

PATRICK WHITE, AUSTRALIAN NOVELIST¹

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Patrick White published his first novel, *Happy valley*, in 1939, when he was 27. Since then he has published 6 novels, 4 plays, and a collection of short stories. His work has had a mixed critical reception, but few have questioned White's literary talents. Many would place him in the forefront of contemporary writing, as a writer of the stature of Lawrence or Conrad². What follows is a broad reading of the later novels, *The aunt's story*³ (1948), *The tree of man* (1955), *Voss* (1958), *Riders in the chariot* (1961), and *The solid mandala* (1966). It bypasses the two early novels, *Happy valley* and *The living and the dead* (1942). White has confirmed that his attitude towards his own writing underwent a major change between the publication of these early novels and subsequent work⁴, hence it is to the later work that we shall look for evidence of his primary interests.

Each of the novels is moulded by a single concern. It is White's interest in the relation of the individual to his self and the consequence of this for other relations. By this is meant the interest in each novel in the degree to which a character has reached awareness of himself, and how this affects relationship with others. Thus each of the novels starts with a person whose chief need is to be related as one human being to another. White sees this impulse towards involvement as depending upon having a strong sense of personal identity. This means having a positive and true image of one's self. This is discovered as something that is genuinely private but which is the basis for relationship⁵. On sensing this, White's characters feel more exposed and more vulnerable to others. Their human potentiality is seen to depend upon their resolution of

¹ I am grateful to James Bertram and John Honeyfield for helping shape my appreciation of Patrick White.

² See, Vincent Buckley, *The literature of Australia* (Ringwood: 1964), and Geoffrey Dutton, *Patrick White* (Melbourne: 1961).

³ *Happy valley* is no longer in print. White's other works are published by Eyre and Spottiswoode, London. Several of the novels have also appeared in European translations.

⁴ Patrick White, 1958, "The prodigal son", *Australian letters* 1, pp. 37 - 40.

⁵ See R. D. Laing, *The divided self*. (London: 1960) and *The politics of experience* (Middlesex: 1967), and Anthony Storr, *The integrity of the personality* (London: 1960).

this discovery. So White's heroes move towards fulfilment, love, and understanding, or towards frustration, hatred, alienation, or even insanity.

The living and the dead had suffered from the detachment with which its characters were conceived. Its motivation was too deliberately external. In *The aunt's story* there is a radical change in perspective. Here the central issues are internalized. What appears unintelligible viewed objectively, becomes the rational world view of the novel's schizophrenic heroine Theodora Goodman. The novel displays her internal conflicts as she confronts a seemingly intolerable world; a world in which the consequences of self-realization are isolation, and of relationship, depersonalization. This is the typical schizophrenic position. Theodora encounters continual threats to her essential self, both from without, as she feels "the contempt and distances of others", and from within. "I shall continue to destroy myself, right down to last of my several lives." These threats are echoed in traditional schizophrenic depersonalizing imagery: darkness, stone, wood, and deadness.

In part 1 of the novel the origins of alienation are seen in childhood, in a world which is still real but which can take on a new meaning beyond the limits of sane experience. In part 2 experience extends the limits of the subjective world, "so that there was no break in the continuity of being. The landscape was a state of interminable being, hope, and despair, devouring and disgorging endlessly". The primary movement of the novel is Theodora's journey towards self-fulfilment, a journey which is a gradual regression to the world of her childhood and during which she experiences a growing unity with nature. Theodora's gradual blending with physical landscape becomes the gradual disintegration of her objective identity, and provides a means of intensifying Theodora's reactions. White fuses his characters with the life which surrounds them, loading his prose with suggestions and images that a mere narrative of events would not sustain. Hence he creates his character's existential position. He creates the context of the situation as they experience it, tracing it as a rational solution to a threatening situation.

As the novel proceeds Theodora's regression becomes more final. "But in spite of outer appearances, Theodora Goodman had retreated into her own distance and did not intend to come out". This retreat culminates in the creation of an imaginary figure, Holstius, with whom Theodora reaches an archetypal state of self-reconciliation. He is Father, Lover, Friend, and God, for she encounters him as every significant memory of her youth. Ironically he is also insanity. But sanity and insanity reflect only different aspects of alienation in *The aunt's story*. Theodora's insanity is both a product of choice and neglect. Although she isolates herself from relationship with others, she experiences a rich inner life which stands in contrast to the quality of life around her. Many of the other characters in the novel are involved in emotional fantasies of one sort or another. Theodora's mother is faintly narcissistic,

listening "to the passage of her own silk", and Theodora's friends Wetherby and Lieselotte perform a ritual of sadomasochistic love so fascinating to the early White. Theodora emerges from the emotionally desolate atmosphere of the novel with an elevated humanity.

