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**West Coast Correspondences:  
Randolph Stow Encounters Thom  
Gunn's *The Sense of Movement*  
Daniel Brown**

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I

Randolph Stow was clearly engaged by Thom Gunn's second collection of poetry, *The Sense of Movement* (1957). Not only is his copy of the book well annotated and underlined, but Stow also wrote an appreciative letter about it to Gunn in July or August 1958. While this letter appears not to have survived, Gunn's reply, an aerogramme dated 8 October sent from Oakland, California, to Geraldton in Western Australia, was preserved by Stow, who kept it folded in his copy of *The Sense of Movement*. Gunn was impressed and heartened by Stow's sympathetic understanding of his work:

It is a great feeling when you see that you have, after all, made a complete communication to someone else who is not already a friend, even if he is a continent or so away. This sounds slushy, of course, but you must know for yourself that it is true.<sup>1</sup>

Gunn was 29 at this time, having published two collections of poetry and moved from England to California in 1954, while Stow, who was 23 and had published two novels and one book of poetry, would go to live in England permanently in 1966. Their mirroring movements between England and the New World enact comparable tensions and preoccupations in their work, between cosmopolitanism and localism, Romanticism and demotic contemporary cultures, which may account for the affinity between them that Gunn's letter asserts so categorically and intriguingly. The exchange of letters that the two young poets made between their respective West Coasts emblematises a series of broader correspondences, which the following essay explores by introducing Stow's reading of Gunn's early poetry and focusing upon some telling resonances and contrasts it has with his own work.

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<sup>1</sup> Private Collection.

Such post-war artistic émigrés as Stow were seen by many of their Australian contemporaries to have settled early divided allegiances in favour of the Old Country, a perception that was facilitated by the vogue for such oppositional schemata in the cold-war White Australia of the 1950s and early 1960s, which sustained the old literary factional categories of Australian nationalists and modernist internationalists, Jindyworobaks and Angry Penguins. This taxonomy is, however, challenged by the hybrid nature of Stow's early poetry, which Dorothy Hewett describes as 'a strange admixture of the Antipodean landscape, and the European heritage – all that "lovely lumber" of his reading affixed to this weird continent of upsidedown seasons, animals, birds, trees, flowers and foliage' (61). His refusal of factional allegiances is consistent with the prevailing attitudes to literary culture he encountered as an undergraduate at the University of Western Australia (UWA) from 1953 to 1955. Having initially enrolled in Law, Stow changed to Arts after a year, where he majored in English and French within the Department of Modern Languages, which was presided over by the Professor of English Allan Edwards. The *Arts Faculty Handbooks* for 1954 and 1955 document an English curriculum that was grounded in the British canon that Edwards knew from his studies at Cambridge in the 1930s with I.A. Richards and a young F.R. Leavis, who reportedly 'thought him the brightest student he had ever taught' (Dale 114). Nonetheless, as well as the Leavisite likes of Donne, Hopkins, Yeats and Eliot, students could also make a special study of Australian poetry in their second year, while after that it was 'obligatory for all English III students' to take the Australian literature course (1955 *Handbook* 57). In an essay he wrote for *Meanjin* in 1952 Edwards, who had been professor since 1941, elaborates various ways in which his department taught and promoted Australian literature, including setting Australian texts on the high school curriculum, with essay prizes and play readings, and through a dedicated course that since 1940 had been taught largely by living writers, including Vance Palmer, Miles Franklin, J.K. Ewers, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Rex Ingamells: 'A keen student, during his three years at the university, could therefore hear thirty lectures on Australian literature, hear and meet at least one distinguished visitor, as well as a number of local writers, and gain a reasonably comprehensive view of our literature' (175). The *Handbooks* show that Stow's studies in French featured a noticeable weighting toward the modern and contemporary, from Baudelaire, Verlaine, Valéry and Proust to Gide, Giraudoux, Malraux, Claudel and Péguy.

Stow's years as an undergraduate at the university coincided with the brief but crowded life of *The Winthrop Review*, 'A Literary and Critical Magazine Published by the Arts Union'. Two of his poems were published in 1953, in the second issue of the magazine, with a steady series of further poems and prose by him appearing through to its last issue in the final year of his studies. Beginning with its founders Geoffrey Bolton and Harry Heseltine, the editors of the *Review* eschewed the factionalism of nationalists and internationalists as an Eastern states affliction, from which Perth had been happily quarantined by its geographical isolation: 'We suspect that, here in Perth, the enrichment of the arts in Australia will occur from a synthesis of these two elements', and 'hope that our pages will contain both reflections of the local environment, and cultural studies of a more cosmopolitan nature' (Bolton, Rogers and Owen, 1). The editorial is followed by articles that instance this happy confluence: a series of essays and responses comparing Australian and American writing cultures; some translations of Baudelaire's prose poems, which appear opposite Stow's 'Cartoon Parade', a poem that proceeds from the teasing Shakespearean premise that 'Life is a dream, and we are dreamed, not dreamers' (35); and an essay on André Gide, featuring some accepting remarks about homosexuality that subsequently provoked a moralistic reply from a correspondent in Darwin. Various advertisements address readers of the *Review* as consumers of not only milk, cigarettes, and slide rules, but classical and jazz records, automobiles and furs, contemporary European cinema (with tips on how to pronounce the names of continental stars) and deportment classes.

