

Seeking the Inaccessible in Robert Stone's *A Flag for Sunrise*

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“One of the most important novelists to emerge from the chaotic changes of 1960s America” (Carlson), decreed *The Guardian* upon the death in 2015 of the American novelist Robert Stone. Indeed, a recurring theme of Stone's obituaries was the transformation his country had undergone during the span of his career, from his 1966 debut *A Hall of Mirrors* to the 2013 novel *Death of the Black-Haired Girl*. That Stone may have found this fitting is suggested by a eulogy he himself wrote, one delivered in his 1981 novel *A Flag for Sunrise* by a world-weary anthropologist named Frank Holliwell. Invited to lecture in the fictional Central American country of Compostela, Holliwell gets very drunk and sardonically soapboxes to his outraged audience:

“I have the honor to bring you hope, ladies and gentlemen and esteemed colleagues. Here I speak particularly to the enemies of my country and their representatives present tonight. Underneath it all, our secret culture, the non-exportable one, is dying. It's going sour and we're going to die of it. We'll die of it quietly around our hearths while our children laugh at us. So, no more Mickey Mouse, *amigos*.” (109–110)

A finalist for all three of America's top literary awards, *A Flag for Sunrise* is set in a Central America on the verge of revolution where nothing is as it seems: it is a book rife with secrets, illusions and undercurrents. But since Stone has described his abiding subject as “the American experience” (qtd. in Bonetti 93), and of this novel in particular wrote that “My subject was again America; the United States had been involved here for so long” (“Reason” 76), it may be fruitful to begin an approach to this major work by attempting to identify the “secret culture, the non-exportable one,” of which Holliwell speaks.

In a 1985 interview Stone himself remarked that “what is best about America doesn't export” (qtd. in Ruas 279), going on to describe Holliwell's speech as

“a lament for an America that may be lost, a lament for the integrity, for the grandeur of the inner spirit of America” (qtd. in Ruas 290). I think we can identify this secret more specifically by linking Holliwell's speech to two additional deaths in the novel. The first is a brief reference in the early pages that also serves to establish the timeframe. On the day before his departure for Central America, Holliwell has lunch in New York with Marty Nolan, a friend from his wartime days in Vietnam. Nolan tries to persuade Holliwell to visit Tecan, a repressive US client state bordering Compostela and facing a leftist insurgency. A CIA agent, Nolan wants Holliwell to investigate an American Catholic mission believed to be aiding the rebels. During the lunch he offhandedly mentions that the black singer and civil-rights activist Paul Robeson has just died, which both fixes the date as January 1976 and suggests that what has died is also American Sixties idealism: “I wasn't trying to goad you to malicious satisfaction, Frank. After all, everybody dies. It just brings back old times.” (20)

The second death occurs at the book's climax, with the martyrdom of Sister Justin Feeney, a nun at the mission whom a smitten Holliwell seduces and then haplessly betrays to Tecan's security forces. In a 1982 interview Stone called Justin “an American who represents some of the best things about America” (qtd. in Bonetti 94), and as we will see, she does seem to embody the idealism that America has found so difficult to export.

Between these two deaths the novel follows the parallel wanderings of the hard-drinking Holliwell and a pill-popping Coast Guard deserter named Pablo Tabor whom fate also delivers to Tecan. The plot machinery that ultimately brings together the novel's four main characters—Holliwell, Pablo, Justin, and Father Egan of the Catholic mission in Tecan—is oiled by secrets and deception. In the early lunch meeting with the CIA agent Nolan, Holliwell thinks that “there was always something faintly gross about

the man, the suggestion of unwholesome secrets” (19), an observation that sets the novel’s tone. The Zeccas, an American couple who come to Compostela from Tecan to hear Holliwell’s talk and then offer him a ride there, turn out to be US military intelligence. Pablo finds work aboard a shrimping boat run by a wealthy American couple, but gradually discovers that they are in fact running guns for the rebels in Tecan. At a secret meeting of the leaders of the revolution we learn that one is actually an American spy, unaware that his cover has already been blown. Near Egan and Justin’s mission is a coastal resort where Holliwell eventually finds himself mingling with wealthy gringo vacationers—who turn out to be spooks for the business interests intent on thwarting the uprising. Realizing how far he has compromised himself, Holliwell thinks:

So one always had to wander through vapors among phantoms, one was always just out in it and it never stopped. Illusion compounding illusion, a limitless hallucination without end or reference point—desires, fears, dread shadows and pretty lights, one’s own delirium and everyone else’s. It was what kept you going. It kept you going until your heart burst.

