



Words of Water: Reading Otherness in *Tourmaline* and *Oyster*

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In the long run, foreigners are all much the same. They are not us.
Janette Turner Hospital, *Oyster*

“White” Australian identity has to a large extent been determined historically by what “we” are not: not Aboriginal, not Chinese and until recently not, it would seem, female or homosexual. That sense of self seemed to have altered dramatically and deeply with the movement in the 1970s towards a pluralistic, tolerant multicultural society. But the “cathartic” national debate on political correctness and race which erupted after the 1996 election of Pauline Hanson and the consequent birth of her One Nation party demonstrated clearly that the prejudices of many “white” Australians against “others”—Aborigines, foreigners, “elites”—had never gone away. In 2001 the Australian people were told by the federal government, and to a large extent believed, that foreigners coming across the seas threw their children into the ocean as a ploy to force the Australian Navy to rescue them. The nation, fearing continued invasion from such inhumane outsiders, re-elected the political party which promised the most stringent border protection policy. In order to protect the “Australian way of life” those foreigners who have made it to our shores have been incarcerated in brutal detention centres. They remain for the most part unnamed, faceless and voiceless, that is to say, they remain unknown and other. While many Australian citizens are concerned and disturbed by these developments, the nation as a whole has allowed it to happen. Why? Partly through clever political manoeuvring and partly because of a deep-seated Australian paranoia about otherness, a paranoia sustained by introversion, self-interest and insecurity. Literature, because it influences the way society un-

derstands itself, has an important role to play in an increasingly-insular and anxious Australia. There is no need to wait for the literature that will be written by current asylum seekers to learn some of the lessons so urgently needed. Randolph Stow's *Tourmaline* (1963) and Janette Turner Hospital's *Oyster* (1996) demonstrate powerfully the destructive personal and communal costs bred by insularity and fear of otherness. Both texts deal with isolated, drought-ravaged Australian communities and the changes wrought by the arrival of a messianic outsider. These communities, sustained by repression, introversion and silence, insist on sameness but they are ultimately undone by difference.

At the 2003 Sydney Writers' Festival, James Hall, in his capacity as chair for the panel titled "Politics and the Australian Novel," decried what he saw as the absence of Australian political novels. "Where was our *Primary Colors*?" he asked. "Why weren't Australian novelists writing about the goings on in Canberra?" Such a literal interpretation of the term "political" disempowers literature and presumes implicitly a realist mode of reading practices. If, however, "political" is taken to refer to the way a society organizes its social life and the power relations which that organization involves, then surely any literature which deals with the nature of relationships, language, history, existence and death, is political. Terry Eagleton's comments on literary theory could apply equally to literature (and other artforms):

[. . .] any body of theory concerned with human meaning, value, language, feeling and experience will inevitably engage with broader, deeper beliefs about the nature of human individuals and societies, problems of power and sexuality, interpretations of past history, versions of the present and hopes for the future. (170)

It is with Eagleton's comments in mind that I want to suggest a reading of the deeply poetic and silent *Tourmaline* in terms of the politics of fear.

Tourmaline is a parched West Australian desert town at the end of the road, beyond the last broken fence post. It is a forgotten place consisting of Kestrel's Tourmaline Hotel, an old police station, Tom Spring's local store, a few "uniform, dilapidated" houses along a "raw red streak" of road, an abandoned church and a war memorial. It is ringed by "the skeletal obelisks of headless windmills" and the "toppling masts" of a once-productive gold mine. Tourmaline "is not a ghost town. It simply lies in a coma" (9). Its inhabitants, prisoners of their own passivity have not been, nor do they desire to go, outside its boundaries. Like the pathetic flies in Kestrel's pub, they remain trapped in a seemingly futile existence that leads inexorably towards death. "To describe the town," the narrator tells us, "I must begin with the sun" (8). Tourmaline is hot. It is dusty. But most importantly, it is dry. Only the oldest residents remember rain. Time passes. The single event of

significance in the town's calendar is the monthly arrival of the supply truck from somewhere unnameable and unknown beyond the blue ranges.

