

Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language

Volume 2 | Issue 3

Article 5

January 2004

Constructing Emptiness: Ennio Morricone and Randolph Stow

Andrew Taylor
Edith Cowan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/landscapes>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Taylor, A. (2004). Constructing Emptiness: Ennio Morricone and Randolph Stow. *Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language*, 2(3).
Retrieved from <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/landscapes/vol2/iss3/5>

This Article (refereed) is posted at Research Online.
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/landscapes/vol2/iss3/5>

ANDREW TAYLOR

Constructing Emptiness: Ennio Morricone and Randolph Stow

Abstract

This paper looks at the construction of emptiness in the works of two artists: the Italian film composer Ennio Morricone and the Australian novelist Randolph Stow. The relevant texts are the music Morricone wrote for Sergio Leone's epic *Once upon a Time in the West*, and Stow's novels *To the Islands* and *Tourmaline*. Two different constructions of emptiness (including the Taost one) are compared, the contradiction inherent in its apprehension is discussed, and there is speculation on how such a concept could gain entry into genres one of whose functions is to obliterate it.

Ennio Morricone

Some time in 1964, while I was teaching at the British Institute in Rome, I came out of a movie so excited by the music that I searched out and bought a 45 of it. The film was *Per un pugno di dollari*, (*A Fistful of Dollars*) (1964) directed by Sergio Leone, and the music was by Ennio Morricone. This was the first film that Leone and Morricone collaborated on, and it marked the start of an astonishing partnership that culminated in the 159 minute epic *Once Upon a Time in the West* (*C'era una volta il West*) in 1969. It also marked the beginning of my love affair with the music of Morricone, who has since gone on, as we all know, to be one of the film industry's most acclaimed composers.

I make no claim to an encyclopedic knowledge of Morricone's contribution to film music – with somewhere around 400 scores it is far too extensive for that. In fact, I wish to focus on only one very small part of it, and that is on some of the music he wrote for that vast film, *Once Upon a Time in the West*. This film starred Henry Fonda, Jason Robards, Charles Bronson and Claudia

Cardinale, and while it has the violence and brutality characteristic of all Leone's Westerns, it also has a quite mesmeric wistfulness and sadness, generated in no small part by Morricone's music. As a matter of fact, I got to know the music well before I got to see the movie itself, so my reaction to the movie was, to some extent, predetermined by my knowledge of the music and the ineradicable mental and emotional impression it had already made on me. If this would seem to be going about things the wrong way around, I can take heart from the fact that, contrary to normal film practice, Morricone composed his music before shooting of the film began. As Leone said once in an interview, 'I never show the final script to Ennio. Before he starts writing I tell him what I have in mind... I always give him all the indications he needs to create, with in-depth descriptions and comparisons... When all the characters have been assigned their musical signatures, we do a recording, with a few instruments. Then I take the recording to the set and use it while the actors go through their lines' (CD Booklet, 1990). This method of operation gave Morricone's music an active, generative role, as the actors' and the director's responses to the music directly contributed to the film's characterisation.

I will not attempt to give anything like a full account of *Once upon a Time in the West*. Perhaps one way to describe it is a savage and brutal counterpart of Stephen Crane's comic little masterpiece, 'The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky' (1898). Crane's story marks the beginning of the end of the Wild West as Potter, the town Marshall, alights from the San Antonio Pullman with his brand new bride, almost immediately to run up against his old antagonist, the gun-toting Scratchy Wilson who is terrorising the town. Scratchy's overwhelming drunken ambition at that moment, it seems, is to shoot holes in anything that moves. Confronted by Potter's new-found, metropolitan, domesticity – signalled by the 'bride' of the story's title – Scratchy 'calls off' the showdown, and wanders away in total bewilderment, while 'his feet made funnel-shaped tracks in the heavy sand.' As the story comments, 'He was not a student of chivalry; it was merely that in the presence of this foreign condition he was a simple child of the earlier plains.'

