of prestidigitation are forever absolved from uttering, and so never run the risk of being mistaken. Leonie Kramer at least is willing to take that risk.

Stow was conscious of the limits of language long ago, without any assistance, as far as I know, from French philosophers and historians. In reply to a question put by Hassall in their interview he said:

I wouldn't say I had lost faith in writing. I never had a great deal of faith in writing. I don't consider writers to be the unacknowledged legislators of mankind.

Hassall in his book quotes the same epigraph from Thornton Wilder (introducing Stow's *A Counterfeit Silence*) on which Brady lays so much stress in her review, and he is scrupulous in drawing attention to its implications. Stow pointed out that for him, poetry was not, as it was for Wilder, a "debased form of speech", but a debased form of silence, a silence which he attempted to "counterfeit" in his practice of verse. At the same time he is only too aware of the inconsistency of the position of the writer who believes in the wisdom of silence, and so has refrained from writing for long periods until possessed by a subject:

“because there are too many books in the world. If I do something I want it to be a book which a couple of people will think is a necessary book”. That is, he remains silent until he has something to say. This is not quite the same as Veronica Brady’s position, however. If she really believes that “the real poem (and presumably the real novel) . . . exists between the gaps of the text” then no meeting with a “real” poem is ever possible, since any claim to have achieved such a meeting, i.e. to discuss it, would close the gaps in the text and the “real poem” would again be somewhere else. It would seem to follow then that those engaged in reading and writing, of any kind, are pursuing phantoms, and that Departments of Literature, and indeed all studies that make use of language should close down. Does “real” literary criticism, or theory, or “real” philosophy also reside in the gaps between the texts? And if not, why not? The fact that so much of this aesthetic mysticism proliferates in one of the most talkative and least willing-to-listen nations in Europe should arouse some scepticism, as well as gratitude for its power to stimulate.

But it is possible to find a fashion stimulating without wanting to adopt it as a religion. In the 1950s and 60s critics were looking for symbols under every bed, particularly for Christ-figures. Misinterpreting the word “expiation”, Leonie Kramer struggles to see Heriot as a Christ-figure<sup>2</sup>, and so cannot help finding the “symbolism” ambiguous; hence the Aboriginals who live vividly in the text and not in the gaps are written out of the story. Frederick C. Crews, of Berkeley, California, dealt with this phenomenon in *The Pooh Perplex*; we need another chapter added to this chastening book to deal with the present fashion, which shudders at the idea that writing is, among other things, communication, some of which is direct, some indirect, some oblique and suggestive, some mysterious. To despair of communication because the forms available to us are limited and inadequate may lead to a dangerous solipsism, and to despise the word while making copious use of it, is hypocritical.

The aim of Hassall’s book on Stow, it seems to me, is not to “appropriate” his work for an academic canon, as Brady claims, but simply to offer evidence (his own and that of other critics) to support his legitimate opinion that Stow is a novelist whose importance has not been sufficiently recognised. He does *not* use Patrick White as a measuring-rod, but merely draws attention to the interests he shares with Stow, religious, moral and psychological. He is not alone in his opinion about Stow’s moral concern. In his *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia*, 1978, J.J. Healy, in a balanced account of *To the Islands* attributes its power to the “stark visibility of the fundamental moral questions implicit in a situation of race”; it is Stow’s “moral

vision, rather than a partiality for symbolic writing" that places him in "the neighbourhood of Judith Wright and Patrick White". (p. 226-7) Hassall draws attention to this view early in his book.

Hassall's study of Stow's fiction and verse fulfils the primary function of criticism. Before all else it communicates the author's enthusiasm for his subject and acts as "guide and courier, not as custodian". Those of us who have never read it will be drawn to do so, particularly by Hassall's fine instinct for selecting truly significant quotations which arrest the reader's attention; for example, the exchange between the Aboriginal Justin and the missionary Heriot in *To the Islands*, illustrating the white man's habit of talking instead of listening, quoted on page 38-9. The habit bedevils to this day the attempts to achieve understanding between blacks and whites, and that a young man hardly twenty-three should have seized on it in the 1950s is remarkable.