One momentous day the truck disgorges a passenger. Blistered and dehydrated, he is very close to death. His limp, disfigured body is carried by three men into "Tom Spring's house of silence" where he is wrapped in damp cloths and watched over by Mary (and others) for three days and nights (20). The stranger gives his name as Michael Random and claims to be a diviner. The townsfolk, in their need, construct Random as "diviner" than themselves. He is their prophet come in from the desert to bring salvation, in the form of water, to this thirsting community. The symbolic construction of the diviner as a Christ figure is obvious from the outset. A tortured and self-hating man, Random, having failed in his suicide bid emerges from "country never mapped, on the border-lands of death," to be born again as a dominating Christian zealot (18). He determines, through humiliation and coercion, to control psychologically and spiritually all the town's inhabitants. With the exception of Tom Spring and Dave Speed (who lives a nomadic life out of the township) he succeeds. Random searches for water, the Christian symbol of rebirth and eternal life. Significantly he fails. He finds gold which swells the town's financial coffers but economic viability is not what the people of Tourmaline need.

Tom Spring's quiet Taoist philosophy of inaction and silence is offered as the contemplative alternative to Random's aggressive Christianity. Tom, as his surname suggests, is a source of water. But his is the water of silence, the water of "highest good" praised in the *Tao te ching* as "the most yielding of substances which yet carves canyons" (Tiffin 92). So on one level, as Stow intended, *Tourmaline* can be read as a "philosophical novel based on the opposing ideas of the *Tao te ching* and Christianity" (Tiffin 84). One of the consequences of this authorial intention, however, is that "Stow's religious propaganda makes types out of his characters, they become representatives, not just of types of people but of systems of thought and methods of behaviour" (Higginbotham 384). The symbolic nature of these "characters" is emphasised in their naming and in their physical characteristics: Charlie Yandana has a "jarrah throat," Horse Carson has "mallee-root fists" and the men outside the hotel verandah have "bark faces." The Law prays: "Lord, fill me with your sap make me grow. Make me tall as karri, broad as a Moreton Bay fig. Let me shelter all Tourmaline in my shade" (102). The "characters" not only merge with the landscape they are subsumed by it. As the novel's epigraph and opening paragraphs signal these "people of little weight" are only "tenants" of this ancient red continent.¹ The most significant character in *Tourmaline* is the dry and dusty land.

Yet Tourmaline, for all its recognisable outback landmarks, is less a tangible reality than a country of the mind. It is the desert country depicted by Stow in "Those Singing Bones":

Out there, beyond the boundary fence [. . .]
Out there [. . .] where the charts are gapped,
 unreachable, unmapped, and mainly in the mind.
 (*A Counterfeit Silence* 52)

The Law signals such a reading early when after describing the town and its few inhabitants he states: "But (dear God) what is Tourmaline, and where? I am alone. I write my testament for myself to read. I will prove to myself that there has been life on this planet" (11).

Leonie Kramer, in her early reviews of *Tourmaline*, criticised harshly what she saw as Stow's attempt to fuse realistic depiction with poetic symbolism. Kramer decried this "schizophrenic talent" arguing that it resulted in characters being "stunted by the necessity [. . .] to conform of the 'myth'" ("The Novels" 89). "Character," she wrote, "is generalised to the point of extinction" (88), before concluding that "*Tourmaline* is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the symbolic novel" (90). Geoffrey Dutton quickly countered Kramer's comments with a more sympathetic assessment of the novel in which he maintained that Stow's characters were "still close enough to reality to justify their symbolic overtones" (146). And so began a long-running critical debate as to the relative merits of Stow's fiction, a debate later dubbed by A.D.Hope as "the *Tourmaline* Affair."

Three years after the publication of *Tourmaline* Stow, frustrated by the critical reception of the novel, published a series of twelve poems titled "*From The Testament of Tourmaline: Variations on Themes of the Tao Teh Ching.*" The poems, offered as a "key to the novel" (Beston 228), correspond through their numbered titles to particular verses of the *Tao*. While critics such as Hope, and later Helen Tiffin and Paul Higginbotham, used this "key" to introduce readers to some of the tenets of the *Tao te ching* and to demonstrate the extent to which Taoism influences not only *Tourmaline* but all of Stow's writing, the poems, in keeping with Taoist teaching, are deeply silent and somewhat obscure. They seek to illuminate through suggestion and image.

