

## Harold Stewart's *Autumn Landscape Roll*, a "Buddhist Divine Comedy"

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### Abstract

Since the days of the Silk Road exchanges between East and West, Asian philosophical and cultural ideas have been a magnet for rare pilgrims of the arts and lay scholars like Australian poet Harold Stewart (1917-1994), who, leaving Australia in the early 1960s, sailed to Japan to settle permanently in Kyoto, a city built on a thousand years of Buddhist learning. Stewart made a singular effort to shift his source of inspiration exclusively to Asia in the belief that Australia's future lay under Australasian skies. This high degree of cultural immersion produced an exclusive oeuvre of Asian-centred writing crowned by two epic poems, a tradition unknown to classical Chinese and Japanese poetry. His large body of writing positions Stewart as the unacknowledged precursor to forty years of Australian poetic responses to Asia, even though his final and perhaps most challenging narrative composition *Autumn Landscape Roll*, a "Buddhist Divine Comedy" with sources predating Dante by 1800 years, remains unpublished.

**Keywords:** Autumn Landscape Roll, Harold Stewart, Traditionalism, immersion, Buddhism, Dante, Divine Comedy, Japan, China

**H**arold Stewart (1916-95) left Australia permanently for Kyōto, Japan in 1966. Immersed in Asian culture since childhood and living in Japan for the final twenty-nine years of his life, the poet wrote two verse epics that are panoramic depictions of Mahayana Buddhism, unprecedented in English-language poetry, alongside a volume of shorter poems and two collections of translated haiku. The defining characteristic of his work is meaningful engagement with Asia without repeating patterns of casual acquisitiveness, post-colonial condescension, or fanciful "Orientalism". Notwithstanding, Stewart's body of work has mostly been passed over by literary critics and his defining major composition remains unpublished, filed with his papers in the National Library of Australia. *Autumn Landscape Roll (ALR)* can be described as a "Buddhist Divine Comedy" that mirrors Dante's monumental *La Divina Commedia* in scope and technical achievement.

First, let us consider some of the reasons why Harold Stewart's 15,000 lines of poetry (Kelly 1993), along with a voluminous body of expository prose, have gone largely unnoticed. Initially, his dual authorship with James

McAuley of the “Ern Malley” hoax of 1944, remembered as Australia’s world-famous literary scandal,<sup>1</sup> brought Stewart more than his share of notoriety. This incident cast a long shadow over his reputation and continued to haunt him through the 1980s until his death in 1994. By then, “Saint Ern” had duly achieved literary canonisation as a modernist hero with poems that continue to be published in the current anthologies, while Stewart’s own Asian-themed work remains obscure and largely unknown. As the Malley myth grew, literary historians like Richard Tipping visited Stewart in Kyōto to research more deeply into what he had always considered to be nothing more than a youthful prank:

It was one afternoon when James McAuley and I were bored; we were on duty and there was absolutely nothing to do...and so we amused ourselves by creating this imaginary poet and his works, which got us into terrible trouble of course, with everybody. But let’s not go into that. It’s a subject which ‘I’m heartily tired of. I’ve had it, day and night, for the last 40 years. All my serious work is completely ignored or neglected whilst everyone harps on this one string. (27)

From the 1940s, instead of exploring the Australian milieu and issues of national identity like his contemporaries, Stewart wrote almost exclusively<sup>2</sup> about Asian philosophy and culture. At that time his work was considered arcane and not in tune with popular tastes, especially during and following Australia’s conflict with Japan during the Second World War. Moreover, there were no notable allusions to Western literature, history, or mythology present in Stewart’s Asian oeuvre, although he was conversant with the English and European canons from an early age. A letter to Alison Broinowski gives an indication why:

Way back in the 1940s, the Muse whispered in my ear that Western Tradition was exhausted and in decline, and that, as ever, ex Oriente lux, Christianity was played out. No one really believed in it or practiced it anymore and as a subject for poetry, Dante and Milton had said it all so superbly that who could rival them? But Eastward were vast unexplored countries and cultures with a rich hoard of art, religion, literature, music and someone had to set out and explore these...As no other poet was tackling this task, why not me? (12)