In Stephen Crane's story, Potter's bride is described, in this her first encounter with a Wild West that was in its death throes, as a 'drooping drowning woman.' The woman in Leone's film – played by Claudia Cardinale – is anything but that. She becomes, as a result of the murder of the man she has arrived to marry – an entrepreneur. Whereas Potter's bride was an ex-servant from San Antonio, she is an ex-whore from New Orleans. The film ends with her pouring drinks for the railways workers (establishing her catering business, you might say) while Cheyenne lies dying and Harmonica, the man with no name, rides off into a sunset that holds nothing for him. The Wild West is being conquered by the railroad; yet the scheming railroad magnate who is ruthlessly pushing his line further and further west is himself killed by Frank, the vicious psychopath played by Henry Fonda. Stephen Crane's West was violent but oddly innocent in its unsophistication. Leone's West is vicious and cruel; and it is facing defeat not from a superior moral (or domesticating) force but from a rapaciousness and ruthlessness every bit as violent and cynical as itself.

Once upon a Time in the West, as its name suggests, is a farewell story. Leone was losing interest in the Western genre. (In fact, Morricone wrote the music for only one more Leone Western, *Giu la testa – Duck, you Sucker*, also known as *A Fistful of Dynamite* – in 1971.) But something else was happening too. It is as though the moral emptiness and nihilism apparent in the film, where courage and daring at worst become pathological, and at best achieve nothing but a lonely retribution, have stripped that world of its heroic veneer and revealed something difficult to pinpoint and name. This essay is, in fact, an attempt to put a name to it, and to do this one must attend to Morricone's music. This is because, while on the one hand the music collaborates with the other elements of the film to create a powerful picture of what I have tried to describe above, on the other it paradoxically goes even further, to something more fundamental than the human world and its cruelties and desires.

The music of the film is built around three main themes, and the names given them on the CD are 'Once Upon A Time In the West', 'Farewell to Cheyenne',

‘Man With A Harmonica’. A fourth track, named ‘Jill’s America’, is actually a recapitulation of part of the first theme. The two themes relevant to the present discussion are the first (the title theme) and the third.

The title theme is introduced by a quiet series of slow descending synchopated chords which have a metallic, chiming timbre. The theme is then introduced, sung as vocalise by a female voice over an unobtrusive bass, then passed to strings which repeat it a number of times while the voice continues, sometimes over it, sometimes under it. The whole passage is slow, haunting, almost tender yet not so, as it has an ethereal quality that seems to shun the human. ‘Man With A Harmonica’ is the theme that accompanies the man with no name. It starts with a dreary, wavering and dissonant harmonica sound rather suggestive of something forgotten blowing in the wind. A more assertive and brassy theme develops, with a jogging rhythm appropriate to a Western where horse riding is a recurrent motif. This is then taken up by percussion and strings, but the harmonica sound continues, outlasting it to conclude the number by fading into the distance. The effect is disturbing and eerie.

[Click here to listen to ‘Once Upon A Time In The West’]

[Click here to listen to ‘Man With A Harmonica’]

It is common to describe the mood of this music as nostalgia and, if one were first to come across the music only within the finished film itself, this is understandable. The film images and the music work together powerfully to create the sense of a world coming to an end, only to be replaced by another which is in no way demonstrably better. One might also detect a wistfulness in it. But given the fact that in some sense the music preceded the film itself, I would argue for the right to listen also to what the music, in itself, has to say. And one can do this – in fact, perhaps paradoxically one must do this – without forgetting that it is film music, to be accompanied by visual images but not to be dominated by them.

The term that best describes what this music is articulating is, in my view, the word emptiness. Loneliness gets close to the mark, or aloneness, or solitude. But the quality I hear goes beyond these. The disembodied voices, echoed by the high strings, generate a sense, not of a gathering of people, but of the absence of people. In Harmonica's music, (in the film the main character has no name, and is known only by the instrument he taunts the villain with) the sound seems less made by some person playing a musical instrument than by some celestial wind blowing in from beyond the stars. This music is ruthless in its stripping away of any dimension of the landscape of sound that might answer to human need or anthropocentric egotism. It lacks a Kantian sense of the Sublime, a Wordsworthian sense of awe, an Emersonian sense of accommodation. It has a quality that is utterly uncomfortable, while at the same time quite without threat or malevolence. If, in the traditional American Western, Wyoming is the state of solitude and open spaces, this music comes from a Wyoming beyond Wyoming itself. It bespeaks a Wyoming that has been deserted and set adrift in limitless space. It bespeaks emptiness.