Tiffin has noted that the *Tao te ching* :

expresses a philosophy of non-action, of silence, of quietude, of non-combat. Its exponents, unlike other sages, must be silent and uncontenting; they must teach by seeming to "happen" naturally. All this presents enormous difficulties for the novelist who wishes to endorse the Taoist point of view and demonstrate its success in a medium more usually dealing in action, in character, and in words. (93)

Stow embraced these perceived difficulties. He chose consciously a language of silence in order to help "his readers [. . .] understand what they must come to of

their own accord" (Hope, "The Tourmaline Affair" 261). It is this deliberate lack of directed reading, coupled with a narrative method that refuses to adhere to the conventional expectations of the realist novel, that has fuelled such diverse critical opinion of *Tourmaline*; but it is these same strategies which ensure that "the novel's immense suggestability remains unimpaired" (Dutton 146). Unlike Random who attempts forcefully to co-opt everyone he meets into his way of thinking, who insists on sameness, certainty and total subjection, the narrative of *Tourmaline*, largely through the figure of Tom Spring, endorses implicitly difference, uncertainty and individual freedom.

Tourmaline seeks to empower the imaginative capabilities of its readers. The Law insists that "to begin [he] must imagine and invent" (11). His exhortations to the reader, after he introduces each "character," read like a mantra: "Imagine her there," "Imagine him there" (12–15). The author's note states at the outset that "[t]he action of this novel is to be imagined as taking place in the future." Stow's narrative method not only makes such a task possible, it means that this text published in a Menzies-led conservative white Australia of the early 1960s can (also) be read in terms of the politics of fear and border protection that currently informs a multi-ethnic, globalised but divided Australian community. Kramer, who fails to acknowledge the political and allegorical dimensions of *Tourmaline*, would disagree with such an assertion.² According to Kramer, Stow, in "trying to extend the novel beyond its conventional limits," has attempted to divorce it "from the demands of real life." Of crucial importance here is Kramer's insistence that it is not "possible to make significant statements about human problems unless the characters who exemplify these problems exist, not only in the imagination, but also in the observation, of the author" ("The Novels" 90). An examination of the figure of the Law, however, demonstrates that *Tourmaline* has something very significant to say about the fear of otherness which stems from and feeds on ignorance and insularity. The Law can be read as Stow's gift to the reader. Learn from him, he offers, what you come to of your own accord.

The Law, though not particularly liked, commands a certain level of respect. As "the memory and the conscience of Tourmaline" (52) he knows much about the history of the town but his knowledge does not extend beyond the limited radius of his immediate surrounds. He lives in fear of the unknown world beyond. On the diviner's arrival he feels "once again the danger—the terrible danger—ah, I cannot tell what terrible danger I apprehended from behind those blue hills" (17). Later he notes that the diviner "must have known, behind those blue hills, terrible things. He must have been acquainted, as we are not, with the danger—the terrible danger—that danger of which I know nothing, but which drives me night and morning to prayer, and fills my sleep with images of wind and annihilation" (44). His unfounded fear borders on paranoia. He is "in awe" of the truck's driver because he comes from the "back of the blue ranges; and always

hugged to himself the mystery of his life's true ambience, as if it could endanger us. He would hardly speak. He was as zealous as a grandmother guarding the facts of life" (16). Deborah is the only "character" who wonders what life beyond Tourmaline may hold. Of course her curiosity is not translated into action. The furthest distance she travels is from Kestrel's pub to her old bedroom across the road. Significantly, when Random begins to tell Deborah that "it's different [. . .] out there," the Law explodes:

"You mustn't tell us," I said suddenly. Because I was afraid. Because of the danger—the terrible danger. It was as if my silent wireless had finally spoken, and for Tourmaline's sake I must clap my hands to my ears, and close my mind, and hear nothing—nothing—but the gathering wind, perhaps, and the slow soft hush of sand at every door. "Wild beasts are loose on the world," he said, from another place, as it were. "When you know that, you don't need to know much more." But Tom, who had come into the room, unnoticed, said: "Don't you? [. . .] This room's full of wild beasts too, that might be let loose at any moment. The question is, what controls them?" (45)