In *The tree of man* White wanted "to suggest every possible aspect of life, through the lives of an ordinary man and woman"⁶. The simple actions of two settlers, Stan and Amy Parker, as they carve their life out of a few acres of land near Sydney, move towards stylization. Action, in *The tree of man*, is often stylized into ritual, the process of abstraction making this study of the nature of relationship more inclusive. The novel develops its covert meaning from the way the Parkers interpret their self-contained world. They approach it in different ways. Stan escapes from his fear of isolation by seeking union with nature and with God. "In this state he was possessed by an unhappiness, rather physical, that was not yet fear, but he would have liked to look up and see some expression of sympathy on the sky's face." Stan is not prepared to commit himself fully to Amy, for he sees love as a threat to personal identity. Amy is dominated by a physical sensuality and tries to comprehend life in her own terms. "She would have liked to perpetuate her dreams, and lift the reflections out of mirrors. So now, from desperate, retrospective sweeping of the verandah floor, she had to go back into the room and see what her possessions really were".

The novel explores the isolating factors which develop in their relationship. For both of them, love is always haunted by its transience. As they make love "the man and the woman prayed that they might hold this goodness forever. But the greatness of the night was too vast. The woman fell back finally almost crying. And the man withdrew into his own fleshy body." Stan comprehends by intuition, the process of self-awareness becoming a gradual withdrawal of attention from the visible world and a direction towards subjective reality. He comes to believe that nothing can be effected by human intervention and denies the full surrender of self that Amy demands. At the end of his life, his belief clarifies. "As he stood waiting for the flesh to be loosened in him, he prayed for greater clarity, and it became obvious as a hand. It was clear that One, and no other figure, is the answer to all sums." With Amy, love is too subordinate to the role of mother. "The closeness of her children excluded all else". It isolates her husband and ultimately her children. But with her grandson she senses something different. The novel ends:

So that in the end there were the trees. The boy walking through them with his head drooping as he increased in stature. Putting out shoots of green thought. So that in the end, there was no end.

The tree of man is man's continuity, and the continuity of life is its own justification. In *The tree of man* White turns an acutely observed picture of human

⁶ Patrick White. *The prodigal son*.

growth into a study of the limits of a human relationship. The Parkers come to no final conclusions about love, but as with all of White's characters, their ability to love is proportionate to the degree of self-realization they reach.

In *Voss* the efforts of the hero at self-realization necessarily come to involve relation with others. This movement is paralleled in the novel's external plot, which is based on the explorations of a Prussian explorer in the Australian desert. Voss's expedition into the desert brings into conflict two creeds which are identified in the opening chapters. The first is that of Sydney of the 1840's, with its confident belief in the inevitability of progress. The second creed is the belief that ultimate understanding can be achieved in isolation from people. Its chief protagonist is Voss, and the members of his party are placed between the two creeds. Some — Roberts, Palfreyman and Le Mesurier — identify themselves in terms of Voss. Others — Judd, Angus, and Turner — ultimately choose to return to the established world. The alternative to these two choices is reversion to sub-human or animal behaviour. Boyle lives half-way between the civilization and desert, his aboriginal servants wearing a tatter of European garments. The aborigine who finally kills Voss, loses his identity amid his own people. Voss is the centre of interaction of these two creeds.

Voss first experiences Sydney society as a threat. "How much less destructive of the personality are thirst, fever, physical exhaustion, he thought, much less destructive than people." At the start he is preoccupied with self-preservation and negates much of life around him. Yet Voss also helps to define the self-awareness of some of the others. When he first meets Laura, she feels accused "of the superficiality which she herself suspected". It is through their confrontation with Voss that the members of the expedition come to evaluate themselves.

Voss's relationship with Laura unifies the two different areas of the novel, Sydney and the desert. The theme of emotional growth and understanding is reflected in the changing vision of the landscape, and provides the substance for much of the imagery of the book. The chief images of fire, sun, stone and water have their counterparts at the level of personality. Light images suggest the uncertain flickering of the individual's inner awareness, or they can suggest a stronger force which threatens this inner awareness. Water and heat can engulf, either way offering self-destruction. Near the end of his fateful journey Voss sees "some dead trees, (which) restored to life by the absence of hate, were glowing with the flesh of rosy light". He discovers "that each visible object has been created for the purposes of love". Voss reflects most perfectly the pattern of self-discovery which develops in various degrees in the members of his team. The sequence of discovery is recalled by Laura as Voss dies. "How important is to understand the three stages. Of God into man. Man. And man returning into God." As the journey starts, Voss, reaching out for the power of the divine, temporarily transcends his manhood. He "accepted

his own divinity". The novel pictures Voss's transformation "into man", the state of humility and awareness which necessarily precedes the third stage, "man returning into God", which is love. With this realization Voss dies, and the novel returns briefly to Sydney, where a number of people are recalled who have also undergone some sort of growth. These are the Bonners and the Pringles, the Sydney socialites who are the victims of a constant satire throughout the novel. It is a lesser concern of *Voss* that even these people are not incapable of change. For as White wrote in *The prodigal son*: "the state of simplicity and humility is the only desirable one for artist or for man. While to reach it may be impossible, to attempt to do so is imperative". *Voss* remains White's most powerful demonstration of this belief.