This quality of emptiness is not something often found in music, film or literature. One could even claim that it is the function of any artistic genre to refuse it, to overcome it, to fill it with somethingness. Perhaps poetry and music, stepping as they do along the edge of silence with their pauses and spaces, come closest to acknowledging emptiness not as a threat, but as a partner. Film, on the other hand – and *Once upon a Time in the West* is no exception – strives to fill it: with people, with action, with light, sound and image. In Leone's film, Morricone's music has a dual, contrapuntal function. On the one hand it serves as character leitmotifs in the Wagnerian sense, and thus both thematically and functionally it assists in the obliteration of emptiness that the other filmic elements are deployed to bring about. On the other, it generates a sense of emptiness which is a denial of both character and action, an emptiness overlayed by the tumultuous or tense action of the screen images, yet audible none the less. And it brings to my mind another manifestation of emptiness: that in a novel by Randolph Stow.

Randolph Stow

To the Islands, Stow's third novel, was published in 1958, with a revised edition appearing in 1982. It tells the story of an aging Anglican missionary, Heriot, tired and disillusioned after many years running a mission in the remote north of Western Australia. (Missions are, of course, instrumental in the process of colonisation, and the significance of colonisation for Stow is something that will be touched on at the end of this essay.) Heriot sets out on a journey 'to the islands' of death after he thinks he has killed a young Aborigine. The revised edition of the novel is prefaced by an epigraph written by a brother of Stow's great-grandfather who explored that part of the Kimberley coast:

Still islands, islands, islands. After leaving Cape Bougainville we passed at least 500, of every shape, size and appearance... Infinitely varied as these islands are – wild and picturesque, grand sometimes almost to sublimity – there is about them all an air of dreariness and gloom. No sign of life appears on their surface; scarcely even a seabird hovers on their shores. They seem abandoned by Nature to complete and everlasting desolation. (Jefferson Stow: *Voyage of the Forlorn Hope*, 1865)

The two names at the end of this passage are remarkable in their contrast: the elder Stow bearing the name of one of the truly great intellectual and political figures of the American eighteenth century, the author of the Declaration of Independence. And his boat, the 'Forlorn Hope' – literally 'hope abandoned', an emptiness of the spirit that is not despair, but a condition beyond both hope and despair. Randolph Stow's novel steers its course between the two extremes those names point towards. Passages of vibrant descriptions of a lush tropical landscape alternate with extremes of desolation such as the following:

...he had nowhere to hide, there was no shelter in the country of rocks, and no movement, nothing to rest or entertain the eye. He thought of cattle breaking away across a creek, the splashing and the bellows, the

shouts of the bright-shirted men pursuing on shining horses. There was no action here.

And it was silent, too, so silent that again and again he had the urge to sing and drown out the silence, although the sound of his voice was hardly less disturbing. If there were music, he thought... But he would not hear that again. (162)

I do not think it fanciful to suggest that if there were to be a music of such a silence it would be akin to that of Morricone.

One can interpret the elder Stow's failure to read the landscape as a typical example of colonial blindness to what is there. None the less, that description of a landscape void of human significance or meaning accurately characterises the emptiness that I see as underlying the human drama in *To the Islands*. In that novel the landscape answers to none of our demands for recognition – even a hostile recognition. Despite great privation, thirst and hunger, Heriot is treated by the landscape with a kind of gentle indifference. Apparently at random it affords and denies him – through the ministrations of his companion Justin – food, water and shelter. On the novel's final page, as Heriot stares into the sun setting over the ocean, trying to discern the islands of death, it is unclear whether any islands appear to him or, even, whether there are any islands at all: 'And when the sun sank lower, there, in the heart of the blaze, might appear the islands' (208).