Tom articulates what the Law tries so hard to repress: an understanding that otherness is never only without but is always already within. Until the Law confronts and accepts the otherness within himself he will be unable to accept difference or plurality, that is to say life, outside himself. He has insulated himself against the possibility of difference or dissent by speaking only to his "forever unanswering wireless" (10). There is a sense, now that Random's words have caused his "silent wireless" to finally speak, that the outside world can no longer be repressed. It is less for Tourmaline's sake than for his own that he must "close" his mind and "hear nothing." If he listens to a voice other than his own, the narrative he has constructed of and for himself may fracture.

The Law is "haunted" by a picture remembered since childhood:

There was a well beneath a great tree. And in the tree was a princess, in hiding. And by the well, a hideous, pathetic, ludicrous negress, with a pitcher on her shoulder. The negress was gazing into the well; which reflected not her, but the face of the princess among the leaves. The black woman's vast teeth showed in delight.

"Ah, comme je suis belle!" s'écria la négresse.

A joke, then—was it?

Oh you in the branches.

I don't find that funny. (105)

In an Australian context, this tableau can be read most obviously in terms of its allegorical implications for the European invasion of Australia and continued repression by “white” Australia of the Aboriginal “other.”³ From a Jungian perspective, the grotesque black woman could represent white Australia’s collective shadow. She may have internalised her otherness to the extent that she is fooled by her supposed invisibility or perhaps she understands and is amused by the deception. Perhaps she knows that by scratching the surface she could cause both faces, black and white, to intermingle.⁴ Such readings, however, do not explain the Law’s continued troubled preoccupation with this picture. The Law shows no interest in the history of Australia’s race relations. He is unsympathetic to and arrogantly dismissive of the Aborigines around Tourmaline. Billy Bogada’s death, he states, is “not one of importance” (9). He resents Charlie Yandana’s youth and happiness and refuses, therefore, to speak to him. As Russell McDougall has noted, the Law’s “[f]ailure of Self to acknowledge Other leads to narcissism” (131), but the Law’s narcissism is not race related. He is most comfortable when he can deny the existence of *all* others. He, who would be “embarrassed” if overhead addressing “some remark to the mirror,” speaks only to himself: “I find that there is no speech that is not soliloquy. And yet, always, I sense an audience” (10). That audience can be read as the “you in the branches,” the reader, who observes the Law grappling to come to terms with his self-deception.

The Law is imprisoned in his “ruined tower; my keys turned on myself now all the locks are gone” (11). He is incapable of opening himself up, in a Levinasian sense, to the face of an other. He remains emotionally and physically detached from the community. He is blind to their needs. He cannot see that Random has crippled the “upright,” optimistic Deb and “turned her into a hunchback overnight” (186). He cannot see that Kestrel and the Diviner are “two sides of a coin” (186). He has not “seen [. . .] that a man who hates himself is the only kind of wild beast [. . .] to watch out for” (186). Tom shows him all these things. The Law’s vision is trained on himself yet he cannot see, or does not want to see, that the self he has constructed is a façade. If he were to look more deeply within himself his mask would crumble. He would have to confront the possibility which haunts him and which the diviner has articulated: “You’ve been empty, all your life. You haven’t any convictions” (165).

The Law has a tenuous existence. He is constructed by, and operates as a function of, language:

I had had my morning rendezvous with the world, my walk to the war memorial, and so come to the time of day when I doubt the reality of myself. Those names give me a name. But when I am quiet and alone [. . .] I cannot believe in it. Who gave me this name? And beside the name, what is there? An unnamed and naming ghost,

perhaps, formless, but forming for some obscure purpose of its own a room of pale stone, ledges heaped with red dust [. . .] (10)