Riders in the chariot is constructed around the lives of four people to whom self-reconciliation has granted an enlarged vision; Mary Hare, the last of an Australian aristocratic family, Himmelfarb, survivor of a German concentration camp, Mrs. Godbold, a washerwoman, and Alf Dubbo, a syphilitic aborigine painter. The disclosure of themselves in moments of common understanding constitutes the imaginative centre of the novel, revealing to each of them the evil which is the antithesis of involvement.

Mary Hare, the first of the four riders, has reached a reconciliation between self and the natural world. Thus her "inner self" is "joyfully serene". But what is visionary to begin with, becomes reality through her encounter with evil in the form of her housemaid Mrs. Jolley. So far "very little of her secret, actual nature had been disclosed to human beings". In the act of disclosure she learns to distinguish between good and evil. Himmelfarb escapes the evils of Nazi Germany to face the more respectable evils which linger beneath the surface of suburban Australia. The novel tests his belief "that spiritual truth is also an active force. Which will populate the world after each attempt by the men of action to destroy it". Like Miss Hare he comes to take the path of inwardness, reaching a semi-mystical transcendence through his faith. The third rider, Ruth Godbold, reaches understanding through adoration and service within her framework of belief. As a girl she "would attempt to express her belief, not in words ... but in the surrender of herself". Her love is on two planes, the physical and the transcendent, and involves her with both the evil and the good. "It could have been that within her scheme evil was only evil when she bore the brunt of it herself". Alf Dubbo comes to realize the distinction between good and evil through involvement with the four riders. His self-awakening is also an awakening to his role as artist. The image of the chariot recurs to enforce a vision of self-fulfilment which moves beyond mere self-knowledge into involvement with others.

Throughout the novel, as illumination proceeds, its antithesis is depicted, notably in Sarsaparilla, White's portrayal of which is a savage indictment of the shallowness of suburban Australia. On the one hand White presents hu-

man need and the exercise of love and understanding, and on the other, a depersonalizing pursuit of material pleasure justified by its devotees as a moral quest. The power of this quest is the force of evil as White sees it. It begins from corruption of the inner being and seeks to destroy all who recognize this corruption. At the end of the novel both the protagonist of good and evil live on. With Patrick White, although good and non-good, love and non-love, feeling and non-feeling, may exist side by side, the good does not necessarily overthrow the evil. Suffering, in White, produces insight, but has none of the Christian attributes of redemption. Self-awareness does not develop and survive without involvement and conflict with others, but the novel demonstrates that evil, when it confronts good, may be the stronger force.

The form of White's most recent novel, *The solid mandala*, like that of *The aunt's story*, is defined by the mind of its central characters. Arthur Brown is generally regarded as a simpleton. His twin brother Waldo, has intellectual ambitions but his attempts to express them result in bitterness and hatred. The theme White explores is suggested in the epigrams to the novel. As usual, there is the reality of an inner world. "It is not outside, it is inside: wholly within." Another suggests that the ability to love depends on a belief in one's self. "Yet still I long for my twin in the sun." Arthur moves towards the reality of what may be called, self-love, demonstrating that a basis for relationship is found in self-affirmation, in possessing a positive and real image of one's self. "Life ... is the twin consciousness jostling you, but with which it is possible to communicate in ways both animal and delicate." In contrast, Waldo's self-negation moves towards an increasingly inclusive hatred. It is Arthur who sees "the hatred Waldo was directing, had always directed, at all living things". In an attempt to remove the threat to the privacy of self which relationship presents, Waldo becomes increasingly self-absorbed. But this preoccupation with self inevitably leads to a preoccupation with self-expression. "They did not grasp the extent of his need to express something. Otherwise how could he truly say: I exist." Ultimately Waldo's self is only safe in imagination or in games in front of the mirror.

The Brown world is one where animal and human blend, and the unself-conscious virility of their dogs asserts the recurring pattern of living: birth, sexual awakening, and decay. The Brown house, like the houses in *The aunt's story* and *Riders in the chariot*, grows and decays in accompaniment to the life it shelters. It is a deliberate accretion to the town just as the Brown family themselves are an image of rejection and self-imposed isolation. Mrs. Brown distrusts her own family and the town; Mr. Brown is in retreat from his Baptist background.

Arthur, the halfwit, as he is judged in the early parts of the novel, is not confirmed as such by his vision of life, which is shown in the later part of the novel. His story is of growth to an unconditional understanding and involve-

ment. He carries with him a glass marble, a mandala, which is his symbol of his imposition of order on chaos. Towards the end of the novel he dances a mandala dance before Mrs. Poulter — who represents the community of involved initiates — in which he enacts his various efforts to include others in his vision. He fails however, and Waldo dies in a scene of which only the subjective details are dramatized. The conclusion returns to the simple Mrs. Poulter, with whom the novel begins and ends. The consequent tone of incompleteness recalls a line from one of White's plays, "continuity is reassuring".

A closer analysis of the novels discussed here would reveal the same basic pattern of a continual movement towards self-realization, which is a recurring interest in each of White's major works. For in each of them, form is defined by White's introspective narrative line. Following and creating the processes of self-awareness, it demonstrates the motives and conditions for his heroes' unifying or destructive actions.