Stow's next novel, *Tourmaline* (1963) also has emptiness at its heart, but a very different kind of emptiness. In her article '*Tourmaline* and the Tao Ti Ching' (84-120) Helen Tiffin draws attention to two earlier articles by A.D. Hope in which 'he showed that Stow had written a philosophical novel based on the opposing ideas of the *Tao te ching* and Christianity' (84). Tiffin, in her article, and Anthony Hassall, in his chapter on *Tourmaline* in his study of Stow, *Strange Country* (52-74), elaborate on this. Both Hope and Tiffin draw, for elucidation, on a sequence of poems titled '*From The Testament of Tourmaline*' written by Stow, which clarify elements of the Tao apparent

enough to us today, but apparently puzzling to readers and critics when the novel first appeared. Emptiness is the fundamental concept of Taoism (Watts), but a Taoist emptiness, in total contrast to the emptiness I have been trying to point to in this paper, is also a plenitude, a 'thunderous silence.' In the novel *Tourmaline*, Tom Spring tries to explain just what this is:

He spoke of the unity of opposites, and of the overwhelming power of inaction. He talked of becoming a stream, to carve out canyons without ceasing ever to yield... He said I must be empty in order to be filled. (148)

But the intractability of such understanding to language is also apparent, as the narrator acknowledges:

At moments I thought I glimpsed, through the inept words, something of his vision of fullness and peace; the power and the darkness. Then it was hidden again, obscured behind his battles with the language. (148)

For the Tao, such concepts are ultimately ineffable.

Heriot, in the earlier novel, had fleeting moments of such a Taoist emptiness as, for example, in the following dream:

Now I am become nothing, whispered Heriot, now and forever, for ever and ever, I am no more...

I am all light, cried Heriot, I am torn apart, I am torn apart, all light, all glorious light. (132)

Approaching his death, 'his mind was placid and empty' (204). But the Taoist understanding of emptiness that is articulated in *Tourmaline* and in the sequence of poems, 'From the Testament of Tourmaline', is only incipient and intermittent in *To the Islands*. In an article on, among others, the poetry of Randolph Stow, Fay Zwicky writes that a 'distrust of language to express the inexpressible, coupled with a deep yearning for disengagement from the torments of desire and ambition have been a marked characteristic of the Australian temperament in isolation' (41). Although specifically referring to Stow's poetry, Zwicky here could be describing the very un-Tao quality of most of *To the Islands*. To see Stow, in this novel, moving intermittently

toward the Taoism of his next novel is helpful to our understanding of how his vision and art developed. But before turning to that by way of conclusion, I will briefly point to the difficulty of the entry of emptiness into language.

Emptiness and its politics

When Heriot declares in his dream that “I am become nothing...I am no more...” he is affirming the abolition of the ego and its entry into the Tao, or the Way. But the language is a contradiction, opening an aporia: it is the utterance of a subject declaring its own non-existence or, in slightly different terms, it declares the human construction of its own non-presence. A similar contradiction is inherent in any articulation of emptiness, because emptiness constitutes a contradiction of the act of apprehension, and *vice versa*. It entails the subject’s apprehension of its being nothing, which is rather like staring directly into a mirror and seeing oneself not reflected there. Furthermore, any empty landscape is apprehended from a point of view that is not empty, that occupied by the viewer. The empty spaces of Leone’s film are viewed, they are seen, and this viewing, this gaze, is a penetration of, and a violation of the emptiness it apprehends. Similarly, the emptiness of *To the Islands* is experienced by Heriot, and this act of Heriot’s invests it with the lineaments of a human significance that it totally and radically denies. Just as the behaviour of particles, in Quantum physics, is altered by the mere act of observing them, so emptiness, by our being aware of it, becomes other than itself. Yet despite this, emptiness is not meaningless to us as a concept, or even as an experience - even though it is the ultimate and fundamental meaninglessness.