The diviner seeks to give him a purpose: he is to “become a spring [. . .] an irrigation channel [. . .] to revive Tourmaline” (166). While Random insists that it is “real water [from] the ground” that he is to channel it is, ultimately, only language that the Law can deliver (166). He needs first, however, to learn that language, especially his meaningless ritualistic language, can neither address nor express adequately humanity’s spiritual and emotional needs. Tom and Dave, the town’s real diviners, attempt, not for the first time, to teach him this vital lesson. But the Law is a slow learner and cannot be “cured” of his misguided certainties. He cannot surrender the familiar and the ritualistic for the unknown and intangible. Similarly he cannot surrender his vision of and for Tourmaline. He clings to a nostalgic desire for a return to the edenic greenery of a paradise lost to drought and dust. This desire must be let go. Tourmaline has enough actual water to service its needs. The water it requires is that of silence, silence that makes space for the contemplation and acceptance of uncertainty and difference. It is time to write a new narrative for the Tourmaline of the future.

Tourmaline is the Law’s testament, an understated, intensely silent narrative that may perhaps break the destructive cycle of insularity and despair which grips and has gripped the town. It takes Kestrel’s departure, an event of great significance, to prompt the Law to begin to write but it is Tom’s death that finally releases the floodgates of his creativity. With Tom’s death the Law is cast adrift. He feels that he is “drowning.” The town dissolves: “There was no town, no hill, no landscape. There was nothing. Only myself, swimming through the red flood, that had covered the world and spared me only, of all those who had been there” (220–21). He returns to the threat of wild beasts though significantly he now acknowledges the challenge and beauty of their existence: “Wild beasts were loose on the world. Terrors would come. But wonders, too, as in the past. Terrors and wonders, as always” (221).

Time in *Tourmaline* is cyclical. The “terrible events” of the present have occurred in the past. Will they happen again? The closing poetic lines, “I say we have a bitter heritage./That is not to run it down.,” mirror the novel’s opening lines of prose. Has anything changed? Has anything been learnt from this bitter heritage? On one reading the answers must be negative. Kestrel returns to take the place of the diviner, controlling the town and continuing a fruitless search for something the town does not need. Deb’s pregnancy will result in another life for Tourmaline, a life like the diviners’ that can be claimed and stifled by the community. Nothing has been learned. The cycle begins again.

There is a more positive reading however. Random, as an outsider, disturbs profoundly the status quo of Tourmaline. While he uses humiliation to achieve

his ends, and while he fosters an “us” and “them” mentality among the residents, some good comes of his intervention. For a brief period he offers his followers hope which generates a sense of agency and purpose. Hope, as Ghassan Hage has suggested recently, allows individuals to “place their lives in an optimistic or at least a consoling narrative. Without hope we become paranoid about potential loss. Our own existence feels perilous, so we guard our borders, refuse to acknowledge Indigenous rights, and hoard our sympathy” (qtd. in Phiddan 56). Hage’s assessment of the Australian psyche could equally be read as a description of the Law’s existence prior to Random’s arrival. But the diviner, for all his false prophecy, inspires the Law (at least for a moment) to feel “bound [. . .] in love and passion together” (172) with the rest of his community. A more hopeful reading of *Tourmaline*, therefore, could be that in writing his testament the Law no longer writes only for himself but has acknowledged the very real existence of an audience. He has sought to communicate with someone other than himself. His written history will be a testament to the past and the future. His words are words of water which may bring hope to this barren landscape, these barren people. Deb’s pregnancy may signify that the drought in this community has been broken. As “From The Testament of Tourmaline” states: “Body is land in permutation” (72).

Stow could not have envisaged that the future in which the “action of [his] novel is to be imagined as taking place” would see “outsiders” isolated and imprisoned in desert surrounds. In one sense, therefore, this reading of *Tourmaline*, in terms of the current policy and disquiet surrounding asylum seekers, is a reading backwards from the perspective of the present. But Stow would have been familiar with the notion that uninvited foreigners arriving illegally on Australia’s coastal fringes could be constructed as posing a very real threat to the Australian way of life. That notion, encouraged by much Australian writing up to the time of *Tourmaline*’s publication, was lent credence by the speed with which Australia’s first Federal Parliament passed the *Immigration Restriction Act* (1901).