He was in love, he remembered. With [Justin]. And she was being hunted down. (376)

If *A Flag for Sunrise* is indeed a eulogy to idealism, then sketched so briefly it comes off as a sentimentally leftist one, which appears to be the book some contemporary critics read. Bruce Allen found in the novel “the kind of authorial heavy-handedness that you expect from Zola or Dreiser” (495), and Jonathan Yardley called Stone “a preacher masquerading in novelist’s clothing, indulging himself in rhetoric right out of SDS or the IWW,” and these paleoliberal slogans “nothing more than safe, comfortable responses to a situation that is considerably more complex and ambiguous than Stone appears to realize.” (3)

But the “limitless hallucination” Holliwell has glimpsed is in fact a metaphysical one that gives *A Flag for Sunrise* a complexity and heft that Yardley himself does not seem to grasp. It is true that several sympathetic characters in the novel have Marxist leanings, and that among other things the book can be read as an indictment of US involvement in Central America. Yet the outcome of Tecan’s revolution is left unresolved, likely because the novel evinces a pointed

skepticism to the Marxist belief in the inevitability of historical progress. Typical is a thought of Holliwell’s, riding toward Tecan in the Zeccas’ car with an American leftist named Bob Cole: “Cole, Holliwell thought, was a man who respected history. History was always affecting to be moral and to be just.” (144)

We later duly learn that Cole has been executed by suspicious revolutionaries. But the novel’s rejection of historical progress is not merely a political stance.

“Whether one is religious or whether one is a Marxist,” Stone told an interviewer, “one is committed to the idea of history as positive” (qtd. in Ruas 293). A Catholic novelist who professed to “write about the presence or the absence of God” (qtd. in Bonetti 91), Stone notes the great indebtedness of the Western novel to the Bible, whose stories and parables imply “that the corporeal world in which people exist is not an illusion to be overcome, or a shadowland reflecting the void, but an instrument of God’s will” (“Reason” 73). And yet in *A Flag for Sunrise* Stone, drawing on the heretical Christian doctrine of Gnosticism, has written a novel that suggests the world is just such an illusion.

Gnosticism, which may have roots in pre-Christian times, holds that the visible universe is the work not of God but of the Demiurge, a flawed and possibly malevolent deity tragically created without God’s bidding. The world “takes the place of the traditional underworld and is itself already the realm of the dead, that is, of those waiting to be raised to life again” (Jonas 68). Each of us contains a tiny piece of the Godhead, and the quest of Gnosticism is for us to somehow find our way back to Him through this world of illusion. Life on earth is often depicted as a “drunken whirl,” its pleasures meant to distract us from the true nature of existence. It is significant that both Father Egan, who opens the novel hard at work on a Gnostic treatise (“He had rewritten the work six times and had reached the point where he could no longer endure it without alcohol” (4)), and Holliwell, whom the novel gradually delivers to a Gnostic worldview, are alcoholics.

It is also significant that so much of the novel takes place at sea, which gives Stone the opportunity to depict the Gnostic world-as-underworld in memorable (and rather Darwinian) imagery. Staring at a fresh catch of shrimp meant to conceal the ship’s cargo of guns, Pablo sees

[...] a living creeping jambalaya, a rapine of darkness and death. In thousands, creatures

of hallucination—shelled, hooded, fifty-legged and six-eyed—clawed, writhed, flapped or devoured their way through the masses of their fellow captives, the predators and the prey together, overthrown and blinded, scuttling after their lost accustomed world. (311)

Holliwell enters this underworld in one of the book's most memorable sequences, a SCUBA diving trip at a site off the coast of Tecan, in which he dives too deep and senses something that the dive master afterward chides him for calling a shark ("You see any shark?" "No." "Then don' be sayin' shark if you don' see one." (230-31)):

And then it was as if the ocean itself had begun to tremble. The angels and wrasse, the parrots and tangs which had been passing lazily around him suddenly hung in place, without forward motion, quivering like mobile sculpture. Turning full circle, he saw the same shudder pass over all the living things around him—a terror had struck the sea, an invisible shadow, a silence within a silence [...] Then Holliwell thought: It's out there. Fear overcame him; a chemical taste, a cold stone on the heart. (227)

