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Patrick White: prophet from the desert

Introduction

BY JOHN McLAREN 1995

Even before his Nobel Prize, Patrick White had become nationally and internationally Australia's best-known writer. This recognition carries with it the danger that he will become a mere symbol, his name recognized by everybody but his work read only by students and specialists. The aim of this collection of essays is to show that he can neither be contained nor dismissed in this way. His work continues to challenge our perception of ourselves and our reality, and remains subject to manifold interpretations. These essays show this range of possibility by demonstrating a variety of political, religious and psychological responses to some of his most widely-read novels.

Although White's fiction deals with universal questions of human limitation and transcendence, it is grounded in the specifics of his own experience of time and place. Its politics are rooted in the intensity of the personal. Its cosmopolitan concerns express a personal response to the visions and oppressions of life in Australia. Its characters and images come from the history of his own family of patriarchal, conservative, nationalist landowners. Its religious aspirations arise from the delight and disgust simultaneously evoked by the physicality of living. The characters of his narratives are so absorbed in the immediacy of their lives that only the cosmic order invoked in his language can offer them meaning. His novels must be read with attention both to the material detail of individual episodes and to the metaphoric sweep of their whole patterns.

This collection concentrates on the novels most frequently studied: The Tree of Man (1956), Voss (1957), The Eye of the Storm (1973) and A Fringe of Leaves (1976). The dates, and the page references in the text, refer to the first UK and Australian editions, except where otherwise noted. The earlier essays however provide a wider context within which to consider these works. Brian Kiernan surveys the development of White's fiction from his first published novel, Happy Valley (1939) to The Vivisector (1970). Rick Wallach looks at the earliest novels, Michael Wilding provides a political perspective, and Carolyn Bliss examines the role of women in White's novels.

I

Patrick White was born in London in 1912. His father's family had been pastoralists in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales since the 1829. Their interests had included parliament, natural history, and scientific and literary collecting, but their passions had been for sheep and horses. They ran their estates in feudal style. His uncle built a vast mansion for himself and a school, post office, church and store for the families on his estate, as well as fielding a cricket teams and sending off military detachments to the Boer War. The passions of most of the other men of the family ran to sheep and horses. As David Marr writes, "the stud book was the only volume they took willingly from their shelves." [1] White's mother, however, did not belong easily in this family. Her people, the Withycombes, had been in the country only since 1847, and although also

landowners could not match the White's style. She made her life in Sydney society. The young Patrick and his sister were brought up by nannies. Later, he was sent to England to complete secondary and, after a stint of jackerooing on family properties back in Australia, university education. During the thirties, he struggled in London as an aspiring and occasionally successful playwright, and then served through the war in the Royal Air Force, which sent him first to North Africa and then to the Middle East and Greece. He returned permanently to Australia in 1948. This history, along with his homosexuality, endowed him with the double vision of both insider and outsider to Australia's ruling class.

This class was itself losing its dominance as White was growing up. His own sympathies however remain with its members, with their servants and with the poor and outcast. He is a rarity in Australian literature, a genuinely aristocratic writer. This quality produces his distaste for the ordinary run of humanity, as well as his uneasy relationship to the country. When he left for Cambridge in 1932 he had no intention of returning. His first three published novels seem similarly to reject Australia. A sense of duty prevents Oliver Halliday, in Happy Valley, from making his escape, but the next novel, The Living and the Dead, is set wholly in England and Europe. The Aunt's Story, the third of the novels written before his eventual return, for the first time expresses his complex sense of a landscape that can be won through work, as his forebears had won the right to possess the Hunter valley. Yet Although Theodora,

the aunt of the title, and her father, feel an affinity for the landscape, it fails to satisfy the aspirations it arouses in them. In contrast, the cousins who successfully exploit it lose the aspiration or understanding for anything beyond their immediate business and social lives. Theodora eventually can find herself only by fleeing abroad to the source of her culture, Europe. Yet the Europe she finds is also alien, a 'jardin exotique' that is eventually consumed by fire in a foretaste of the holocaust. Theodora's final flight is to America, to a landscape and people very like those she had known at home. Her pilgrimage stands as an image of her class, dislodged from the homes they have built but unable to find a past where they can belong. This was to be the pattern of White's own life.