It is not surprising, then, that emptiness does not figure prominently in much Western culture. One thinks of its catastrophic consequences for a Westerner in another novel deeply influenced by Eastern thought: E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*. It is the function of much Western art, as I said earlier, even Modernist art that explores the angst of meaninglessness, to negate emptiness: with despair, with angst itself, or with some ‘momentary stay against confusion’ such as Robert Frost spoke of. In a protraction of

colonisation co-terminous with Modernism, the American Western movie filled the landscape of the West with a vision of history and nation now discredited. But it took two outsiders, two Italians with no investment in American culture or history – and Morricone in particular – to reveal the emptiness beneath such an enterprise of retrospective nation building. They stood to gain nothing from either a patriotic or a cynical glorification of the West, its colonisation and exploitation by non-indigenous interests. Their film is an exploration of moral emptiness and the futility of heroism, but beneath that, as I have argued, Morricone's music opens onto a metaphysical emptiness which he had no reason not to acknowledge.

In the case of Randolph Stow, his family had had an association since 1836 with the land he wrote about, and was complicit in the colonising of South and Western Australia. But the young novelist's growing interest in Taoism indicates his progressive disengagement from their considerable enterprise and achievements. It was precisely this disengagement, I would argue, that enabled him to confront the emptiness that lay beneath Marcus Clarke's perception of the 'weird melancholy' of the Australian landscape and to recapture something of the unadorned vision of his ancestor, but without the limitations of the earlier man's colonial vision. In *To the Islands* one can perceive an awareness of emptiness that his growing interest in Taoism enabled him to acknowledge and confront. But in that novel it was not yet able to infuse it, in any coherent way, with a Taoist comprehension of it such as that apparent in *Tourmaline*.

I would conclude then that both Morricone and Stow, although to differing degrees, displayed an oblique and disengaged perspective on the culture they focused on, a perspective unencumbered by interests – political, cultural, psychological or religious. This is what gave them their distinctive capacity to penetrate to the realm of silence and emptiness that most other cultural – and political – activity characteristically seeks to deny or annul.

Works cited

- Clarke, Marcus (1893) 'Preface' to *Poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon*. Melbourne. At http://download.franklin.com/cgi-bin/franklin/ebookman_free_preview?agord
- Crane, Stephen (1898) 'The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky' in Frank Bergon, ed. *The Western Writings of Stephen Crane*. New York: New American Library, 1979.
- Forster, E.M. (1924) *A Passage to India*, London: Penguin Books. 1936.
- Frost, Robert (1956) 'The Figure a Poem Makes' in Scully, J. ed. *Modern Poetics*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Hassall, Anthony (1986) *Strange Country: A Study of Randolph Stow*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- Hope, A.D. (1974) 'Randolph Stow and the *Tourmaline* Affair', in W.S. Ransom, ed. *The Australian Experience*. Canberra: Australian National University Press. 249-268.
- _____ (1975) 'Randolph Stow and the Way to Heaven'. *Hemisphere* 18, 6. 33-55.
- Leone, Sergio (1969) *C'era una volta il West (Once upon a Time in the West)*. Music by Ennio Morricone.
- _____ (1971) *Giu la testa (Duck, you Sucker; also titled A Fistful of Dynamite)*. Music by Ennio Morricone.
- _____ (1964) *Per un pugno di dollari (A Fistfull of Dollars)*. Music by Ennio Morricone.
- Morricone, Ennio (1990) *The Legendary Italian Westerns*. RCA: The Film Composers Series, Vol.2 (CD and unpaginated booklet).
- Stow, Randolph (1958) *To the Islands*. London: Macdonald. Revised edition 1982. London: Secker and Warburg.
- _____ (1965) *Tourmaline*. London: Macdonald.
- Tiffin, Helen (1978) '*Tourmaline* and the *Tao Te Ching*' in K.G. Hamilton, ed. *Studies in the Recent Australian Novel*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- Watts, Alan (undated) 'The World as Emptiness'. <http://www.bluehoney.org/Emptiness.htm>
- Zwicky, Fay (1994) 'Vast Spaces, Quiet Voices', *Australian Book Review*, September 1994, No, 164.

Andrew Taylor
Edith Cowan University
Western Australia.

12 June 2003

NOTE: An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper at the 2001 EASA Conference in Lecce, Italy, 24-28 September 2001.