The cultural xenophobia in Australia in 1963, and continuing today, was fed by an epistemological uncertainty. It was, and is, a response to the fear of the unknown other. In the 1960s that fear was influenced by colour and politics. The period since World War Two had seen the rise of Communism in mainland China and the overthrow of white colonial governments in countries such as India, Pakistan, Vietnam and Malaysia. Japan remained for many the barbaric enemy who had bombed Australian soil and fought Australian troops as close to home as Papua New Guinea. The other to be feared at that time was the “Asian” hordes poised to invade Australia through her vast, “empty” North. Since 2001 the other has largely become the asylum seeker, who may be a potential terrorist and whose culture and religion are seen to be at odds with Australian values and traditions.

In another sense, therefore, *Tourmaline* could be seen to offer a prophetic view of the future. Stow’s use of Taoism is inherently cross-cultural. Taoism resists

xenophobia because it operates as an epistemological code, as a way of knowing difference or otherness. Stow's narrative carries an important message to the Australian nation today. The Law convinced himself that he could survive by listening to and communicating with no-one but himself. He was wrong. His narcissistic introversion left him (uncreatively) empty, bitter and afraid. His irrational fear of the unknown, his inability to speak out against what he discovered to be false and his desire for past (and pastoral) certainties find resonance in contemporary Australian society. Again one is reminded of the Law when Hage, tracing the psychology of Australia's present paranoia about otherness, asserts that John Howard's ideological ascendancy "signals the rise of an unprecedented political narcissism: a numb and dumb sense of self-satisfaction with the national self and a refusal to hear any voice other than one's own" (76). Australians need more than ever to look outwards, beyond the "blue ranges," and enter into constructive dialogue with what they find there. *Tourmaline* in returning the reader to its beginning may offer itself as a timeless testament to the destructive personal and communal costs bred by mindsets closed against the possibility of difference. It is a lesson that must be reinforced continually if we are not to slip back into the ways of the past.

Turner Hospital's *Oyster*, published more than thirty years after *Tourmaline*, offers more explicitly the same lesson. *Oyster* was inspired by Turner Hospital's trip to outback Queensland at a time when bitter race debates, fuelled by the rising One Nation party, gripped the nation. *Oyster* is set in Outer Maroo, a remote, drought-stricken mining town in western Queensland. Outer Maroo has a population of 87. Its children have never seen rain. Like *Tourmaline* the "town seems drugged" (83). Through much concentrated effort Outer Maroo has been kept off all government survey maps. Postal and telecommunications services have been sabotaged to ensure that only a few select inhabitants have the ability to communicate with the outside world. Petrol is not freely available. The borders of this tiny community are controlled rigidly. No-one leaves Outer Maroo. And foreigners, whether they hail from interstate or overseas, are not welcome. Occasionally people arrive in Digby's supply truck but mysteriously they never leave with him; they simply vanish. Mr Prophet and Mr Godwin, corrupt opal barons and leaders of the Living Word fundamentalist congregation, dominate and control the people of the township. Like Random, they foster an "us" and "them" mentality and tolerate no deviation from their hypocritical, pious teachings. The Living Word operates to stifle all language of desire and difference. Books other than the Bible are burned. Satellite dishes and television, mouthpieces for Satan, are banned from the family home.

The political implications of *Oyster* are more overtly marked than those of *Tourmaline*. In Outer Maroo the ultra-conservative wealthy landowners stockpile huge arsenals in anticipation of an invasion by "the government, or the Aborigines, or

whoever, comes to take their land” (245). The town’s inhabitants grumble about “the bloody republic [. . .] [and] the bloody ratbag politicians” (328). They “distrust equally the government, the coastal cities, the newspapers, the ABC, the Department of Education, the godless Other, the World, the Flesh, the Devil, all the people out there who are not in the little crucible of pastoral *us*” (315). This is One Nation, Fred Nile and gun lobby territory all rolled into one. The publican’s racist outburst is familiar to Australian readers: “as far as I’m concerned, they’re still Abos. [. . .] I been watching black faces whingeing on TV ever since I got the satellite dish. Finders keepers, I say. [. . .] Nobody gets free beer or free opal on account of a suntan round here” (68).