Stow's advocacy of the *Review's* ethos, and indeed his practical dedication to furthering it, is clear from his decision to become one of the three or four editors who would run the magazine from mid-1954, when Bolton and W.R. Rogers left to study in England, until its demise four issues later. Their first editorial describes a recent literary controversy in *The West Australian* newspaper as 'The Realist Writers **versus** J.K. Ewers and others', and uses it as a platform to reiterate founding editorial principles of openness and catholicity 'and to keep our pages as clear as possible of that interchange of invective which has so often passed, in Australia, for literary and political criticism' (Stow et al. 1). Another application of this liberalism is found in the subsequent editorial's strong stand against censorship, which equates 'the [Nazi] burning and the [Australian] banning of books' ('Two Dangers' 1). The ensuing debate on censorship, and another on the White Australia policy, pitted values of laissez-faire cosmopolitanism against those of nationalist cultural 'purity'

and protectionism. Such intense issues were integral to the *Review's* preoccupations with the place of art in Australian society, and its editorial insistence that local artistic and intellectual life is promoted and enhanced by exposure to, and collaboration with, internationalist culture. This is the premise also for the Festival of Perth, which, like *The Winthrop Review*, began at UWA in 1953, having been founded by Professor Fred Alexander, who in 1955 contributed an article about it to the magazine. The issues edited by Stow and his peers include poems and stories by Donald Stuart, Molly Skinner, Olive Pell and the Jindyworobak Ian Mudie, a plea by Mary Durack for the publication in Australia of recent German missionary scholarship on Aboriginal languages, followed by her poem inspired by this work, 'Lament to Galalan', essays on Giraudoux, W.B. Yeats, Katharine Susannah Prichard, theatre in Paris, Samuel Butler and Handel, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Eliot and Pascal, and translations of Heraclitus and the Hungarian modernist poet Endre Ady. II

Much of Stow's early poetry and prose shares with *The Winthrop Review* a late modernist syncretism, as it scrutinises Western Australian physical and social environments through metaphysical perspectives that were encouraged and developed by his studies of canonical and contemporary European literature. Gunn's letter to Stow indicates that it was this dialectical relationship between idiomatic local culture and internationalist literature, understood both anthropologically and philosophically, that Stow appreciated in *The Sense of Movement*:

I am particularly pleased that you should like *On the Move and Market at Turk* (this last is liked by very few people apart from myself). Yes, you are right about 'the generation': one mustn't speak about it – look what's happened recently with Angry Young Men and the Beat Generation – but nevertheless it's there; a particular and unprecedented kind of exuberant godlessnessness [sic], a kind of despair that is not only liveable in but lived in. You are dead right about Sartre, who was, I guess, my main 'influence' for 4 or 5 years, though I'd make a reservation here and there about him now. The rest of the influence (with these poems anyway) is from having had a motorcycle for a while myself and from having friends who ride them. The mere riding of one is, in a strange way, a sort of controlled irresponsibility.

I like the name bodgies and leatheries that you mentioned. I met an Australian the other day who told me that 'bodgies' is equivalent to 'hoods' over here, but he couldn't tell me anything about leatheries. Are these specifically the bike-boys, or just anybody in leather jacket and boots?



Many of Stow's underlinings and annotations of the poems in *The Sense of Movement* note the importance they place upon the will, the Sartrean underpinnings of which he had evidently commented upon in his letter to Gunn. The two poets converge in their efforts to grasp a pervasive pattern to post-war culture through existentialism and its preconditions and anticipations in Romanticism. Stow offers his own regional analysis of the post-war ethos in *The Bystander*, the book he wrote in Geraldton over the summer vacation in 1955–56. Set in rural Western Australia, *The Bystander* has as its eponymous outsider hero the mentally simple Keithy Farnham, while its cultural bystander Diana Ravirs, a Latvian refugee from the German concentration camps who comes to work for the Farnhams, opens the insular world of the novel, with its literal use of the word 'holocaust' to refer to bush-fires, to the contexts of recent events in Europe. In the brief essay he wrote about *The Sense of Movement* for the *Poetry Book Society Bulletin* for May 1957, an example of which Stow kept folded in his copy of the book, Gunn declares that 'Baudelaire's ennui has now become democratic ... It has become a wider and at the same time more undefined malaise: Sartre's nausée, Kingsley Amis' "that uncertain feeling", or the impatience of the hoodlums in some of my poems like *On the Move* and *Market at Turk*.' The diagnosis he offers in his letter to Stow of 'a particular and unprecedented kind of exuberant godlessness [sic], a kind of despair that is not only liveable in but lived in', is the pivotal point of his analysis, from which he characterises contemporary high and low cultures, 'Angry Young Men and the Beat Generation' and 'bodgies and leatheries', a distinction that the motorcyclist-poet further collapses with such poems as 'On the Move' and 'Elvis Presley'.

