

DOUGLAS STEWART: *TERRA AUSTRALIS*

This is one of Douglas Stewart's "exploration" poems. Or we can call it one of his "voyager" poems. It depicts an imaginary meeting between the Portuguese navigator Quiros and the Australian socialist William Lane. They meet in the Pacific Ocean, because Quiros is sailing westward in search of the fabled South Land (the *Terra Australis* of the poem's title), while Lane is sailing eastward to found the colony of New Australia in Paraguay.

This much we learn from the poem's two introductory stanzas. The rest of its first section is devoted to an imaginary soliloquy in which the spirit of long-dead Quiros speaks of the almost insuperable difficulties that he encountered in his search: human faithlessness, deceptive islands, fever, thirst, mutiny, and hostile intrigue at home in Spain. He never did, in fact, discover the great continent for which he searched. But the poet represents him as trudging on, in the attempt to fulfil his purpose, till the end of time.

The second section begins with the meeting and initial exchanges between the two voyagers. It is clear that Quiros conceives the great southern continent as a future Utopia, a land that shall be ruled in the spirit of political and moral idealism: "No more by oppression chained, by sin besmirched." But this was more than three centuries earlier than the time of William Lane. Lane is familiar with Australia as a nineteenth-century reality, and he thus readily disillusions Quiros about his great southern continent. For Lane too is an idealist, and he is fleeing from Australia in order to establish his own Utopia in South America. Yet South America is where Quiros has come from; so that he in his turn is able to disillusion Lane. This is the note on which the second section of the poem concludes: the mutual disillusionment of the two questing idealists.

The third section is devoted to a recital by each man of the ways in which his ideals were shattered by reality. The Paraguayan Utopia disintegrated because of incompetence, laziness, greed, drunkenness, disease, lust, and murder. The Spanish expedition was ruined by murder, hatred, ignorance, and doubt. The poet sums up this section by pointing out the likeness in the two stories.

Yet both men refuse to accept their respective disasters as the final reality. They do not sit down under their defeats and give way to despair. Instead of scuttling their ships, they hoist sail and resume their voyages. For they are both sustained by the faith that a better future is still a possibility. The past is dead, whereas somewhere ahead there must exist a "land of love and faith", and from their unending quest for this Utopia both men refuse to be diverted.

It is clear from this exposition of what the poem says that it is a kind of fable. For what it really expresses is the poet's own optimistic faith in the ultimate future of mankind. The obstacles to human progress are many and formidable. Some are external (environmental), such as biting insects and poisonous fish; but most are those of man's own nature (psychological). In spite of defeat and death, however, the bright goals still lie ahead, and man is capable also of enterprise, endurance, devotion, and idealism. Physical reality may be daunting and disillusioning; but there is a spiritual reality as well. The questing human spirit is indomitably committed to sailing into a brighter future.

Yet this is possible for leaders only. It is Quiros and Lane who are the poem's protagonists, not their colonists and crews. And the leaders are set apart in their own world of visionary ideals. They are the "men who know the mountains", as Stewart calls them in an earlier poem (Sonnets to the Unknown Soldier, p.12), or "the striders of mountains", as he calls them in 'Sarcochilus Fitzgeraldi' (Rutherford, p.10); they are "high and far and lonely", as he says in 'The Pictures' (Rutherford, p.18). They may be navigators, such as Quiros and Lane; or scientists, such as Professor Piccard (Rutherford, p.1) and Earl Rutherford (Rutherford, p.75); explorers, such as Scott (in The Fire on the Snow), Shackleton (in Worsley Enchanted), and Cunningham (Rutherford, p.45); poets, such as Stewart himself, Robert Fitzgerald (Rutherford, p.11), Geoffrey Dutton (Rutherford, p.16), Rosemary Dobson (Rutherford, p.23), and David Campbell (Rutherford, p.50); surveyors, like Robert Fitzgerald's grandfather; artists, like the aboriginal rock carver (The Dosser in Springtime, p.39) and the painters of Stewart's pictures; or men of religion, like the old priest of Easter Island (Rutherford, p.57). Stewart always isolates his leading figures, on an island or an ice floe, in an empty polar continent or an empty ocean, or among the mountains. In this poem, Quiros and Lane do not meet along some busy trade route; no, they are "Sailing some highway shunned by trading traffic". They are also shut off, by a wall of mist, in the realms of the dead.