Though *what* is out there is never named, its presence pervades the novel in ways that complicate Yardley's reading of the book as a shallow liberal sermon, or comparisons to social-realist novels from a century ago. For like Robert Converse in Stone's earlier *Dog Soldiers* (1974), Holliwell has been "badly seared," as he puts it (165), by Vietnam, and critics differ over how much distance this puts between Stone and his predecessors. William H. Pritchard writes of the novel's vision that "Vietnam is behind this, but so are Conrad and George Eliot, and the various articulate delusions which precipitate the plot of *A Flag for Sunrise*, did so just as relentlessly for *Nostramo* and for *Middlemarch*" (174-75). Roger Sale counters that while Stone "is a nineteenth-century moralist," the violence and disillusionment of the Vietnam period "make Stone's task far different from any writer of a century ago" (70-71). What is clear is that on one level at least, the fear Holliwell feels on his dive is a Conradian horror of Vietnam. Gazing at the ocean later, he recalls the war specifically:

The light of the ocean oppressed him. He was not deceived by its exquisite sportiveness—

the lacy flumes of breaking wave, the delicate rainbows in the spray. He knew what was spread out beneath its trivial entertainments. The ocean at its morning business brought cognate visions to his mind's eye; a flower-painted cart hauling corpses, a bright turban on a leper. (376)

The proposition underlying *A Flag for Sunrise* is that no peace has been made: the Vietnam War has found a second life in Central America. Tecan forever reminds Holliwell of his wartime past—"Smaller breezes stirred against the sea wind's breast, carrying an iodine smell, a smell of jacaranda, of flowers he knew by half-forgotten, six-toned names from across the world" (388) —and the novel itself begins in the wake of a killing when Lieutenant Campos, a sadistic government thug, interrupts Father Egan's writing to confess to murdering a Canadian girl, whose body he forces Egan to dispose of. Dropping the weighted corpse into the sea from a boat—very close to the spot where Holliwell will take his revelatory dive—Egan "felt as though he had gained a thoroughly new insight into the processes of the world" (15).

Egan will work this insight into his personal heterodoxy. By the end of the novel, with war looming, he has accumulated a ragtag congregation of traveling hippies in a jungle clearing behind the mission, into which wander both Holliwell and Pablo. Interestingly, Egan's Gnostic sermonizing includes a measure of Buddhism: "Whirl is king and it's lonely and in shadow, but over there—well, that's life over there, that's where the Living belongs [...] The Living is lonely for itself. For the shard of itself that's lost in us, the jewel in the lotus." (333) Enlightenment hidden in the corporeal, the image of a glinting jewel both focuses the light imagery that pervades *A Flag for Sunrise* from its title on down, and also engages Buddhism in the novel's rejection of the notion of historical progress. Here are Holliwell (for whom Buddhism also carries echoes of Vietnam) and Justin:

"God doesn't work through history, [Justin]. That's a delusion of the Western mind."

"Too metaphysical for me," she said. "I don't know how God works." (387)

In this exchange we sense that Justin, though she may enact in her death the eclipse of American idealism, cannot be reduced to an ideological mouthpiece. Even before she meets Holliwell her revolutionary ardor is tempered with realism:

“People—men, when you came down to it—were always dreaming up glorious phantasmas for her to wait joyously upon. Justice. The life to come. The Revolution. There are limits, she thought. Justin Martyr.” (232) Though martyrdom does indeed await her, she gradually drifts away from ideology, as Jeffrey S. Bull describes:

Paradoxically, she moves away from metaphysics toward belief; she accepts the notion that “justice” might only be a word, yet she continues to see the revolution as a chance to end some suffering in one place: now. The paradoxes of religious and practical belief settle in her as a desire for practical action. (224)

It is Holliwell who moves toward metaphysics, which is why Justin is perceptive but glib when she tells him, “I don’t have your faith in despair [...] I can’t take comfort in it like you can” (388).

Holliwell’s worldview is more complicated than this, as Gregory Stephenson writes: “On the one hand, he is a prisoner of despair, his raw, bleak, profoundly pessimistic apprehension of the world. At the same time, he aspires ineluctably to believe in some transcendent goodness, in purity and purpose.” (69) This purity and purpose is what he finds so seductive in Justin, though his simultaneous skepticism of it echoes Stone’s:

We’re not going to get anywhere by overlooking the difficulties that life presents us. We have got to start from an acceptance of the fact that we find ourselves beset, by our own natures which are imperfect, by a world which is imperfect. We cannot simply decide to overlook and transcend these things in a casual way. If we try to do that we end up compounding our situation. I mean that’s why revolutions, for the most part, turn on themselves and fail. (qtd. in Bonetti 96)