The soubriquets 'bodgies' and 'widgies' describe young men and women respectively in post-war Australia who modelled themselves on American popular culture, and whose violence, drinking and licentious sexual mores provoked a moral panic that reached its height from 1956 to 1958 (Moore 7). Stow's interest in these gangs and their American counterparts would have been sharpened by his formal studies in anthropology, which he had begun at the University of Sydney early in 1958. Indeed, he acquired and first read *The Sense of Movement* during the first year of these studies, for the ownership signature of his copy is dated 1958 and its bookseller's ticket shows that he bought it in Sydney, at Angus and Robertson's. Such American-inspired youth culture is depicted in an episode of *The Bystander*, in which Keithy is taken from his farm by his neighbours, the Robson boys, on a day trip into town, where they listen to pop music in a record shop ('I'm not asking for diamond rings, / Furs and

Cadillacs and all those things' [109]) and play billiards, before the brothers graduate to underage drinking and sexually forward behaviour with two girls they pick up, who they call 'Peg and Bitcho'. Taking her cue from Hollywood, 'Peg' or Betsy subjects Keithy to a routine of advances 'as good as they did in the films, she knew that; there should be a camera over his shoulder' (116). The scene discloses another dimension of Keithy's identity as the Bystander, that of sexual outsider, a position that the author and indeed his correspondent could also identify with through their sexual attraction to other men.

The taxonomical interest in 'bodgies and leatheries' that Gunn airs in his letter to Stow comes down to appearances, to what they wear and what this signifies, an incipient semiotic of fetishism that is more definite and developed in the poem 'Market at Turk', a favourite of Stow's that Gunn describes as a minority taste, 'liked by very few people apart from myself'. The poem focuses upon an anonymous male figure standing on a street corner, whose 'boots, jeans, and a curious cap' it is devoted to describing and deciphering. Such props, especially the anthropomorphised cap, 'whose very peak, jammed forward, / indicates resolution', recall Johnny Strabler (Marlon Brando) in the 1953 film *The Wild One*, not simply in his iconic and much imitated appearance but also in the character's performance of an over-determined masculinity. The outward indices of 'resolution' that the young man in the poem offers are questioned and dampened by its half-rhymes and the more regular dilution, the deferred rhymes, of the *abcabc* scheme:

It is military, almost, how he  
buckles himself in, with  
bootstraps and Marine belt,  
reminders of the will, lest even  
with that hard discipline the  
hardness should not be felt.

Phallic assertiveness and potency are predicated here upon autonomy and containment, which as the final lines indicate, make them not simply overdetermined but hysterical and preposterous. Nonetheless this latent energy is further focused and indeed savoured in the following and final stanza, with its incidental allusions to unbuckled abandon: He waits, whom no door snatches unbuckling in the close commotion of bar or bed, he presides in apartness, not yet knowing his purpose fully, and fingers the blade. (*Sense* 32)

The poem draws to a close with a menacing image, made ambiguous by the conditioning penultimate line. A hoodlum, who having been introduced early in the first stanza as 'prepared / for some unique combat', appears to

be waiting for orders, to be assigned a purpose by the gang leader. Such a literal reading is, however, revised and complicated by the poem's intervening exposition, opened out to describe his masculinist containment as a lack of self-knowledge and existential purpose, which becomes focused here in an image of neurotically displaced masturbation.

The title 'Market at Turk' situates the poem at a particular locale, a street corner in San Francisco, the coordinates for which are stark terms of transaction and exoticism. Its hoodlum is a body for hire. The onomatopoeic verb 'snatches' in the first line of the final stanza is freighted with its early incarnations as a noun, first as a door's hasp or clasp, then as the line rolls into its successors, an illicit or hasty sexual act,<sup>2</sup> that is referred to the masculine space of the 'bar or', interchangeably here, 'bed'. The sexual glamour invested by popular culture in the figure of the male gang-member is complicated and critiqued but nonetheless retained by the poem. In his essay for the *Poetry Book Society Bulletin* Gunn suggests that the contemporary 'malaise' he attributes to the hoodlum in 'Market at Turk' could be addressed through 'reaching a purpose only by making the right rejections'. The final stanza of the poem itself 'indicates' the 'resolution' of its subject's Sartrean bad faith through the 'unbuckling' of his hysterically masculinist persona, an epiphany of destruction and transformation that offers an audacious counterpart to the pivotal 'Buckle!' in G.M. Hopkins's 'The Windhover', a poem that would have been well known to Gunn from his English studies with Leavis at Cambridge in the early 1950s (*Occasions* 159–60), and to Stow similarly from his studies in Edwards's department at UWA.