Environment and circumstances, too, are, for Stewart's heroic figures, hostile, forbidding, unyielding, or indifferent. His protagonists usually suffer defeat, or death, or both. Yet their unflinching struggle and their heroic endurance consistently testify to the power of the indomitable human will to triumph notwithstanding. This pattern of physical defeat but spiritual triumph is readily identifiable in much of Stewart's most ambitious and most significant work.

Such protagonists as Quiros and Lane, Piccard, Scott, Rutherford, and the rest are clearly intended to represent whatever is best in human nature, the best of which the human spirit is capable, in whatever field of endeavour. They stand as guarantors of a better human future. They represent the standards of true civilization, pushing back the frontiers of dark barbarian ignorance.

They and the ideals for which they strive are represented by simple characteristic imagery. Utopia is a place of "golden headlands"; it lies in the west "Like a great golden cloud". It is a land of "trees and fountains shining in my mind". Its inhabitants are men who "shall walk at last like spirits of fire", rarefied, refined, and pure.

At the other end of the scale are the animals, representing the unthinking, insensitive, brutish side of human nature. Thus fever, thirst, and mutiny "stalked" the seas, presumably like prowling wild beasts; while "poison spiders spun their webs in Spain",¹ representing the moral poison of envy, hatred, lies, misrepresentation, detraction, and obstructionism in men's souls. Human cruelty, depredation, and destructiveness are likewise represented in the image of the desert crow that "Feeds upon poor men's hearts and picks their eyes".² The disappointment of high human hopes is similarly expressed in Quiros's image of the vast ocean yielding nothing but "Seagulls and Flying fish". Other destructive forces in human striving are incompetence, represented by the colonists' inability to milk a cow; and disease and death, represented by biting insects and poisonous fish. Lust, too, is some kind of voracious predator; doubt is another venomous foe; while greed for materialistic gain reduces men to the level of bloodthirsty beasts that "tear each other's entrails out".

The past, with all its failures, defeat, and death, is some mere traveller's tale, easily "puffed out" like the feeble light of a flickering candle. Or it is merely a dream, in which Quiros and Lane are mere phantoms. This is typical Stewart imagery for

whatever is non-actual: the real reality is not past defeats, but the ceaseless onward surge of the human spirit. The causes of man's defeat may be the dark, anarchic forces in his own soul: hence drunkenness is imaged as a bomb, a man-made thing that can destroy his societies and explode his ideals. Or they may be the hostile forces of adverse circumstance or environment, imaged here as "a blast of bony breath"; "bony" suggests the skeletal bareness of a corpse picked clean: again the idea of destruction and death. The phrase recalls the description of the blizzard at the end of The Fire on the Snow, where the Antarctic is represented as lashing itself into a fury to kill three men. 3

But the most insidious kind of destructive force is despair, for it represents the ultimate power of spiritual defeat, the most calamitous of all human disasters. We ought not, therefore, to be surprised at finding this idea imaged in terms of the devil and his temptations. The unstated implication is that whatever is best in the human spirit must resist this temptation with the voice of Christ in the wilderness: "Get thee behind me, Satan."

For the human spirit should exuberantly rejoice in its ability to accept the challenge to attain a brighter and fuller future. This idea is expressed in what is probably Stewart's favourite among all his images: the play of light on water. Thus the poem's final stanza opens with a picture of "sparkling brine" and the dancing of light on the sea. The physical light is, of course, an image of the spiritual light that is to illumine man's future. Furthermore, the striving towards such a spiritual future is clearly intended to prosper and succeed, for it enjoys divine blessing: "The wind from Heaven blew both ways at once". What is best in the human spirit is bound upon its eternal quest for the attainment of its highest spiritual ideals, in whichever direction they may be found.