Except for the publication of two collections and a book of haiku translations<sup>3</sup> before sailing to Japan, his works continued to be ignored by most critics and institutions of Australian literature. A growing sense of isolation contributed to his desire to leave the country of his birth. An intensely private man this was no doubt intensified by the social impossibility of being openly gay at that time in Australia, whereas Japan appeared to be more sexually tolerant.<sup>4</sup> Finally, long exposure to Asian literature and the writings of Traditionalist writers René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon that expounded Eastern metaphysical doctrines fuelled Stewart's desire to explore firsthand meditation practice, in particular through Jōdo-Shinshu, the Pure Land school, non-monastic and popular in Japan. Initially Stewart studied to take formal vows as a Jōdo-Shin priest, but in the end adopted the life of a lay practitioner to pursue his primary interests as a poet and scholar. Bandō Shōjun, his mentor, was a priest and Professor of Buddhism at Otani Daigaku (Shin Buddhist University) in Kyoto, and Hisao Inagaki, another scholar became his second co-translator and friend. Together they also created authoritative English translations of the canonical works of Pure Land Buddhist texts, making Stewart one of the early scholar poets working in this field.

Aligned with these sources Stewart's poetry and prose should also be considered Buddhist transcultural literature. As a modern example of sub-created Mahayana art, the poet's work ably cements its position within the history of creative responses to Buddhism practised throughout China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea, and Taiwan, the largest and growing demographic segment of the Buddhist world that includes considerably more than 1.6 billion people according to 2010 estimates (Snyder).

Living by frugal means, Stewart spent his first twelve years composing *By the Old Walls of Kyoto (Old Walls)*, 500-pages of twelve long-verse narratives of walks to some of the city's most important shrines and temples. They are also accompanied by twelve exegetical prose commentaries exploring Sino-Japanese Mahayana culture and philosophy. This book has been described as "the poetic soul's 'Lonely Planet' Guide to Kyōto" (Leckenby). Published in Tokyo and New York in 1981, the title reached a keen international audience interested in Buddhism and literature about Asia. Despite receiving some prominent reviews, (Green 137) it was poorly distributed and made minimal impact back in Australia. *Old Walls* compares the central state of being and consciousness, symbolised by the Pure Land of Amida Buddha, (the Japanese name for Amitabha from the Chinese) to the earthly Paradise, or Eden that Dante situated on the summit of Mount Purgatory. At the centre of its walled garden a spring or holy well dispenses the waters of immortality:

Once the aspirant has reached this central point of contemplation in the midst of the restless action and reaction of his present plane of existence, it is possible...to ascend from the human to the suprahuman planes to the higher levels of being and consciousness that are figured as the heavenly realms. (Stewart 339)

The expository notes accompanying this 4,351-line poem also mentions Tendai monk Genshin (942–1017) commonly referred to by scholars as the “Japanese Dante”. His influential prose work, *Ōjōyōshū* (Essential Collection of Passages Concerning Birth in the Pure Land of Amida), vividly describes the Buddhist Paradise and Purgatory (334) and later becomes a main source for Stewart’s eight Hell wards depicted in *ALR* as mentioned in his introduction.

*Autumn Landscape Roll* is an Eastern response to the keystone work of European literature. Dante’s great epic, central to the development of Western civilization, links the classical and medieval periods to modern times. Similarly, Stewart sets for himself the prodigious task of borrowing the *Commédia*’s architectonic scaffolding to build a thirty-two-canto cosmological picture of the universe, journeying through purgatorial hells and Buddha-fields once described by Buddha himself, pre-dating Dante by 1800 years.<sup>5</sup> Stewart first conceived *ALR* in Australia during the 1940s:

The first intense prevision of this epic struck like a lightning-flash half a century ago. It was recorded in a brief prose synopsis and from time to time during the following decades, three cantos and a few scattered passages were composed. These parts now find their predestined places in the completed whole. Since at that early period I had not yet been able to visit the Far East and so lacked direct contact with the Mahayana Buddhist Traditions as well as any first-hand experience of Oriental countries and cultures, I was too ill equipped for so ambitious a project. (11)

The work was originally meant to span four books. Each would bear a season’s name and collectively include a great deal more Chinese history, legendary personalities, and philosophy. He had made copious notes for the “Spring” and “Summer” volumes, but abandoned the vast scheme, settling instead on the ‘Autumn’ component alone (11).

Such ideas for seasonally linked works must have also arisen from Stewart’s familiarity with the “Mountains and Rivers” (Shan-shui) school of Chinese and Japanese scroll painting. Horizontally displayed

handscrolls are traditionally taken from a box, unravelling a continuous narrative of landscape scenes, displaying literal images with coded allusions to the universe. Thus, viewing a scroll painting is like reading a book from the beginning to end (Hearn 3). One can, therefore, see how Stewart might have considered the idea of a scroll painting as a “storyboard” for a narrative work which becomes the literary conceit for *ALR*. Hence, this epic inspired by Chinese painting is unconcerned with heroic action and psychological character development, usual attributes of a European epic, and an aspect of the *Commédia* he did not try to emulate. When characters converse, they do so through stylised episodes of philosophical dialogue or discourse. *ALR* should thus be “read” as a visual panorama whose primary purpose is to expound philosophy through the medium of an allegorical journey. In Stewart’s unpublished introduction, the poet also reminds that epic verse, religious or heroic, was not written by the Chinese or Japanese and that he had embarked on his projects to fill “these lacunae”, albeit in English. Such a claim may seem tendentious to some, yet it is understandable, given that English and other European languages have become the current lingua franca for Buddhist discourse in the same way that Pali was adopted in ancient India as the official court language by King Asoka (268 to 232 BCE) and throughout the Buddhist Period in ancient India. This also demonstrates the poet’s complete identification with the cultures that he felt so much a part of. Hence, he set *ALR* in T’ang period China, matching traditional Chinese aesthetic sensibility with traditional English prosody, unlike Ezra Pound who, ironically, promoted formal Chinese and Japanese poetry through elegant, yet distorted free verse imitations with the express purpose of declaring war on English metrical verse.<sup>6</sup>

Undaunted, for the next fifteen years Stewart dedicated himself to his “Chinese epic”, and although he no longer actively sought to publish in his home country, Stewart could not repudiate his nationality, which is evident in the lively Australian tone of his voluminous correspondence. One of Stewart’s last letters dated 5 May 1994 to Peter Kelly speculates at that time on the 5,356-line composition “as probably the longest poem in Oz Lit” (16). Thus, it is clear that Stewart wanted to be included in an Australian canon at a future date, and choosing Dante’s monumental work as a blueprint for his Taoist-Buddhist equivalent of the *Divine Comedy* was a bold tactic employed to bring English-language readers on a journey into the Mahayana tradition. Given the two lay scholar-poets’ symbiotic relationships with their respective religious and philosophical traditions it may be useful to look briefly at their personal lives. The Florentine was forced penniless into exile in 1302. Shifting from principality to principality for the last eighteen years of his life, he gradually detached from political concerns and devoted himself to writing the *Commédia*, which has long been regarded second only in doctrinal importance in Christianity to the Bible. Likewise, dogged by the infamy of the Ern Malley hoax and Australian disinterest in his work, Stewart uprooted and exiled himself in Kyōto to follow the long-established

Buddhist tradition of creating dual texts: poetry alongside prose exposition as stated in his *Old Walls* introduction (xvii). A modern example of this convention can be found in the Collected Poems of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Consequently, Dante and Stewart wrote their major works while in exile or self-exile, relying, to a large degree on the support of patrons (Kelly 114) and completed their poems roughly a year before their respective deaths in 1321 and 1995.