### III

'Market at Turk' evidently appealed to Stow directly, for unlike other poems in his copy of *The Sense of Movement* it bears no interpretive comments or other markings. He simply confides his particular liking for it to the author. By way of contrast, Gunn's long poem 'Merlin in the Cave: He Speculates without a Book' receives something of a running commentary from Stow. In his 1961 essay 'Raw Material' Stow characterises the mind by this activity of making glosses, describing it as 'one's annotating psyche'. The physical environment is accordingly read and appropriated as the marginalia of individual consciousness. He makes this idea axiomatic for art, and his argument against realism: 'the world out there is raw material. But only part of it – all the rest is mind' (Hassall 405;

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<sup>2</sup>E.g., see *Titus Andronicus*, II, sc. 1, ll. 96–97 (p. 110).

407). Nonetheless, the focus he gives his essay by assigning it the title 'Raw Material' suggests a wariness of romantic solipsism and a correlative hope that art can nonetheless grasp aspects of objective reality. This is a preoccupation in much of Gunn's poetry also, and the reason why Stow was especially engaged with 'Merlin in the Cave', where the artist-scholar figure of the wizard considers the entire edifice of human knowledge and its relation to raw experience. Stow singles out the following stanza from Merlin's monologue by marking it with an encompassing brace:

I must grow back through knowledge, passing it  
Like casual landmarks in a well-known land, Great  
mausoleums over ancient wit,  
Doors that would swing at my complacent hand; And  
come at last, being glad to understand  
The touched, the seen, and only those, to where  
I find the earth is suddenly black and near. (*Sense* 57)

Merlin's retreat from his Prospero-like privilege of knowledge receives from Stow the following annotation: 'Faced with [the] absolute he desires the growing, the concrete.' His use of the word 'absolute' is drawn from the final lines of Gunn's 'On the Move', which Stow marks in his copy with a brace:

At worst, one is in motion; and at best,  
Reaching no absolute, in which to rest,  
One is always nearer by not keeping still. (12)

Accentuating a familiar metaphor of knowledge as the end of a journey, something we 'arrive at', Stow recognises the significance of its depiction in the stanza from 'Merlin in the Cave' as a resting place, the existential dead end of the 'absolute'; the antithesis of growth and movement, an idealist disavowal of the concrete. Gunn's lines build a romantic opposition, similar to that of Yeats's Byzantium poems, between the reified fixity of our various understandings of the world, Gunn's 'Great mausoleums over ancient wit' recalling Yeats's 'monuments of unaging intellect' (1), and the mystery and immediacy of mortal experience.

Merlin passes through the dream-like reifications of knowledge, which are described by the functions they serve for him, 'Like casual landmarks' that allow him to find his bearings in the world. Its portals are responsive to his 'complacent hand', a phantom figure of touch that yields to an actual, irreducible and immediate, sensory datum, which is figured here conversely as an understanding, of 'The touched, the seen, and only those'. Leaving behind him the conceptualised 'well-known land', Merlin has 'come at last', as if he is being hurled into the grave, 'to where / I find

the earth is suddenly black and near'. The arc of this dream-like sequence parallels another of Gunn's poems, 'The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death', where losing his 'war' with the marsh, the rider's free-willed self-consciousness moves through the dark substance of the earth, into the unconsciousness of nature:

I used to live in sound, and lacked  
 Knowledge of still or creeping fact,  
 But now the stagnant strips my breath,  
 Leant on my cheek in weight of death.  
 Though so oppressed I find I may  
 Through substance move. I pick my way,  
 Where death and life in one combine,  
 Through the dark earth that is not mine,  
 Crowded with fragments, blunt, unformed;  
 While past my ear where noises swarmed  
 The marsh plant's white extremities,  
 Slow without patience, spread at ease  
 Invulnerable and soft, extend  
 With a quiet grasping toward their end. (*Sense* 28–29)

These lines clarify Gunn's views on the dialectical relationship between Stow's principles of 'raw material' and 'mind'. A gloss for the 'earth' that is 'suddenly black and near' in 'Merlin in the Cave', the alien 'dark earth', with its 'Crowded' constituent 'fragments', 'blunt, unformed' by the will, is not preferable, but simply the antithesis, to the 'well-known land' of human ideas that we move through with such complacent facility.