This is an essentially conservative position, one that should leave us unsurprised to find *A Flag for Sunrise* resistant to Yardley’s charge of armchair liberalism. Holliwell wonders of revolutionaries, “How could they convince themselves that in this whirling tidal pool of existence, providence was sending them a message? [...] The world paid in blood for their articulate delusions, but it was all right because for a while they felt better.” (244) This rumination comes shortly after his SCUBA dive, which likewise begins with revelation—the Gnostic glimpse of the jewel in the lotus—before turning dark: “The icy, fragile beauty [of the

reef] was beyond the competency of any man’s hand, even beyond man’s imagining. Yet it seemed to him its perfection provoked a recognition. The recognition of what? he wondered. A thing lost or forgotten. He followed the slope of the coral field. Down.” (226)

The Darwinian threat Holliwell perceives in the depths finally confronts him, in the novel’s final pages, in the form of Pablo Tabor. Gary Adelman notes that Pablo’s presence in the novel is as “a vulgar double of Holliwell” (126), and while in contrast with the worldly anthropologist he is violent, childlike, and bigoted, he is also, as Stephenson points out, “genuinely concerned with certain existential questions, including why the world is as it is and what his own role in it is” (74). By the time he meets Holliwell his adventures have turned bloody—he has killed his gun-running shipmates and been wounded in the process—but the diamond he has been given by a dying old arms dealer signifies his own insight, the mounting sense that his life has purpose, which Father Egan’s Gnostic sermon brings into full flower: “‘This is what I came down here for,’ Pablo told Father Egan. ‘This is how come I went over the hill. It was all leading up to this, see? There was a goddamn planned purpose to everything.’ He thought of the diamond in his pocket and touched it.” (373) As the revolution engulfs Tecan, Father Egan sends Pablo and Holliwell off in a boat to escape, and looking at Pablo— “he could see nothing but delusion and menace in the animal eyes” (422)—Holliwell recognizes his danger:

I know you now, he thought, watching Pablo. Should have known you. Know you of old. He felt the force he had encountered over the reef.

[...] It was as strong as anything in the world. Stronger, perhaps, when the illusions were stripped away. It glistened in a billion pairs of eyes. Comforting to think of it as some aberration, a perversion of nature. But it was the real thing, he thought. The thing itself. (428)

“The thing” is of course in Holliwell too, who murders his double and pushes the body overboard, and the novel ends with the anthropologist alone in the boat on the verge of rescue. His final thought— “A man has nothing to fear [...] who understands history” (439)—is meant to be read with the highest irony, and as Robert Solotaroff writes, we are also intended to see the death of American idealism in Holliwell’s fate as a

reluctant killer:

...what he eventually sacrifices in the course of the novel is his sense of himself as an essentially good man. The shard that he finds within is not of God but of things themselves, of the fashionings of the Demiurge. And since Holliwell is very much a representative American, it is reasonable enough to move to the macrocosm: the suffering that comes from Americans moving about, doing their business in the world. (102)

The temptation would be to conclude that Holliwell's vision and Stone's are the same, but in interviews and essays Stone strikes a more redemptive note. Recounting the wartime experience that first made him realize that "[t]he world is in depravity," Stone writes,

[...]when I figured it out, I thought, "This is the way it is. There is no cure for this. There is only one thing you can do with this. You can transcend it. You can take it and you make it art."

[...]if you turn it into art, it means that on some level the world's consciousness gets that tiny bit higher, and maybe somehow, in some unforeseeable distance, we can get beyond this and it will stop. But we cannot make it stop by saying, "This is not us. This is them. This is him, this is someone else." No, this is me, this is me. This is my head that's filled with murderousness. ("Universe" 233)

The sign in *A Flag for Sunrise* that Holliwell's vision is not coterminous with Stone's comes in a fleeting passage following his murder of Pablo: "Under the bow, he found a small sparkling stone. It appeared to be a rhinestone when he examined it in the beam of his light. He threw it overboard, together with Pablo's bloodstained pants." (432) The tragicomedy here is not in the material value of the diamond, since unlike Pablo, Holliwell is financially comfortable. We can only conclude that the shard really is of God, that the secret grace behind this visible depravity is available to us if we only know what to look for.

What finally makes Stone's work so troubling is that the path to redemption is nowhere apparent in it. In the 1982 interview, speaking of the breakthrough his characters seek, Stone made a significant confession:

What I'm writing about—basically what's

in the white space, perhaps—is that breakthrough [...] They're getting some sense that there's a level in which one can break out of this box. They don't succeed in doing it; I can't have them succeed because I don't know how they'll be able to do it. I just don't know any more than they do. (qtd. in Bonetti 95)

Yet it was perhaps this humility—the sense that he never felt complacently in possession of the secrets he sought—that made Robert Stone one of the most important novelists of post-Sixties America.

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