Just as the poet's lives have much in common, so do their works. Firstly, each epic takes an allegorical journey through Christian and Buddhist representations of the afterlife. Dante's poem commences *in media res*, the poet struggling through his own "mid-life crisis" with the famous lines:

At the mid-point of the path through life, I found  
Myself lost in a wood so dark, the way  
Ahead was blotted out... (ll. James 3-5)

Here we are presented with a depressed man suffering a personal and spiritual crisis who becomes both author ('auctor': Lat.) and actor ('agens': Lat.) in his drama. In the same way, Wu Tao-tzū, who steps inside his own painting<sup>7</sup> (Giles 47) in the early stages of *ALR* is experiencing a transitional phase in his future Bodhisattva Career. A leaf falls and points a path that Wu follows. Walking down a slope, he enters a group of trees feeling a mood reminiscent of Dante's melancholia:

Wu enters next a shadow-dappled wood,  
And soon is deep among secluding trees (ll. 760-62).

Here he must consider whether he has reached the limits of his small span, or whether he is just a tiny unit disconnected from a larger reality:

O weary leaf in exile, are you now  
As homesick as my heart is for the bough?" (ll. 586-88)

The ontological question posed by Wu, the painter, Stewart's alter-ego, is also the central concern of Dante, the poet, in the ninth sphere of Paradise, where Beatrice delivers her speech on the birth of the universe, the final mystery the poet aches to experience:

I tell,” she said, “I don’t ask, what you ache  
To hear, for I can see it there unmixed  
Where all dimensions meet with no mistake  
And every time and place is centred. (James 14-17)

Both poems indeed travel through extramural realms that supply corresponding visions, portraying the respective journeys through the cosmos. *ALR*’s itinerary differs to the *Commédia*, yet there are so many resemblances between these two works that reflect common ideas in the Taoist-Buddhist and Christian-Dantean traditions that will bear lengthy study and discussion.

For example, poet and painter having each emerged from “dark” or “shadow-dappled woods” will both ford infernal rivers and descend concentrically the calderas of volcanoes. Wu observes Ti-tsang Wang Pusa (Ksitigarbha in Sanskrit) the Earth Bodhisattva as he journeys through the eight Hell wards, while Virgil leads Dante through the nine circles of the *Inferno*. Correspondingly, both climb either Mount Sumeru or Mount Purgatory, which figure correspondingly in the Hindu-Buddhist and Christian cosmologies. Although the accounts strike similar chords, there are also major differences between Christian and Buddhist afterlife doctrines. God’s fiery damnation is the fate of those destined to reside forever in Christian Hell. By contrast, those who arrive in the Buddhist infernal regions live there for set periods according to their self-inflicted karmic actions; and unlike Dante’s (mostly Italian) cast of celebrated sinners, the beings depicted in Stewart’s poem enter a generic state without embodied identity because Buddhists do not believe in the individual soul. Reincarnation to a personal identity is another category of cyclical punishment, and Redemption from identity is the true spirit of Buddhist philosophy. This is embodied in the form and actions of the bodhisattva Ti-tsang’s intervention using the enlightening *Mani*-gem of radiating light to liberate sinners from their past karmas, as well as to transform Hell into a lotus-filled Pure Land.

The next stage of Stewart’s pilgrimage takes the reader to the Western Pure Land of Amitābha Buddha and His doctrine; teaching that lay persons and honourable beings that did not reach Nirvana in their lifetimes can enter this supramundane region and quickly gain enlightenment under the Cosmic Buddha’s direct influence. From Canto XXIII on, Wu gets a glimpse of this region with its marvellous lotus lake, celestial trees, fountains of light, luxurious buildings, and finally the court and dais of Amitābha Buddha beneath the Cosmic Bodhi Tree through the visionary intervention of Pure Land Patriarch Shan Tao. Similarly, led by Beatrice, Dante travels to the nine celestial spheres of Heaven to finally meet with and discuss the finer points of Christian doctrine with the twelve philosophers located in the Empyrean. Here, he is finally encircled in light making him fit to have the