The tactile is privileged in the extract from 'The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death', as it is in the stanza from 'Merlin in the Cave'. The motorcyclist who, like the Orphic figure of the lyric poet, 'used to live in sound' is thrown down 'Through the dark earth that is not mine', made subject to 'Knowledge of still or creeping fact': the resistant inorganic mass of the world, which leans against him, weighs upon him, physically oppresses him, and the 'creeping fact' of organic nature that extends its tendrils into the corpse, its tactile 'quiet grasping' superseding sound, going 'past my ear where noises swarmed'. As the nineteenth-century Scots Commonsense philosopher Sir William Hamilton observes, renewing the Democritean thesis that considers it the paradigmatic sense, touch engages immediately with the object world by both receiving its pressures and offering resistance to them (*Lectures* II, 154; *Works of Reid* II, 848–49). 'Though so oppressed I find I may / Through substance move': touch is 'The Sense of Movement'. Both 'Merlin in the Cave' and 'The

Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of this Death' refine and revive knowledge to this material datum of immediate experience.

In a further stanza from the 'Merlin' poem the magician reiterates the insubstantial pageant of his knowledge, depicting it as light and abstract, a castle in the air, and opposing it to an organic principle of life and Heraclitean strife, the exposition of which Stow underlines in his copy:

And yet, the danger. All within my mind  
Hovers complete, and if it never grows It  
never rots; for what I leave behind  
Contains no fight within itself ... (*Sense* 58)

'Yet the absolute', Stow writes glossing these lines, 'being uncomplex, does not decay'. Stow makes his own study of the mortal dynamic of decay, companionate to 'The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of this Death' and dating also from 1957, in his poem 'A Fancy for his Death'.

#### IV

Stow writes of Australia in 'Raw Material' that it is 'a huge country', but fruitfully complicates this cliché with his observation that 'size itself is a complex of feelings. When one is alone with it, one feels in one way very small, in another gigantic.' 'I see in Australia ... an enormous symbol ... And because of its bareness, its absolute simplicity, a truer and broader symbol of the human environment than, I believe, any European writer could create from the complex material of Europe' (Hassall 407; 408). Indeed 'A Fancy for his Death' offers a distinctively Australian rejoinder to Baudelaire's 'Le Mort Joyeux' (Joyful Death), a poem from *Les Fleurs du Mal* (132-33) that Stow would have known from his undergraduate studies.

Stow's poem 'A Fancy for his Death' opens with the landscape of the West Australian Wheat-belt as the correlate for the immense temporal depth of death:

Walking at large in the future of his death By  
agelong rocks and early winter wheat  
He was surprised by a falling sun. Beneath  
That punishment he cried and fell, his breath  
Died on the name of God in joy like hate. [*Act One*, 76]

The portentous burdens of meaning here, the central apocalyptic sign marking the fall of the sun/son and its oracular inflections recalling the poetry of T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas, are rendered as if unremarkable by its steady reportage and iambic pentameters, a tension that makes this metaphysical vista surreal in the mild manner of British Neo-Romanticism.

English Romanticism is revisited in Britain from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s, most urgently and definitively during the war years, as a dream. Inflected stylistically (or even ornamentally) by modernism, the Neo-Romanticism of this period is both surrealist, with a core group of its artists having organised the 1936 London International Surrealist exhibition, and, in the face of the Second World War, nostalgic and nationalist, as it presented galvanising images of ‘*What we are fighting for*’, the English countryside and architectural heritage, the cultural identity of the modern middle-class British state that was largely created by the Romantics and institutionalised by the Victorians. Transplanting the modernist metaphysical dreamscape to the Wheat-belt, the opening image of Stow’s poem recalls his earlier homage to the most popular of the NeoRomantic poets in his ‘Lament for Dylan Thomas’, which was published in the first issue of *The Winthrop Review* for 1954, a year before ‘A Fancy for his Death’ appeared in the *Bulletin* (2 Feb 1955: 50). The initial line of each stanza of the ‘Lament’ follows the formula ‘Who, walking many a surging dawn’, so that in the third the figure of Thomas is presented as ‘walking many a pastel dream’, and in the final, ‘many an endless fantasy’. Indeed its closing lines, ‘He walks at large ...’, bring us to the beginning of ‘A Fancy for his Death’, ‘Walking at large ...’, while the refrain of the elegy, ‘Now he is dead. Let us dream well for him’ (v. 2, n. 1, 25), could be the epigraph also for the later poem.