Hassall presents the fiction and poetry as a single *oeuvre*, from 1957 to 1984, while recognising that Stow is still in mid-career and likely to take off in a new direction. The central theme so far, dealing with alienation and the efforts to break out of it, is shown unfolding from one novel to the next. Stow sees man's problem as being able to understand and accept this essential solitariness, a problem especially painful for those of us who are conscious of being "born" exiles. His vision of mankind's situation, which a keen sense of humour does nothing to belie, is a sombre one, but it fits the facts as we so far know them: we inhabit a universe which owes its existence to what appears to us to be cosmic violence; it would be strange if the creatures of that universe did not share some of that violence in their bones; their moral task is to alleviate as best they can some of the consequences of these primary facts. Like Heriot, we are "the product of many murders"; to imagine we can atone for the fact is "egoism, not expiation"; the task is rather to forgive and be reconciled: to accept solitariness without making a virtue of it, to build what bridges we can instead of waiting for news from outside that we are not alone. At every step, Hassall shows himself aware of these concerns.

His introductory chapter outlines the main forms of alienation which interest Stow: "tribal, racial, urban, geographic and religious. Stow draws on all of these, making particular use of the alienation of native people in European colonies and former colonies like Australia and Papua New Guinea, and the post-colonial alienation of settlers, which he, like Martin Boyd and Henry Handel Richardson, depicts as a European consciousness fretting in an alien landscape."

Neither Stow nor Hassall questions this last unease, and so great is the novelist's power to impose the sense of it on the reader, that this

particular reader, a migrant of over half a century's standing, is provoked to follow the advice in his poem "From the Testament of Tourmaline":

If my words have power to move, forget my words.

Is it really true that Australians in general are Europeans fretting in an Australian landscape? Or is it true rather of writers and artists who have been brought up taking for granted a European base to their culture? Writers are a particularly introspective, not to say self-regarding species of artists, and as Stow himself points out, quoted by Hassall on page 3 ". . . the environment of a writer is as much inside him as in what he observes."

It seems to me we need to know more of what other kinds of Australians besides writers feel about living in Australia. Does a fisherman on the north coast of New South Wales feel alienated? I doubt it. Or a miner digging for opal at Coober Pedy? Or forest rangers in national parks? Or marine biologists? What we generalise as geographic alienation may be a problem of individual temperament, or a religious sense of alienation from God. It is doubtful whether Henry Handel Richardson would have felt at home anywhere on earth. Martin Boyd on the other hand, felt at home wherever there were congenial people who talked his kind of language, and always insisted that people were more important than places. A point that is rarely raised, and which Stow's books and Hassall's study provoke one to raise in discussions about "home", is whether there is any particular virtue in allowing oneself to become attached as if by an umbilical cord to a particular patch of earth, unable to feel "whole" away from it. We need to ponder perhaps Martin Boyd's reply to a *Bulletin* critic's charge of rootlessness: "I carry my roots within me".

After marking out his terrain, Hassall examines the novels in chronological order, showing how each one opens out of and is related to the other, and how the poems have a direct bearing on the fiction. There is also a separate chapter on the verse. Veronica Brady takes him to task for using an outmoded paraphrastic method. Hassall's book is addressed to the general reader and in his hands this method is illuminating. Its chief virtue is that it gives the reader a sense of being-in-the-work. All too often in the kind of criticism favoured by Brady the novel or poem disappears from view, leaving the critic conducting a monologue at the centre-front of the stage. But we come away from Hassall's account of *To the Islands*, for instance, with a lively memory of the characters who have most engaged our attention while reading the novel: Heriot, Rex, Justin, Dixon, Rusty and Sam.