final audience of God. By contrast, *ALR* introduces the reader to equivalent universal states or Buddha-fields described in turn by the eight Patriarchs who expound their complimentary visions of the Ultimate through the agency of Buddhas and bodhisattvas from the Mahayana pantheon. Hence, *ALR* directly reveals Stewart's shaping purpose: to hold up a Taoist-Buddhist mirror, both structurally and doctrinally, to the grand medieval work. His allegorical journey constantly reminds readers of Dante's epic, thus encouraging them to re-evaluate the two traditions.

A primary area for comparison must inevitably be their poetic engineering and scope of vision. A structural analysis of *ALR* and the *Commedia* will reveal how cognition is distilled and organised through a poetic grammar, mathematically aligned with music. Near the beginning of *Paradiso*, we observe Dante seeking the gift of poetic language to help remember and record a semblance of the vast cognition, that will become the *Commedia, ex post facto*. He thus evokes Apollo:

...all I could retain  
as treasure in my mind will now appear  
In this song. What's imprinted in my brain  
Of the Holy Kingdom will be written here.

Apollo, with your help, For this last burst  
Of my long labour, make me the flask  
Of your Power... ll. (ll. 343-49)

Metricality and rhyme are the most powerful aids for the "re-membering" of parts. Dante's appeal to the sun god of poetry, Apollo, teacher of the Nine Muses who govern poetry, music, mathematics, science, geography, drama and other disciplines is a request for the "password" with which he can access Apollonian mysteries, or to be more precise, the control of mathematical measures with musical equivalents, consequently Dante's reference to "this song". Stewart also understood that metre and rhyme exist profoundly at the heart of English poetical composition, and although "an enormous difficulty" they are "of course, an enormous help" (Tipping 32). He explains the same phenomenon from another cultural perspective, referring to one of the Traditionalist thinkers A.K. Coomaraswamy who retells a myth from the Rg Veda, the primordial source of poetry for the Indo-European languages. This myth recounts the contest between Prajāpati, the Lord of Creatures, and Mṛtyu (the Latin Mors) or Death. Prajāpati has just completed his task of creation, but through this tremendous labour has drained his productive powers, delivering himself into the hands of his mortal enemy. "Mṛtyu is now free to do his worst,



dismembering Prajāpati and dispersing his body through all the separate creatures and things in the universe. But at once a miracle occurs, for Prajāpati proceeds to ‘put himself together again *by means of the metres!*’ For it is precisely metre (from the Greek *metron*, a measure) that enables the poet to reintegrate the scattered fragments of his experience into a re-membered whole” (Tipping 32-33).

A similar example can be found in the *Inferno* when Dante asks Virgil about a group of Florentines who were his darkest political rivals, and whether they will get a second chance to attend the Day of Judgement like the souls in Purgatory at Redemption:

My Leader said: “Until the air is rent  
By the angel’s trumpet – and the dead shall find  
Their graves, take fleshly form and hear resound  
The eternal echoes, as shall be decreed

By the Last Judge – this one held by his ground,  
Will never wake again.” (ll. 100-106)

The phrase “and hear resound / The eternal echoes” is significant. The trumpet heralds the coming of the Son of God upon a cloud who will deliver judgements to those raised up in their skeletons and flesh. This reassembling of parts occurs through the agency of music — the angelic blast. Now the Newly Embodied can hear divine sounds emanating from the paradisaic realms. As rhythmic divisions equate to poetic metre, musical invocation has the power to access the “eternal echoes” which equates to divine cognition. Meanwhile, in Stewart’s unpublished notes in the National Library of Australia, the poet relates this to the Sanskrit word which Coomaraswamy translates as “metre means ‘mantra’” used as ritual aids to meditation. Through these metrical repetitions, the spiritual fragmentation of the artist welds into a unity and thus poetic composition can proceed. “The poet, like his heavenly exemplar, literally com-poses or synthesises himself by writing in metrical forms...This is what is spoken of in India as a ‘metrical self-integration’. That is to say by means of the metres the poet not only organises the disordered and scattered remnants of his work, but in the very act of so doing, unifies his own body, soul, and spirit” (3-4).