As a member of a class on the brink of dispossession, White was particularly sensitive to the precarious nature of human identity. We construct ourselves, our subjectivity, through the operation of language on memory and received ideas. When these received ideas are under challenge, personal identity necessarily remains fragile. Rick Wallach examines how White demonstrates this fragility through his exploration of the relationships between fictional protagonist, literary narrator and reader in his second published novel, The Living and the Dead. In this work the narrator's memory reconstructs a life on the brink of disintegration in a text just emerging into consciousness. This uncertainty about both the self and its world is the hallmark of the modernism that Brian Kiernan identifies as the dominant influence on White's first three published novels. He notes that while in Happy Valley this style conceals an essentially conservative story, in the next two novels White uses it to

confront the political issues of a Europe in decay. In Kiernan's view neither work finds a way of engaging with the real issues it raises. The Living and the Dead remains preoccupied with individual sensibility, and The Aunt's Story, locked into Theodora's solipsistic vision, is unable to present any view of the world beyond her perceptions.

While completing The Aunt's Story White decided, for complex personal reasons, to return to Australia. His life here was miserable, and he did not resume writing for several years. The Tree of Man is the first of his published novels written in Australia, and the one which established his reputation. It is both a record of existence in what White called "the "Great Australian Emptiness" and an attempt "to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people . . ."[2] Or, as he expressed it at another time, he found "Life in Australia . . . to be for many people deadly dull" and so "tried to convey a splendour, a transcendence, which is also there, above human realities." [3] It is also a microcosm of the history of settlement in Australia, presented not as "dun-coloured realism" but as a conflict between the "nostaglia for permanence and the fiend of motion" (p..8) that fight inside its main character, Stan Parker, as he searches for the illumination that will make the struggle of life worthwhile.

The opening pages of Tree of Man set out the archetypal images of Australian settlement: a cart, a man, two big stringybark trees, a horse and a dog. After stopping the cart, getting out and rubbing his hands, "the man took an axe and struck at the side of a hairy tree." Before man or place is

named, the task of settlement has begun with the first act of clearing, of imposing man on nature. The remainder of the novel completes the pattern: the man marries, neighbours come, families grow, until finally the bush clearing becomes a garden where the old man sits in an outer suburb of metropolitan Sydney. The bounds of his life's movement have been the battlefields of Europe which take from him his youth, the city which takes his children from him, and the river to the west which in its flooding gives him intimations of mortality and infinity. Yet within these limits he comes to recognize God, first in the rain and eventually in a gob of spittle, and to leave as legacy to his grandchild the knowledge that "in the end there were the trees . . . So that, in the end, there was no end." (p.499)

Most histories present the story of white settlement in Australia as a narrative of either victory, defeat or endurance. Men, and sometimes women, subdue nature to build prosperity, succumb to the brutalities of society and the environment, or build a democracy as a bulwark against an unforgiving nature. Each of these patterns appears in The Tree of Man. The Parkers do achieve a measure of prosperity, but the city which grows around them is portrayed as a symptom of the sickness of the human soul that the settlers have brought to this new country. On the other hand, the O'Dowds, Quigleys, Peabodies and the other families who settle around the Parkers constitute a rough democracy able to offer physical, and occasionally spiritual, support in times of crisis. The ending of the novel, however, changes the pattern, confirming that the history of the Parkers is a part of cyclical, not linear, time. While there has been change, there has ben no progress. Individual lives have risen

and fallen, just as the big house of Glastonbury has been built and destroyed. The silver nutmeg grater that Amy Parker thought their first visitor had stolen reappears as Stan farewells the last caller he will see. The discovery of the grater completes Amy's cycle of material possession. Stan's cycle belongs rather to nature. The trees that appear in the first paragraph of the novel, the trees that challenge him to his life's task, are still there at the last. The cycle is ready to start again. The wisdom or insight that Stan Parker has gained he is not able to communicate to others, even his wife. If there is no end, there has been no beginning, and the grandson must start on his own.