Stow’s ‘Lament’ was printed in *The Winthrop Review* opposite a photograph of the tower of UWA’s neo-Romanesque Winthrop Hall (1932), which functions here rather like British Neo-Romantic photographs, as a grounding image of a heritage that unites its readers, while the preceding six pages consist of an essay by Allan Edwards on ‘British Water Colours 1914–1953’, the substance of a talk he had given for an exhibition held in Perth in March 1953, which provided a good source of Neo-Romantic work, including paintings by Paul Nash, John Piper, Graham Sutherland, David Jones, Eric Ravilious, Michael Ayrton, Ceri Richards, Cecil Collins, and Robin Ironside (who coined the term ‘Neo-Romanticism’ in 1942). Stow may have seen the original exhibition, while the essay, which he was in part responsible for publishing, offers an insight into the contemporary understanding of Romanticism that Edwards would also have brought to his teaching. Here he is on Nash:

[T]he landscape **Towards Stone** (73) is even more remarkable, so much done with such few means; but Nash developed many fascinating directions during the thirties and forties, especially in those remotely beautiful dream-like abstractions he did as illustrations to Sir Thomas

Browne's *Urn Burial* and the equally dream-like landscapes he painted, that are at once recognisably Southern England and yet mysterious, haunting, sometimes frightening, with their obelisks, and spheres, and Druid stones, or his monster-like dead trees or sea-hollies. During the War attached to the R.A.F. as an official artist he introduces into his romantic dream-landscape the strange shapes of aeroplanes, metallic moths or black insects of nightmare menace; and then in his last years we have his images of sunset and moonrise, sunflowers ... visionary landscapes of the soul. You'd say he's very English, yet he's also a surrealist of distinctive character (thinking of Blake and Palmer, thinking of Ceri Richards and Cecil Collins, both represented here, perhaps we'd better admit fantasy, vision, and nightmare are just as thoroughly English as *Evening Bells Across the Meadow*). (19)

But it was for his advocacy of the paintings not of the British Neo-Romantics but of the Australian Sydney Nolan that Edwards was best known during the 1950s, as he had persuaded Joseph Furphy's son Samuel to use the initial bequest from the Tom Collins Memorial Fund he established in 1949 to buy works by the artist for the university. Another event that coincided with the beginning of Stow's studies at UWA, this purchase of a set of twelve Nolan paintings was made in 1953. After an initial showing at the state art gallery, they were hung around the university, with one being placed in Edwards's office and another in the Hackett student coffee shop, allowing and no doubt requiring the professor to discourse to his students on the aesthetic, historical and national contexts of these controversial acquisitions. As a serious student of literature active in *The Winthrop Review* and a published poet who wrote two subsequently published novels over his summer vacations, Stow would have been well known to the Professor of English and had a good measure of access to (and interest in) talking with him. Edwards is an obvious source for Stow's familiarity with contemporary Australian art, and the emphasis that the professor places upon 'dreamlike landscapes' and the value of consciousness in his reading of the NeoRomantics is likely to have surfaced also in his discussions of Nolan. Indeed Stow makes such a transposition in 'Raw Material', where he argues that Nolan and Drysdale achieve their 'mindscapes' as 'the external forms [are] filtered back through the conscious and unconscious mind' (Hassall 407), an analogy that is made explicitly by the poems in *Outrider* (1962) with their accompanying paintings by Nolan, and of course demonstrated by his transformation of the Australian environment in 'A Fancy for his Death'.



The second stanza of 'A Fancy for his Death' adapts to Australian conditions the iconic Neo-Romantic figure of the 'Green Man'. This is the pagan emblem of resurgent nature that Crispin Clare dreams about and is haunted by in Stow's 1980 novel *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, the first English edition of which features a painting on its dust-jacket of the Green Man by the Neo-Romantic artist John Piper. The figure is represented in May Day festivities by a face coming out of a leaf bower, the apparition of which in his dream Clare describes as 'a face made of summer leaves, not sinister but pitilessly amused' (4), and indeed such an image marks the title pages and the chapter divisions in both the English and American first editions of the novel. Such imagery derives from the wood and stone carvings of foliate heads found in churches and cathedrals, human faces merging in or emerging out of botanical forms, which became known as Green Men in 1939, when they were so named by the English folklorist Lady Raglan,<sup>3</sup> receiving much attention and becoming a prevalent design element over the following decade. Other examples of the type are found in the Green Knight and Robin Hood, while James Frazer records various folk traditions of 'leaf-clad mummers (Green George, Little Leaf Man, Jack-in-the-Green, etc.)' in his definitive study of the solar deity, *The Golden Bough* (II, vi). The quibble on the falling sun in the first stanza of Stow's poem connects the Christian myth of the dying Son with such pagan solar mythology, preparing the way for the description of the poet's body as it enters ritualistically into a union with the earth:

And he in the wreck of his unholy hours  
 Lay by his hateful love, the earth, unburied,  
 Till the tendrils of his veins grew green and sour And  
 put out leaves of strawberries. The far  
 Crows hawking through the midday air attended

His ceremonial destruction, flying  
 His name and eyes into the bleeding sun;  
 And he was spurned by lusty colts, and sung  
 By plovers through the idle silver mornings,  
 And ants ran wild in the hollows of his bones.