Coomaraswamy’s exposition again reinforces Stewart’s own belief in the importance of scansion and prosody:

The kavi, (or poet) makes the metres the wings of his ascent. It is again metre that lends wings to the poet's imagination so that he can soar to the heights of the heavenly spheres. But if his verse lacks wingbeats, then, like Icarus, his poetic flight will fall to earth. The musical discipline of rhyme, an additional formative principle invented since the independent development of prose also proves to be a creative aid to the poet who wishes to concentrate his meaning and clarify its expression. It has been wisely said that "The rhyme knows better than the poet", and this is because behind it lies the whole ancestral genius of the language. (3-4)

The *Comedy* thus deploys the number '3' and its multiples, especially '9' in Dante's three-line *terza rima*, stanza of thirty-three syllables, which becomes the building block for his epic with its accompanying trifold rhyme scheme of *a-b-a, b-c-b, c-d-c, d-e-d*. Each canto is further composed of thirty-three verses, developed through three books of thirty-three cantos each, plus a prologue to enumerate the esoteric meanings of the Holy Trinity (Tipping 33). For example, Dante enters the gateway into the afterlife at the beginning of Canto III, after which he will descend the nine circles of Hell, the nine rings of Mt Purgatory to the Garden of Eden, and finally the nine celestial bodies of Paradise before reaching the Emyrean, the seat of the Godhead.

In the same manner, Stewart uses the Taoist system based on the number '2' and its multiples, especially '8', the most famous example of its exposition, being the I-Ching, which explores the permutations of action through eight sets of trigrams. Stewart's unit of composition is the two-line couplet. One cannot help thinking that this is an attempt to mirror the Taoist duality of Earth and Sky with a "Yin" line, followed by a "Yang", implying Universal balance. In this way, Stewart has re-contextualised an English literary form for an Eastern cosmological system of thought. *ALR* also comprises a four-canto prologue, combined with twenty-eight cantos, including a short epilogue that "seals" the thirty-two-canto composition.

Just as the *Comedy* has three distinct books, *ARL* falls into two binary halves: the first sixteen cantos comprise the palace Prologue, Taoist autumn realm, and mountain monastery cantos. The second equivalent "book" visits the eight Hell wards, and then takes the reader through the eight "Buddha-fields" or visionary expositions of the eight Mahayana schools. Two different cantos each deploy an eight-line *ottava rima* stanza poem embedded within the narrative for specific tantric visualisation. The first in Canto VII is a sixteen-stanza "autumnal fugue" (in two parts) and meditation on trees and their autumnal colours that act as a tantric bridge to the celestial trees in the Pure Land as depicted in Canto XXV (ll. 761-756). In the same way, a poem of twenty-eight stanzas in Canto XXXI represents the twenty-eight phases of visualisation of Mañjusrī' (Wên-shu), the

bodhisattva of Pure Wisdom, whose symbol is the full moon. These twenty-eight stanzas follow the elliptical divisions of the lunar cycle (ll. 5002-5234).

The numeral ‘8’, the Sino-Japanese “lucky number,” has even greater esoteric significance regarding Buddhist cosmology, where, by way of analogy the universe is compared to a chessboard. Eight by eight, black and white squares represent the Yin and Yang principles to indicate the Nights and Days of Brahmā, which are astronomically vast tracts of time. According to Stewart, these descriptions arise in *The Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra* (Lotus of the True Law Sutra) and other Buddhist scriptures. They correspond to the sixty-four major *kalpas*, or aeons of Buddhism. On a microcosmic level, this design is also the *vāstu-maṇḍala*, or generic ground plan for any Buddhist temple. Stewart’s unpublished endnotes shed more light on the mathematics underlying Buddhist cosmology (ll. 5131).