In breaking from a linear pattern, White shifts the emphasis from the history that people make to the history they suffer. To put it in another way, history is not a battlefield that challenges his characters to achieve, but an environment that gives them an opportunity to find themselves. Those who, like White's own family, try to control history, inevitably lose themselves. Others, like Amy Parker, are unable to accept their own recognition that life does not keep within expected patterns, and finish in mere bewilderment. Stan Parker succeeds as he learns to give himself to the currents of his life. When he starts clearing his land, he occasionally feels the need of "making that life purposeful. Of opposing silence and rock and tree" (p10.) "Anaesthetized by the future," "possessed by the demon of purpose" (p.11), he toils furiously to make the land his own. But this apparent determination to make his own history is illusory, for the purpose is not once he chooses so much as one he is chosen by. He has "become involved" outside any conscious choice of his own, and "he knew also that there was nothing to be

done."

> He knew that where his cart had stopped, he would stop. There was nothing to be done. He would make the best of this cell in which he had been locked. How much of will, how much of fate, entered into this it was difficult to say. Or perhaps fate is will. Anyway, Stan Parker was pretty stubborn. (p.11)

This stubbornness is a quality Stan Parker shares with the other central figures in White's fiction, but it is a stubbornness that seeks control only over his own life. The only one of his visionaries who breaks this rule is Voss, who is himself broken before he finds the truth he seeks. Yet, in making themselves, the visionaries leave others behind, and in many cases break them by their indifference. In this, they share the qualities of White's landowning forebears.

White's break with history as a linear process reflects the break in the continuity of the dominance of Australian life by pastoral money. This again is suggested by the exclusions of The Tree of Man. The settlement of Durilgai begins, like the history of his own family, after the dispossession of the Aborigines, and it disintegrates before the expansion of the city rather than as a result of social change. The new middle classes appear in the person of Armstrong the butcher, who builds Glastonbury in an attempt to recreate the life of the landed gentry. The new forms of making money appear only in the shady dealings and sordid death of Stan's son Ray. They are symbols of moral decadence rather than of economic change. The new manufacturing industries which are the source of the new wealth and power remain absent from this, as from his other novels. White's interest is in

those who are being dispossessed of their power, and in those who never had it. These alone can find their true selves.

David Tacey has observed that this passivity before experience is characteristic of White himself: "White is not so much a myth-maker, as an artist who is himself made by mythic impulses. Symbols create him, and archetypes live through him. The active, initiating factor is not mind but imagination." [4] Tacey suggests that our own reading of White should follow a similar principle, and that we should attend to the patterns that come through the tale and not to the explanations the author gives for them. Following Jungian psychology, he argues in the first of his essays in this collection that the dominant force in The Tree of Man is the Earth Mother, the pagan goddess whom Stan Parker serves and who uses both Madeleine and Amy for her own purposes before destroying them. Tacey has applied a similar analysis to White's other novels, arguing elsewhere[5] that Voss is not a visionary but a victim of the Goddess who is served by Laura, and, in his essay on A Fringe of Leaves, that Ellen Roxburgh achieves a balance between the light and dark forces that compete within both nature and her own being.

Tacey's interpretation conflicts with the orthodox reading of White in terms of Christian mythology of vision achieved through suffering. His attention to the power of mythology within the novels undoubtedly explains their compulsive power, but we may wonder whether, in trusting the tale rather than the teller, he does not force their structure into his own preconceived patterns. His interpretations are challenged by other writers in this collection who use apply either social or directly Christian

forms of analysis to his work.

Brian Kiernan established what have become the standard interpretations of White's earlier work. His essay reprinted here emphasizes the relationship between the vision of individual characters in the novels and the realities of the societies from which they come and from which their vision sets them aside. He finds the significance of The Tree of Man in Stan Parker's life which, "at its end, achieves its meaning as a totality that contains both struggle and joy." He argues however that this success is won apart from the lives of ordinary people and the preoccupations of contemporary urban society. Voss, by contrast, brings together, in the related quests of Voss and Laura, the parallel searches for the self in nature and in society. It also shows how lesser figures achieve personal fulfilment merely by giving themselves to life. Yet, as he points out, the nature of its final visions remains ambiguous and open to various interpretations.