Supreme, therefore, above the other images of the poem stands that which represents the goal of all that is best in human striving for this fulfilment. It is the image of Paradise, of Utopia, of the fabled South Land, Terra Australis. It has never been reached: it is, as Quiros says, "unknown, untouched", the great southern continent which, as Van Mylen reminds us in the first scene of Shipwreck, was for long centuries known as Terra Australis incognita. 4 Yet knowledge increases as the search goes on. All worthwhile human endeavour is a voyage of exploration into the unknown future.

The poet's own imagistic exuberance, however, occasionally leads him astray. The image in the second half of the poem's opening stanza, for example, appears to be a mere gratuitous conceit. It seems intended to create a striking initial effect for its own sake, instead of contributing functionally to the value of the poem as a whole. Nor does it seem to be accurate; for the "crinkling" brain surely exists inside the skull, whereas "the vast Pacific" rolls on the outside of the world. It is likewise difficult to see how the romantic moonlight imagery at the end of the first section can be integrated into the imagistic-thematic pattern of the whole poem.

The poem is nonetheless a typical example of Stewart's powers of understatement, his ability to voice a significant statement about the human condition in deceptively simple language. Indeed, a regrettable failing in the superficial critic, misled by Stewart's unobtrusive competence in applying the principle of ars celare artem, is to dismiss his work as slight. The apparently casual tone, the authenticity of the colloquial idiom, the tendency to chatty prolixity, these characteristics conceal the poem's logical progression, the careful juxtaposition of its opposing groups of images, the profundity of the central theme. The passionate intensity of conviction that provides the poem's ultimate inspiration is controlled by sheer mastery of technique.

For one thing, the whole poem unobtrusively reflects the poet's competence as a dramatist. The easy flow of run-on lines, and the division of the same line between the two speakers, are examples of this dramatic competence. The characters are first brought on stage to be introduced to the audience; Quiros, who speaks first as the older man, delivers his soliloquy; there is an exchange of greetings as the younger man comes forward to share the centre of the stage; they engage in a duologue, comparing experiences; they take their departure through opposite wings. The whole poem is a little dramatic tableau.

Other matters of technical interest are the unobtrusively pervasive uses of alliteration and assonance. Stewart uses a number of true rimes, but also a number of mere eye-rimes and a good many assonantal substitutes for rime. Islands, for example, assonates with Lima (apparently to be pronounced Lime-a), clarions assonates with violence, fable with devil, years with Quiros. The purpose is no doubt to avoid jingles; the effect is to enhance the seemingly artless tone of easy conversation. There is also assonance, of course, within a line, as in "brine...brain" in the final stanza,

or as in "Terra...send...demented". Alliteration within the same line is common: "stalked the seas", "staring to see", "land of love", "spiders...spun...Spain" (with assonance), "saw...sun...circle", "sailed...seamen's...Spain", "a blast of bony breath". Sometimes the triple alliteration spills over from one line to the next, as in "bottle...blow up...bomb". Often enough, too, the alliteration is double and transverse, as in "clots the waves with coils of weed", "cask of liquor caused the last".

Yet the details are subordinated to the whole. The poem makes its impression as an unity, dramatically conveying a single theme by means of functionally unified imagery and lyrical language of unobtrusive technical mastery.

The poem is a popular anthology piece. It was first published in The Bulletin, 14 December 1949. Since then it has been included by Rosemary Dobson in Australian Poetry 1949-50, by H.M. Green in Modern Australian Poetry (1952), by George Mackaness in An Anthology of Australian Verse (1952), by Judith Wright in A Book of Australian Verse (1956), by John Thompson, Kenneth Slessor, and R.G. Howarth in The Penguin Book of Australian Verse (1958), by Chris Wallace-Crabbe in Six Voices (1963), and by the author himself in Sun Orchids (1952), in his own Australian Poets selection (1963), and in the Collected Poems 1936-1967.

Footnotes

1. Cf. the little poem in which a spider is represented as a "devil,/Gripping" the moon "with claws of death" (Sun Orchids, p.20).
2. Cf. the little poem about the "lone black crow" plucking "The day's gold eye/From the cloud's white wool" (Sun Orchids, p.35). "The day's gold eye" is, of course, the sun.
3. Douglas Stewart: Four Plays (1958), p.26.
4. Four Plays, p. 229.

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