In addition to metrical practice Stewart’s use of rhyme is as innovative as Dante’s terza-rima scheme. His “Taoist-Buddhist epic” uses couplets of iambic pentameter verse with an original form of variable rhyming throughout his long verse paragraphs. Unpublished notes again shed light on the method suggested to Stewart through his life-long interest in Indian classical music (14) where the “scale”, or *rāga*’s ascent (*arohi*) differs from the notes of its descent (*avrohi*). This enables a musician to linger on phrases or notes to create or strengthen the mood of the piece (14). In the same manner, Stewart’s “*rāga*-rhyming” system can accentuate an idea, mood, dramatic characterisation, or emotion. In this following section, Ming Huang-ti, the greatest T’ang Emperor and patron of the arts is astonished to see Wu Tao-tzū stepping into his own painting. Stewart’s variable rhyming adds to the overall flow of the narrative:

“Your painting, Wu, has caught forever here  
Autumn’s perennial golden atmosphere.  
Such art is more than human. Are your powers  
Inherited from Heaven then, like ours?”  
Turning to see why he had not replied,  
The monarch stared, amazed and mystified:  
Wu, having quietly faded from his side,  
Was wandering along that weed-grown trail  
Into his landscape! When, not far ahead,  
Wu paused, and looking backward, beckoned him,  
The Emperor could not follow where he led,

But only watch his distant figure, dim  
 And indistinct, diminishing in scale  
 While passing through the morning's golden haze  
 That glorified the foot-hills, veil on veil,  
 Until beyond their range's farthest rim  
 Wu disappeared at last from mortal gaze.  
 And wandering on through that pictorial plane,  
 Lost in his work, was never seen again.

(ll.527-545)

The first four lines of the emperor's speech are neat and orderly couplets followed by an emphatic tercet rhyme to indicate Ming Huang's surprise at Wu's disappearance. Meanwhile, Wu the "undisciplined" painter, known for his free spiritedness and unpredictability is described through one long sentence of nine continuous lines with variable end-rhymes. These random rhymes mirror Wu's steps forward, and then his backward glance. The point of view shifts now to Ming Huang who sees the painter-sage moving out of his grasp into the foothills. The sense of finality is reinforced again by a strong rhyming "monarch" couplet at the end of the paragraph. Another portion of the poem from the third level of Hell used this flexible "rāga-rhyme" system to depict human suffering:

Husbands and wives, **adulterously dead**,      **a**  
 Without *regard for* age or *sex are fed*      **a**  
 Into a teeming mortar's womb of *lead*,      **a**  
 Where a **priapic pestle's** blows can **pound**      **b**  
 Miscopulating **pairs**, *till all* are *ground*,      **b**  
 As *rice to flour*, beneath its **pecking head**.      **a**  
**But in a forge infernal blacksmiths heat**      **c**  
*Incestuous couples*, **whom** their **hammers be**      **c**  
**Laid on an anvil**; then to quench their *vice*      **d**  
**Plunge them hissing** into a **bath of ice**.      **d**

(ll. 3007-3016)

The opening combination (*italics added and emphasis mine*) of *a-a-a, b-b, a* end-rhymes mirrors the action of human flesh and bone being ground like rice to flour. Next, two rhymed couplets follow like matching hammer blows. This grisly description of torture is further heightened through internal rhyme and strong alliterative, consonantal, and assonantal effects. By contrast, Dante's terza rima trifold schema of overlapping rhymes surges forward through its six-line frame, which gives it unique continuity accompanied by a sense of expectancy. As Felix Stepanile suggests, "...for the rhyme that intrudes as a middle rhyme in one tercet is then foregrounded in the next tercet, *then* disappears. Echo becomes semantic freight in a poem of this kind...to borrow a term from acoustical technology the technique of third rhyme offers surround sound" (Finch and Varnes 117). Stewart's work offers both the binary terseness of the rhyming couplet, along with similar "surround sound" echo effects created by the disappearance and reappearance of earlier rhymes in unexpected positions. Stewart has developed something truly original and he works within his existing tradition, rather than adopting broken scansion. Pound may have removed metre and rhyme from the poet's toolkit, yet Stewart is one who not only reinstated, yet added to them. Here classicism meets classicism at the crossroads of formal expression. A.D. Hope's 1948 review of Stewart's achievement in *Phoenix Wings* is worth pondering at this point, as these remarks made seventy years ago are equally applicable to *By the Old Walls of Kyōto* and *Autumn Landscape Roll*:

One is struck by the selection of detail, the sureness of the observation and the contemplative vigour, which the verse displays. Just so, one feels, Chinese art observes and selects, and just so does English poetry speak. It is a remarkable marriage of two habits of mind, two traditions so remote from each other...I am struck by the mastery, the justice and the originality of movement. The almost lost art of narrative in verse is not only revived here --it finds a new method and extends its means. (Hope 269)

Stewart's lifelong engagement with Asian culture reaches its zenith with *Autumn Landscape Roll*. The poem provides us with access to symbolic meanings behind sacred art that have been created, based on the ancient sutras. The poem acts as a stimulus for contemplative research through the various schools of visualisation, ritual performance, and mantric recitation. Like Dante's, Stewart's magnum opus is both an astoundingly sustained literary work as it is a rare poetic codex. We can only marvel how the poet has managed to juxtapose the essential teachings of the Eight Schools of Mahayana Buddhism alongside the cathedral-like edifice of *La Divina Commedia*. Hereafter, these two monumental volumes can be placed next to each other on any enlightened bookshelf interested in transcultural comparative religious and literary scholarship, especially in Australia, a

country that now has a large diasporic Asian population and a widening interest in Asian religions. Each presents a microcosmic picture of the universe. Reading them side-by-side is an exceptional way for both Western and Eastern readers to better understand each other's realities.

Stewart's formalist poetics may, however, be secondary to more germane considerations. What Richard Tipping, a strong advocate of experimental poetry, once wrote after interviewing Stewart in Kyōto in 1987 is still pertinent today:

The future for Australia in the Asia and the Pacific will be decided not by debates about poetic method and style, but by the extent to which we understand and address fundamental differences in cultural value systems and social structure between and among our societies. Harold Stewart is an important touchstone of our distances. (Tipping 24)

## Notes

1. The Ern Malley hoax has spawned a minor industry of books, essays, articles, and academic debate that continues to this day, notably through books by Michael Heyward, John Ackland and Peter Kelly.
2. Even Stewart's second collection, *Orpheus and Other Poems*, explores the same allegorical theme of the afterlife found in *Old Walls*, *ALR* and the *Commédia*.
3. *Phoenix Wings* (Angus & Robertson, A&R, 1948), *Orpheus and Other Poems* (A&R, 1956) and *A Net of Fireflies* (Tuttle, Japan, 1960).
4. Japanese society tolerated homosexual behaviour by samurai, priests, and others until late Meiji modernisation (1868-1912), which led to the adoption of the western medical conceptions of homosexuality as an illness.
5. Born in 563 BCE, Gautama Buddha taught for at least two thirds of his eighty years. In the *Devaduta Sutta*, he discourses about hell in vivid detail. According to *The Dante Encyclopedia*, Dante's *Inferno* was not circulated until 1315 and *Purgatorio* was available by 1320.

6. See Ezra Pound's *Cathay* (1915). A fuller discussion about Stewart and Pound can be found in Chapter 1 ('Formalism in a Modernist Age') of my own doctoral thesis entitled *Asian Expatriate Immersion in The Later Works Of Harold Stewart*, Monash University, 2015.

7. In another variant of the tale in Wu painted a cave at the foot of a mountain. He clapped his hands and entered, inviting the emperor to follow: the entrance, however, had closed behind him. Before the astonished monarch could move or say a word, the painting had also vanished from the wall.

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