Hassall argues rightly that Stow is "a private rather than a social novelist, less interested in interpersonal relationships than in his char-

acters' relationships with themselves and with God". But that view does not prevent his placing the novels squarely in the social and historical period to which they obviously belong. He shows that even in the youthful *To the Islands* Stow is a keen observer of social relationships, but prefers to write about them as mirrored in individual lives. He rightly emphasises the randomness of Heriot's actions, for example, and leads us to see its general significance. Heriot is presented from the first as a man at the end of his tether, who no longer knows why he is doing what. His fellow workers think he is "going troppo". He does not go into the bush deliberately on a voyage of self-discovery; circumstances impose it on him. As Hassall says, after stoning Rex, he has no clear idea what course of action to take. Once on his way, aware that he is incapable of suicide, he becomes a prey to conflicting impulses, convinced that he owes a death, but unwilling to die. He accumulates bits of wisdom and self-insight not by rigorous self-examination, but through accidental meetings and chance remarks. Hassall is right to re-assert that Heriot's last words "My soul is a strange country" are in their proper place at the end of the novel. He is a man whose early idea of himself has been exploded, and in spite of his belief that his Aboriginal companion Justin will effect a "proxy reconciliation" for him with Rex, he still has much to learn about himself, and little time to learn it. He is about to slough off his physical body, and if he still retains any belief in the survival of a "soul" after death, he has not, any more than the rest of us, any real idea of what manner of thing that soul might be. Heriot's growing uncertainties about his life's work, about his relations with Rex and Stephen and his black charges in general epitomize the randomness of black-white relations over 200 years of history, and their terrible complexity. But, as the understanding which slowly develops between Heriot and Justin shows, the picture is not utterly hopeless. Hassall deals admirably with these shifting relationships, equating the personal situation between Heriot and Rex with the tensions that led to the massacre at "Onmalmeri".

Though he rightly draws attention to the acuteness of Stow's observation, Hassall is not blind to the book's defects of style. He rates Stow's gift for dialogue more highly than it perhaps deserves at times, though the passages quoted from *To the Islands* justify his choice. But I do not think Stow in these early books is invariably in control of dialogue; and even in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* it falters sometimes in the second part.

I am not persuaded that the last-named is as masterly as Hassall claims, fine though it is. Stow has not altogether solved the problem of conveying without tedium, the tedium of civilian life after Rick's return

from the war. The second part of the book seems to lose momentum and it is no excuse to say that that was true of Rick's life. But I should not go to the stake for this opinion.

*Visitants* is a more compelling and more difficult book, and here Hassall is an admirable companion. This novel contains some of Stow's most beautiful writing, and some of its most poignant and penetrating observation, much of which as Hassall reveals, grew out of his own experience. There is for example the meditation on pages 30-1 of the novel, on the need for men to leave behind a sign of their existence, a primary impulse of art; the description of Cawdor's anguish when he goes on leave, and after outbursts of garrulity, finds he cannot talk to anyone; the vision of vast stretches of time, the contemplation of which is suggested as a remedy for obsession with the self. Here we remember the horror which the child Rob experienced in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* when he first became aware of time. The contrast is typical of Stow's refusal to rest in certainties, of his recognition of the fluidity of things, of the "thusness" of things, and of the close and necessary relationship between contradictories. In this respect he reminds one of the poet Harold Stewart, who began writing of the Tao in 1948, or even earlier, and who has identified himself with Far Eastern culture ever since. In form, his early poems "The Three Tasters", "The Leaf Maker" and "A Flight of Wild Geese" are as different as possible from Stow's practice, but the outlook is similar and so is "the fanatical realism".

If I have the strength of mind to keep to the resolve, this should be my last written review. I am, therefore, especially glad that it deals with a book about Randolph Stow, whose work I was rash enough to praise in its very early stages. Hassall's study, I think, makes a convincing case for his belief that Stow has developed into one of Australia's finest writers, versatile, powerful, original, and at times profound. He proffers information not readily available elsewhere, and some has come from close and sympathetic contact with his author. The book contains an invaluable chronology of the events of Stow's career; an account of his collaboration with the musician Peter Maxwell Davies; the Notes to each chapter are full, and generous to Hassall's co-workers, and there is an indispensable Bibliography.

The style of the book is straight-forward, unpretentious, lucid, and at times elegant. When the occasion demands, it can also rise to a subdued eloquence. Together with his interview with Stow, the book provides an admirable introduction to the *corpus* of the fiction and poetry, from which readers can move with confidence to form their own judgements, as Hassall obviously hopes they will do.

