☀ TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE ☀

The Solid Mandala and Patrick White's Late Modernity
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1. Patrick White and Late Modernity

This essay contends that the Australian novelist Patrick White (1912-1990) presents, in his novel *The Solid Mandala* (1966), a prototypical evocation of late modernity that indicates precisely why and how it was different from the neoliberal and postmodern era that succeeded it. Late modernity is currently emerging as a historical period, though still a nascent and contested one. Robert Hassan speaks of the 1950-1970 era as a period which, in its 'Fordist' mode of production maintained a certain conformity yet held off the commoditisation of later neoliberalism's 'network-driven capitalism'.[1] This anchors the sense of 'late modernity,' that will operate in this essay, though my sense of the period also follows on definitions of the term established, in very different contexts, by Edward Lucie-Smith and Tyrus Miller.[2]

Late modernity as understood in this piece is composed of two key aspects. One is the dominance of the innovative, labyrinthine Modernist aesthetics developed in the previous generation – the generation born in the late nineteenth century, that of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and, most important for White's text, T.S. Eliot – and inherited by the second-generation modernists, writers like White who were born in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The other is the political predominance of welfare state models and a strong public sector that provided significant employment. These two aspects are contrasted with the era of neoliberalism of the postmodern era (roughly 1970 and after) that in this light is seen not just as an issue of certain conservative, free-market political parties gaining electoral dominance in the Anglophone world, but as aligned with models of what Zygmunt Bauman has called 'liquid modernity' and Ulrich Beck has labelled 'risk society'.[3] Late modernity, as defined here, is that era which precedes liquid modernity and risk society and which proffers at least an ideal of social security and egalitarianism that the later formulations lack.

It is not claimed that the fictional styles of the two eras emanated from the socio-political orientation in a vulgar, base-superstructure manner; but it is contended that there can be meaningful and heuristic homologies between the two, as J.M. Bernstein has suggested in his phrase 'rationalized modernity'.[4] Of course, to historicise late modernity presents a paradox. To historicise a mentality that claimed history no longer mattered, is more of a challenge than to historicise a period like Romanticism, which already admits history in its self-construction. In turn, the very method of historicisation is an effect of a postmodern viewpoint, and in a sense is a

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[1] Robert Hassan, 'The Recursive Mode: Space, Time and the Commoditization of Culture,' *Cultural Politics* (5.3: November 2009) 339.

[2] Edward Lucie-Smith, *Late Modern: The Visual Arts Since 1945* (New York: Norton, 1975) and Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[3] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), and Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 2000).

[4] J. M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bliss: Late Modernity and the Meaning of Painting* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2006) 139.

token of the epistemological irrecuperability of the late modernity it at least effectively seeks to reclaim. This is one of the many cognitive quandaries with which the twenty-first-century examination of late modernity – and of Patrick White's fictions of it – must contend.

These issues of periodisation indeed present many pitfalls. When dealing with the near past, people of different generations have different perspectives upon not only the nature of the near past but its degree of proximity; the very idea of a near past implies some people still living for which that past is still a part of active memory and therefore not securely 'the past' as it is for younger people; therefore, not only has there not been time for there to be a consensus about the period, but not everybody may have the perceptual distance to see it as a period. Moreover, although this essay will proceed from the assumption that the social welfare policies of the 1950-1970 era are, in general terms, desirable ones in social and moral terms, inevitably no constitution of temporality can be either totally utopian or totally elegiac. Although this essay will contend that White's suburban, Sarsaparilla fiction, largely written in and set in the 1960s, reflects certain virtues of its period, it cannot be denied that the succeeding period had virtues not only for Australia and the world but for White himself. Even as, in the 1970s and 1980s, a more free-market attitude towards economics began to gain prominence, so did more open attitudes towards homosexuality and a greater sympathy towards multiculturalism, important for White and this novel because of the themes of Judaism and homosexuality seen therein and analysed in part three of this essay.

Moreover, there are certain aspects of periodisation specific to Australia that come into play here. During the entire 1950-70 period of late modernity, Australia was governed by the conservative policies of the Anglophile (Sir) Robert Menzies and his successors. Moreover, this era is often perceived as one of cultural ossification and stasis, broken only by the liberating plunge taken by the poetic generation of '68. The more sophisticated and globally connected Australia of the following era might seem to many to be the product of an almost totally beneficial change from the more cloistered and peripheral atmosphere of the earlier time.