Kiernan's acceptance of Voss as an historical novel places it firmly within the tradition of western narratives of the quest, whether in search of the social truth of home, the individual truth of the self or the vision of the holy grail that transcends both. The quest, the journey of exploration, is one part of the Australian legend, the counterpart and necessary precursor of the myth of settlement that is embodied in The Tree of Man. But by emphasizing the historical elements of Voss we can lose sight of the extent to which the ambiguity of its endings, the uncertainty of the achieved vision, replaces historical linearity with existential circularity in exactly the same way as does the ending of The Tree of Man. White sees the historical ambition of

explorer and settler from the inside, he shares the ambitions of Voss to enter a new country and the pride of achievement in the patriarchal Arcadia of Rhine Towers, but, as outsider, he also presents these material vaunts as obstacles to true enlightenment, as mere episodes in the recurring drama of human struggle against itself. The elusive figures of the last chapter bring no sense of ending.

Michael Wilding agrees with Kiernan that White's work belongs in the modern rather than the realist tradition. Given that so many of his themes are taken directly from the history of Australian exploration, land settlement and exploration, this may seem surprising. Wilding however points out that one measure of White's success is the extent to which he has effaced the earlier tradition of realist writing that took this history as its subject matter. White, taking the same themes, reduces the specific detail, employing instead generalized impressions of countryside or city that serves as images suggesting states of mind. His work stresses the deviant, the person who shocks society by refusing its values, but he provides no alternative to the society he rejects. Even when, as in Riders in the Chariot, he appears to take up such a contemporary political issue as the holocaust, his work betrays a contempt for the bourgeois and a fear of the workers rather than a sympathy with the victims of history. This is consistent with the modernist practice of art as representing nothing but itself.

Yet even if White's novels do not seek to record social reality, they cannot avoid social issues. Carolyn Bliss accepts them as records of quests for a deeper and richer sense of reality than can even be envisaged as a possibility by ordinary

mortals. The everyday concerns of society can only obscure this further vision. However, his portrayal of the role played by women in these visionary quests raises the issue of whether they have the capacity to achieve this vision for themselves, or whether they merely serve as agents to assist the growth of the male characters. Certainly, Theodora Goodman belongs with the visionaries, but her androgynous status makes her a doubtful case. Yet, although the women in the novels under consideration in this collection have some similarly androgynous qualities, all four heroines are challenged to affirm their feminine qualities, and their portrayal, Bliss argues, shows a progressive increase in White's estimation of women's capacity for exploration and enlightenment. Amy Parker may remain enmeshed in the material, but Ellen Gluyas, later Roxburgh, not only achieves her vision but brings it back into communal life. Although Bliss acknowledges Tacey's interpretations, her approach owes less to psychology that to Joseph Campbell's mythology. Fundamentally, she sees the characters as challenged to explore their own psyches rather than to surrender to forces beyond themselves. Despite their difference in approach, however, her reading of A Fringe of Leaves comes close to Tacey's, emphasizing Ellen's acceptance of the two sides of her existence.

In her study of Voss, Joan Newman, like David Tacey, draws on psychology and mythology to explain the symbolic patterns underlying the fiction. Newman, however, examines the myths of the quest and of the male hero slaying his father, rather than those of service to the Goddess. Rather than opposing these older myths to Christianity, she sees them subsumed in the newer religion through the hero-figure of Christ. Christian theology ,

transformed such pagan tales as the quest for the grail into allegories of the Christian hero's quest for truth. In Newman's reading of White's novel, Voss assumes this role for himself. Voss's quest, however, is through the inner world of Dante rather than the outer world of Odysseus. As a modern hero, he perceives this psychic world is a wasteland whose image is mirrored in the physical desert through which he leads his expedition. His role as leader of an actual expedition, however, becomes confused falsely with the role of God, and he can reach the end of his spiritual quest only as his pride is destroyed by suffering and finally death. Yet Newman shows that Voss, and several of his characters, have genuinely Christ-like qualities. Similarly, while Voss journeys into the interior Laura, in Sydney, undergoes a similar journey from the primitive, instinctual figure of Eve through sexual awakening to the spiritual power of Mary.