It also serves as a reminder that it is wise to listen seriously, as Hassall has done, to what an author like Stow has to say about his own work. He is at least as well equipped to theorize about it as most of his critics. He has been a student of two subjects admired by Veronica Brady, Anthropology and Linguistics; as a patrol officer he has had experience in the field; he is an accomplished linguist, a distinguished student and teacher of literature; has read widely in history, medieval legend and folk-lore. He has been a manual labourer, has travelled widely, made a study of non-Western religions, and has a wide knowledge of music. Hassall's method of criticism allows the relationship between this background and the imaginative writer to reveal itself; the critic stands aside. It seems a less risky method than that of denying what is on the page, because one has been gazing too exclusively into the gaps between the lines.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Even more astonishing is the fact that Leonie Kramer ignores the Aboriginal Justin's telling of the story on pages 51-6 of the novel, and Stow's footnote about it on page 56. (Penguin edition).

<sup>2</sup>Kramer also pays no attention to the presentation of Heriot in the early part of the novel: his disordered mental state, his verbally cruel treatment of some of his white colleagues, his relentless refusal to forgive his black charges, or even to listen to their side of the case against them, his resort to threats of physical violence. She also ignores altogether Sister Bond's arguments against the concept of expiation, the folly of supposing it is possible to offer reparation for past wrongs, when the real road to reconciliation is forgiveness on both sides. With this part of the story a blank, the way is open to her to accept at face value Heriot's account of one of his expiations (as late as page 183) as a basis for her argument about Christian symbolism.

Consequently she fails to see what really torments Heriot's mind from beginning to end of his journey: the same problem as preoccupied Schopenhauer in his essay "On the Suffering of the World", namely the cruelty and violence in which all living beings are implicated, most of all the human beings who consider themselves thinking and moral beings (see pp. 159-60). "Why is the world so hungry?" Heriot cries, (p. 118) "Where is God?" He is obsessed with the fact that the physical scheme of things is arranged so that species prey upon one another, that hunger is the driving force, and unlike his Aboriginal companion is not able to reconcile this appalling fact with the idea of God. Unlike Schopenhauer, he failed to see the obligation the fact imposes on men in their relations with one another; "caritas", calm acceptance and reconciliation are not to come until the novel *The Girl Green as Elderflower*.

According to Schopenhauer, every man "should be regarded as a being who exists only as a consequence of his culpability and whose life is an expiation of the crime of being born", (cf *To the Islands*, p. 159). In his talk with Sam at the derelict mission, on page 183, Heriot names this as the first of his expiations "my birth as a human being drove me to charity". A niggardly sort of charity, as the book reveals. His second expiation, he says, drove him to the mission because of "the massacre done by my race at Onmalmeri". Kramer ignores this very

specific sin, and, to her statement that "Heriot became a missionary for expiation", adds her own words "that he has taken on himself the sins of the world." This gratuitous association with Christ sows confusion where none exists. Thirdly, Heriot says, "at the end there was my hatred", his hatred of Rex and his hatred of those he has failed as head of the mission. That hatred, he says, "has made a lost man of me". What insight he acquires is partial: he sees that his own violence is part of a chain of murders stretching from the amoeba to himself, but he cannot, like Justin, accept the fact with equanimity. He rebels to the very end against biological necessity, but carries the argument with God no further. He is simply determined not to be a party to universal predation, to become prey, rather than predator like the crows and hawks, and it is doubtful whether he dies with any religious belief at all, Christian or other (p. 199). He finds what he describes as a feeble defence for crimes of passion, and the "poor reconciliation" that "we hurt out of love, not hate", but these are particular rather than universal defences.

If Heriot has any symbolic significance at all it is what Hassall has drawn out in relation to the massacre. He might also be seen as representing all those who through the ages have cried "Why does God allow such things to happen?" His own reference to himself and Justin as Everyman and Good Deeds has a touch of irony about it, which gives it only a peripheral relevance, though it gains some slight support from the meaning of the word "heriot", referred to by Hassall on page 186 n. 29.

Some apology is due for this long note, but a re-reading of *To the Islands* has led me to rate it much more highly than I once did. Its insistence that mankind's greatest need is for mutual forgiveness (the core of real Christianity) grows more "relevant" every day. (It is only fair to add that the majority of Australians were blind to the Aborigines until W.H. Stanner's Boyer Lectures in 1968 opened their eyes.)