Into this repressed and repressive hamlet staggers Oyster. Like Random before him he comes, seemingly wounded, out of the desert. He too has been “tormented” by God and “transformed” by the experience. He too has piercing eyes. He too is a fraud. Oyster’s arrival, like Random’s, is taken to signify the breaking of the drought. Unlike other outsiders, Oyster is accepted by the locals because they know that he, like them, has something to hide and because he tells them what they want to hear: that governments are not to be trusted and that it is time for Australia to “return to the way the world was meant to be” (328), a time of certainties when men were men and women were women. “At the Reef,” he announces, “I am rebuilding Eden” (328). Oyster establishes a cult even more repressive than the society of Outer Maroo. He recruits young backpackers from around the world to work the opal mines and subjects them to sexual, physical and emotional abuse. Renamed and stripped of their individuality and personal freedom these disciples become little more than emaciated slaves. Oyster becomes increasingly deluded and paranoid until, as the new millennium approaches, he sacrifices his followers and their children, his children, in a (Waco, Texas-style) blazing armageddon. And the town says nothing: “Silence is golden” (212).

“Out here,” the narrator states, “silence is the dimension in which we float” (149). But there are different forms and gradations of silence at work in *Oyster*. There is the debilitating silence of the town’s complicity in mass murder, a silence that allows the community to turn in on itself and abrogate individual responsibility. It is a silence which enables even those who know they are morally culpable to do nothing. The town remains paralysed by fear and deception. Oyster, the Reef and the fire are never mentioned. This collaborative silence is an extension of the imposed silence of dissent which operates in small communities. It is the kind of silence the school teacher Susannah Rover refuses to respect. Susannah is the only individual prepared to broach taboo subjects. She wants to disturb the status quo. For her questions she is brutally murdered and disappears without a trace.

There is also the silence of *Oyster*’s narrator, Jess Hyde, otherwise known as “Old Silence.” Jess, who came to Outer Maroo as a way of escaping her (other) self, chooses silence as a mode of withdrawal from the world. That withdrawal, in

the face of such evil, is morally questionable but she and her lover Major Miner finally act, at the eleventh hour, to try and save the lives of Mercy Given and two foreigners. In doing so they are spared. Like the Law, Jess functions as the European memory and conscience of Outer Maroo. *Oyster* is her “chronicle,” written from a somewhat detached perspective as she, feeling like “Robinson Crusoe” (150), watches the distant town and presumably its inhabitants, disappear in a raging inferno. While it is too late to change the current course of events in Outer Maroo, her narrative may make a difference next time because the past and present are also the future. All that happens now has happened before and will happen again and Jess has “a hunch that stories such as this one are too common for comfort these days. They will get worse as the decade advances” (8).

There was once a flourishing town known as Inner Maroo but it too was incinerated perhaps, it is suggested, because the greedy miners sunk their wells too close to the ancient bora rings and the indifferent graziers scattered the sacred stones. Ethel, as a Murri woman, knows this history. She knows Outer Maroo has been sung. Ethel is the Aboriginal memory and conscience of Outer Maroo. She has watched silently as this latest community destroyed itself through self-interest and a collective failure of imagination but now she is laughing. “Whitefella Maroo” has gone but the land remains, so too the “First Ones” of Ethel’s Wangkumara ancestors. The whitefellas’ weapons and wealth did not help them hold on to the land. Ethel feels that justice has been done. Now those who truly belong to the land will return. Now her “lost language” will come back to her: “She is waiting for a name other than Ethel to rise out of [the stones], for the name she was never given but should have been, for the name history took from her. She is waiting to meet her other self” (44).

The Murris teach Bugger Harvey how to read the deeply silent land. He in turn passes his knowledge on to Major Miner, showing him how to dispense with gelignite and to receive gently what the earth has to offer. Bugger’s lessons inadvertently push Major Miner “deeper into the way of the Tao” (336). He learns to feel gently for the spaces and to move through the gaps in the landscape. Indeed it is only those who move through the gaps that survive *Oyster*’s armageddon. It is a method Turner Hospital’s readers must also employ if they are to negotiate *Oyster*’s complex narrative structure, its refusal of linear time and its movement towards an horizon of silence that celebrates uncertainty and absence.