Newman does not see Voss as a modernist exaltation of art for its own sake, the vision as its own justification, but as a precise response to the moral and spiritual disintegration that culminated in the second world war. In using pagan and Christian mythology White is endeavouring to recover the unity of the self and the world which modern life had lost. While Newman recognizes that this unity with the absolute that White seeks through the figures of Voss and his companions is specific to western culture, this does not destroy the relevance of his work to the crisis of that culture, although it may reduce its claim to truth to merely one among a number of conflicting appeals.

Both Mary-Ellen Ryan and Ann McCulloch similarly place The Eye of the Storm in the western tradition of regeneration through suffering. However, both of them see Elizabeth Hunter, the

character at the eye of the storm and the novel, not as a questing hero like Voss, but in the pattern of a Lear to whom suffering comes despite his arrogant will. Both writers see Elizabeth as achieving her own freedom within this world at the cost of the enslavement or deformation of her children, but whereas Ryan argues that Elizabeth's daughter Dorothy succeeds to her powers, McCulloch finds that both son and daughter remain incapable of the spiritual awareness that would allow them to face the truth of pain in a world of fragmentation. For her, Basil rather than Dorothy is the potential successor, but, in the absence of any Cordelia to bring him the love his being lacks, he is unable to find the courage to accept a new creative role, remaining locked instead into the obsolete role of Lear.

If, as McCulloch suggests, Elizabeth Hunter is White's last attempt at an active 'super-being', Ellen Gluyas, or Roxburgh, in A Fringe of Leaves, represents one of his most successful portrayals of the visionary who, like Stan Parker, is active in his or her own life, but who also allows life to bring its own lessons. Veronica Brady suggests that she is presented as the type of complete human being who attains wisdom through her quality of passivity. This passivity allows White, through the person of Ellen, to apprehend the power of the Aborigines, the psychological other of the white civilization into which she has married, and which is in the process of displacing them from their land in favour of the brutalities of colonization. Brady, however, points out that White neither idealizes the Aborigines nor evades their own capacity for brutality. Rather, he has Ellen herself enter into them, even partaking in the rite of cannibalism. Through this she is able to enter wisdom by the

path of fear rather than love, and so achieve what Brady describes, in the words of Claude Levi-Strauss, as the full humanism that puts the world before life, life before man, and the respect for others before self-interest.

Brady is aware of the criticism that White is merely joining the neo-colonialists who reduce Aborigines to a stereotype that enables us to continue to appropriate them for our own purposes. She argues however that rather than attempting to include the Aborigines in his fiction, he uses their distance from us as a means of criticizing our civilization. At the same time, he shows how this civilization shares many of the qualities, such as the reduction of the woman to a commodity of exchange, that it condemns in Aborigines. She places White's work firmly in the centre of politics and history, while at the same time recognizing that it cannot be reduced to either. Rather, she argues that he subjects the values of western culture to an interrogation that reveals their limitations at the same time as suggesting ways these might be transcended. Although writing from a specific time in history when traditional values are fragmenting and even the idea of the universal is under challenge, he opens the way to a new humanism.

These essays do not suggest any single interpretation of White's fiction, or even any one way of approaching our reading of it. They do, however, convey something of the power of his imagery, the way he forces us to look in entirely new ways at the relationships between people and at the land that sustains us. His landscapes, whether Australian, European or American, are not however mere metaphors of the human condition. Rather, they are an active constituent of the selves we create. If we make a

wasteland of our cities, our inner landscape will be a desert. If, like Ellen Roxburgh, we learn to give ourselves to the world rather than to judge it, judgement and a fuller realization of life will come to us. Like White himself, we will be empowered to become both observers and participants in our own histories. This is the prophecy that White has brought back from his exploration of the deserts and the wellsprings of the human mind.

[1] David Marr, Patrick White--a life, Sydney: Random Housed, 1991, p.16.

[2] "Prodigal Son", in Geoffrey Dutton and Max Harris, the Vital Decade, Melbourne: Sun Books, 1968, p.157. [First published, [Australian Letters, Adelaide, 1958].

[3] Interview, Southerly, 2/1973, p.136.

[4] 'In the Lap of the Land', P.R.Eaden and F.H.Mares, Mapped But Not Known Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1986, p.192.

[5] See Tacey, 'Patrick White's Voss: the teller and the tale', Southern Review, vol. 18, no.3, Nov.1985, 251-71.

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