The gestalt-like ambiguity of the Green Man, as an apparition of human and vegetative form emerging from one another, is captured by the description of the protagonist's veins as metaphoric 'tendrils' that become literal as they 'put out leaves of strawberries'. Stow elaborates this pagan form of resurrection idiosyncratically in the final stanza of his poem, as

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<sup>3</sup>The "Green Man" in Church Architecture', *Folklore* 50.1 (Mar. 1939), 45–57.

with the advent of an Australian spring the fallen son rises: Quiet he lay, till fiery August flared

Over that sober and astonished land  
To mark with orchids his dead eyes and hair;  
And the farm-boy, passing that place at noon, was stayed To  
think on him who lay so shallow, and  
Pointing his pitchfork, whistled to the sky:  
'Here is one more than sweat on lichened stone;  
For now the bronze-flowered poison-bush shall rise  
Bursting in sparks and flaming from his thighs,  
And he is made perpetual with the sun.'

Having been earlier 'spurned by lusty colts', the poet's body undergoes a romantic immolation through the farm-boy's lyrical 'whistled' vision, which sublimates and secularises Hopkinsian epiphany in Blakean imagery of fire as sexual and creative energy. The idiom is one that Stow shares with his peers, such as his friend William Grono, whose 'Dream of a Virgin' opens 'Golden he was, / Rising from the thighs of Spring' (*Winthrop Review* 1.3: 28). The common source here is most likely James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, which both poets would have known of, if not directly then at least from T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and his notes to the poem. Indeed Stow's poem may well have taken its cue from Eliot's "'That corpse you planted last year in your garden, / Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?'" (65). The lushness of the Green Man evaporates in the parched Australian landscape of Stow's poem, its basis in solar mythology starkly disclosed. The equation of leaf and flame in the farm-boy's 'Fancy' of 'the bronzed-flowered poison-bush' is reiterated early in *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, as Clare, looking into a fire, revisits his dream: 'he seemed to glimpse once more the god's face, the smile unchanging, whether sketched by leaves or by flame' (7). Stow writes that his 'novel had an uncommonly long gestation', which he traces back to 1966 (144). 'A Fancy for his Death' indicates that his interest in its mythic underpinnings stretches back still earlier, to the previous decade.

Stow's 'Fancy' describes a peculiar *Liebestod*. It suggests parallels with the bush-fire at the end of *The Bystander*, that 'stirred [Patrick] with an excitement that was greater than love' and which Keithy appears to have submitted to as the proof and fulfilment of his love for Diana Ravirs (238). Immolation implies here an oceanic dissolution of selfhood, a condition that is effectively actualised in 'A Fancy for his Death' by the farm-boy's epiphanic encounter with the dead poet, his recognition of the corpse's vegetative *petite mort*, by which 'he is made perpetual with the sun'. This

fiery ‘Fancy’ has a counterpart in the chapter of *The Girl Green as Elderflower* entitled ‘Concerning a wild man caught in the sea’, which ends with the satyr-merman ‘Sylvester’, who is accordingly identified with both Sylvanus and Okeanus, pagan divinities of forest and sea, taking his ‘almost asleep’ human friend to his watery kingdom: ‘John’s mouth was slightly open, his round blue eyes were wide.’ In kissing his ostensibly inviting lips the merman discovers that John is drowned, his eyes are dilated not in sexual excitement but in death (102).

While Stow’s poem anticipates the more developed and sustained commitment to the romantic pastoral trope of the Green Man in *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, a journey into medieval Suffolk, Gunn’s ‘The Unsettled Motorcyclist’s Vision of his Death’ develops the urban romantic agony of Baudelaire that he cites in his *Poetry Book Society Bulletin* essay: ‘His subject . . . was the Romantic obsession – both sides of it, the Romantic aspirations and the helplessness of the man who submits to them absolutely.’ Gunn’s poem offers a re-writing of the Green Man figure that is consistent with the complementary direction he took to Stow in journeying between England and the New World. Like Baudelaire, Gunn is suspicious of nature and celebrates the expressions of the human will as they triumph over it: ‘My human will cannot submit / To nature, though brought out of it’ (*Sense* 28). Just as Baudelaire champions the fashionable artifices of cosmetics, clothing and hairstyles for prevailing over raw nature (8–15, 16–38), so too Gunn celebrates the demotic cultures of his own day, in Presley and in metaphysically-inclined motorcyclists at war with nature, for ‘Men manufacture both machine and soul’ (*Sense* 11). The dead body in Gunn’s ‘Vision’ is reconstituted as a Green Man, but unlike Stow’s ‘Fancy’ the transformation occurs not as enhancement but effacement:

And though the tubers, once I rot,  
 Reflesh my bones with pallid knot,  
 Till swelling out my clothes they feign  
 This dummy is a man again,  
 It is as servants they insist,  
 Without volition that they twist;  
 And habit does not leave them tired,  
 By men laboriously acquired. Cell  
 after cell the plants convert My  
 special richness in the dirt:  
 All that they get, they get by chance.