The need to see things differently operates as a powerful theme in the text. Much of the narrative is filtered through the adolescent mind of Mercy Given. As a child of Outer Maroo and member of the Living Word congregation Mercy had no language with which to even contemplate desire and difference. Susannah Rover changed that by feeding Mercy the language of imaginative possibility: “Mercy pored through Miss Rover’s dictionary, word by forbidden word, sucking each meaning as she went. The taste was addictive. She licked words and polished

them and held them up to the light” (74). Mercy, as Alice, enters various tunnels and finds herself in other worlds or more correctly, worlds of otherness. There is the grotesque otherness of Oyster’s world where she is raped and abused but there is also the tunnel of Miss Rover’s books where she comes to understand and relish the concepts of perspective and difference. In this underground space Mercy discovers that it is possible to imagine a world more complex and therefore more beautiful than that which has been constructed for her. Pointillism operates as a metaphor for Turner Hospital’s narrative method: “*the application of thousands of small dots of colour to the canvas. Looked at closely, the small dots of paint are apparent. From a distance, they blend to convey luminosity*” (202). Mercy “believes she would be more at ease in a world of people who think in colour” (203). She is not alone. The heroes of *Oyster*, like those of *Tourmaline*, are those who do not view the world in terms of black and white certainties.

Mercy ponders the power of imagination and the written word:

But what is the relationship, Mercy wonders, if the Pointillists are right, between the intrinsic colour of a certain event and the colour it takes on when what you remember is all muddled up, or when thinking about it makes you frightened? If we invent things and write them down, is it like killing a goanna in one of the outer paddocks where the bulls are kept? The dead goanna brings the ants and the ants bring a snake and the snake bites the jackaroo’s leg and the jackaroo dies and then the bulls snort and get restive and [. . .] If an essay lies in a box somewhere, in an abandoned opal mine, does it ferment? (219)

Words, as Miss Rover knew, “are like bushfires. [. . .] You can’t stop them and you can’t tell where they’ll end up” (71). Words, as Stow’s fiction attests, are also like water: they may appear to be gentle and understated but they have the power to carve canyons.

Words do make a difference because words, in the form of stories, have the capacity to tell a nation to itself (selves). Patrick White knew this. In “The Prodigal Son” he decried the 1950s Australian “exaltation of the ‘average’” (270) over intellect and imagination. Rather than join the throng of departing artists and intellectuals he began to write *The Tree of Man* because he believed that fiction could not only “lead to communication between human beings” but that it could help “to people a barely inhabited country with a race possessed of understanding” (271). David Marr, in delivering the 2003 Colin Simpson lecture, cited White’s assessment of 1958 Australia and argued that forty-five years on we have as a nation come almost the full circle. Unfortunately, Marr is right. In twenty-first century Australia unauthorised “foreigners” must be kept out at all costs.

“Elites” are denigrated and discredited. The federal government gains increasing popularity by promising to protect the nation from terror and terrifying otherness. Marr, addressing an audience of writers, urged them to look hard at and write imaginatively of the “real” Australia. While the task for writers is to continue to create such challenging texts, it is equally important that readers understand how to engage with them, how to move through the gaps and read for the spaces. As Australian readers we need to be open to what fiction may tell us about ourselves because ultimately what we read is not so much about others as it is about us. Otherness, as Julia Kristeva has theorised, and as *Tourmaline* and *Oyster* demonstrate, is never solely without but is always already within the self, the community and the nation.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The epigraph, taken from St John Perse’s poem “Anabase,” is translated by T.S.Eliot as “O men of little weight/ in the memory of these lands [. . .].” Cited in McDougall, 130.
- 2 McDougall levels this same criticism at Fay Zwicky in his discussion of “Speeches and Silences.”
- 3 Both McDougall and Tiffin offer powerful allegorical readings of *Tourmaline* in terms of colonialism and relationship to land.
- 4 Gordon Bennett’s *Echo and Narcissus* (1988) presents almost a mirror image to this tableau. Bennett portrays Aboriginal Echo as the alter-ego of the white Narcissus. She is the repressed origin and “other” of Narcissus’ own fate. For further discussion of this painting see *The Art of Gordon Bennett* 83.

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