And multiply in ignorance. (*Sense* 29)

As Edwards' discussion of Nash indicates, much of Neo-Romantic art was fixated upon the new relations of the body and the land entailed by modern warfare. David Mellor observes that 'everywhere the stresses and restructurings of British society during the Second World War imposed new strictures on the human body; a tender body that was bombed, conscripted and exposed to an incremental technological violence and degradation; the body which was imagined in paint by Gerald Wilde, Francis Bacon and Leslie Hurry' (16). While 'The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death' brings such conceptions of bodily vulnerability to the figure of the Green Man, it does so without stigmatising the machine. Transformation into nature is depicted in this poem not as a romantic *Liebestod* but an abject defeat. It is an invasive process, marking the usurpation of willed selfhood by another being, a trope that was endemic to popular culture at the time, in such films as *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). In the 1953 BBC television series *The Quatermass Experiment*, parallel to the process by which the hero of Gunn's poem himself becomes unconscious and undifferentiated, like the shrubs in which his motorbike was originally caught, 'glazed insensate green', the astronaut hero Caroon is gradually transformed, as the screenplay describes it, 'into a pastoralised mutant as a result of biochemical change':

a mass of undergrowth which is in gentle, swaying motion. It consists of small leaves with patches of a firmer, moss-like variety. Very, very slowly an eye opens among the leaves, as if someone is looking through. It moves forward. A second eye can be seen, dead and twisted. The mossy foliage comes forward with them. The effect is not unlike the 'Green Man' of mythology. (Kneale 143–44)

The extent of the marginalia that Stow added to his copy of *The Sense of Movement* makes it unique amongst the archive it belongs to, which consists of eighteen poetry titles, many of them Poetry Book Society Choices or Recommendations, that bear his signature and dates from 1954 to 1959.<sup>4</sup> Indeed it is one of only three he has marked with more than an

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Montgomerie, *The Cherrie and the Slae* (London: Faber/Porpoise Press, 1937); Stevie Smith, *Mother, What Is Man?* (London: Cape, 1942); Ewald Osers and J.K. Montgomery (trans. and ed.), *Modern Czech Poetry* (London: Prague Press/Allen & Unwin, 1945); Sacheverell Sitwell, *Selected Poems* (London: Duckworth, 1948); Robert Conquest, Michael Hamburger and Howard Sergeant (eds), *New Poems 1953* (London: Hutchinson, 1953); Rex Warner, Christopher Hassall and Laurie Lee (eds), *New Poems 1954* (London: Hutchinson, 1954); Vincent Buckley, *The World's Flesh* (Melbourne: Chesire, 1954 [Presentation copy]); Stephen Spender, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1955), Stephen Spender, Elizabeth Jennings and Dannie Abse (eds), *New Poems 1956* (London: Hutchinson, 1956); Edwin Muir, *One Foot in Eden* (London: Faber, 1956); W. S. Merwin, *Green with Beasts* (London: Hart-Davis, 1956); John Holloway, *The Minute*

ownership signature. While his copy of the P.E.N anthology *New Poems 1953* has some pencil ticks next to titles on its contents page and that of the sixteenth-century Scots poem *The Cherrie and the Slae* includes a few translations of archaic words and phrases, *The Sense of Movement* includes several translations by Stow of epigraphs and terms, and, as indicated earlier, under-linings of words and phrases, and extensive notes. Similarly, while he wrote to Gunn and carefully kept his reply, a manuscript fragment glued to the title page of his copy of Stephen Spender's *Collected Poems* indicates a further such letter that Stow evidently thought not worth preserving beyond its closing greeting, 'Yours sincerely / Stephen Spender'. Stow's intense engagement with Gunn's *The Sense of Movement* stems from a shared cosmopolitan cultural sensibility, shaped and influenced principally by Leavisite literary studies, post-war French thought, and Romanticism. He is particularly interested in the ways in which Gunn's poetry, like his own, addresses problems of epistemology that arise from Romantic metaphysics, as well as its anthropological and personal concerns with contemporary popular culture and sexual mores. The images and explorations of masculinity and masculine sexuality in *The Sense of Movement*, and the relations Gunn saw them to have to Romanticism and nature, offer an especially telling point of comparison with Stow's work. Gunn identifies a virile principle of the will with the figure of the motorcyclist, an image of working-class masculinity that Gay identity politics in the West Coast of the U.S. would appropriate as its own during the 1960s and 1970s. Drawing upon Baudelaire, like Wilde before him, Gunn embraces artifice against nature, implicitly championing 'unnatural acts', whereas Stow romanticises nature as an amoral, bittersweet, haven from societal taboos and judgements. Nature is enchanted erotically for Stow, pantheistic and polymorphously perverse in both 'A Fancy for his Death' and *The Girl Green as Elderflower*, a mythic realm that allows sexual and emotional relations between men to occur only as versions of the *Liebestod*.

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