None of this is untrue, though under Menzies's premiership Australia – the 'Lucky Country' in Donald Horne's famous phrase – maintained a considerable welfare state in ways surely not endorsed by twenty-first century inheritors of his partisan mantle.[5] But this essay, in line with the recent transnational turn in Australian studies, asks the reader to see the specific changes in Australia as not just national in portent but as part of a larger global turn from a paradigm largely centred on the welfare state and the public sector providing employment to a paradigm governed by (to use Beck's term) 'risk society'. In 'risk society,' the paradigmatic class is composed of people subject to risks beyond their control (and not controlled for them by the state), people whom Guy Standing and Gerald Raunig have labelled 'the precariat'.[6] Moreover, neoliberalism is here seen not just as a specific public policy platform of certain partisan interests, which can be ignored by the litterateur at their convenience, but as an all-pervasive mode that affects wholesale existing mentalities and states of cognition. It is this essay's contention that Waldo Brown and his brother

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[5] Robert Watts, 'The Origins of the Australian Welfare State,' *Historical Studies* (19.17: 1980) 35-49.
[6] Gerald Raunig, *A Thousand Machines* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010) and Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

Arthur, the co-protagonists of *The Solid Mandala*, are people who, in the late modern paradigm, however tormented and limited their lives are in individual terms, are provided a firm social foundation by their polity, and that this is an important factor in comprehending the novel and their place in it. The Browns are not part of 'the precariat' in White's novel because there is not yet any precariat. Indeed, the lack of risk in their lives, their plodding routine, is one of the factors that particularly frustrated the would-be self-dramatist in Waldo.

When White wrote his major fiction, he could not have anticipated the late twentieth-century rise of a revitalised capitalism and rhetoric of unfettered globalisation that we have come to call neoliberalism. Yet in writing of his own time, with necessary ignorance of the future, White was startlingly able (for a writer so often discussed as private, hermetic, or deliberately cut off from society) to diagnose its characteristic features. White's sense of his own era, late modernity, is shown in *The Solid Mandala*.

Waldo Brown, the frustrated writer, 'spiteful intellectual', and all-around sadist in *The Solid Mandala*, is in an intellectual position not far from what late modernity (here meaning the period roughly from 1945 to 1960) imagined itself as being.[7] Equipped with all the intellectual resources in the world, working in a Library that with its capital L and its lack of geographic inflection (The Library, not 'The Mitchell Library' or 'The Sydney Municipal Library') could as well be Jorge Luis Borges's Library of Babel, or André Malraux's *musée imaginaire*.[8] Waldo, *qua* his being a librarian, can see everything, but cannot innovate himself; he is an *idiot savant* who manages to hold down a marginal job in a secure but constricted environment, a cognitive equivalent of the novel's dominant thoroughfare – Terminus Road, where, as Brigid Rooney puts it, 'beginnings turn into ends, and ends turn into beginnings.'[9]

The Solid Mandala, even before Arthur's presumed incarceration in a lunatic asylum after his killing of his brother, is rife with images of imprisonment and enclosure. Waldo prizes his 'rock crystal' temperament (*SM* 81).[10] Arthur 'chokes' (*SM* 135) his love for Mrs Poulter because of society's expectations. Waldo feels he and Arthur cannot 'escape' (*SM* 77) from each other. The library itself is a kind of prison. The 'Zeitgeist' to which the observer-figure Mrs Poulter is contrasted at the novel's end is a Max Weber-style 'iron cage', a rationalistic enmeshment in which society as a whole functions seamlessly yet any dialectic of further development is held at a standstill. After 1970, postmodernity and then neoliberalism reauthorized agency, so that what was in an odd way the comforting paralysis of late modernity seems to have snapped. As David Harvey puts it, after that point even ostensibly progressive nongovernmental organisations were 'actively neoliberal, engaging in

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[7] See David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (New York: Viking, 1990) 469 (henceforth abbreviated as PW). Though Miller's *Late Modernism* uses the literary term 'modernism' and not the periodic term 'modernity', and addresses a slightly earlier period than is the focus here, Miller's sense of the mode as encompassing both anticlimax and reconsideration is very close to that expounded herein, as is the earlier study of Lucie-Smith.

[8] Charles Caramello shows the privileged role of libraries in late modern self-referential fiction – spurred on of course by Borges himself *being* a librarian.

[9] Elizabeth McMahon and Brigitta Olubas, R*emembering Patrick White: Contemporary Critical Essays* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010) *13*. Henceforth RPW.

[10] Patrick White, *The Solid Mandala* (New York: Viking, 1966), henceforth *SM*.

privatisation of state welfare functions'.[11] Global capitalism, the desiccation of the welfare state and the very idea of a social welfare economy, may be only one aspect of a postmodern climate which has also seen important advances in gender and sexual equality, multicultural empowerment, and the questioning of Eurocentrism – all objectives White, as seen in his late anti-nuclear and pro-Aboriginal political activism, would have favoured.

Yet the world White portrays in his books, however satirically, also reflects an assumption that social welfare systems and publicly funded institutions relying on tax-generated revenue would function as a background to his characters' lives, visionary or sceptical, innocent or calculating, dreamers or plodders. Gelder and Salzman describe White as a 'Left-liberal'.[12] White assumed reflexively, as did everyone who lived in advanced Western democracies in his era, that there would be a mixed economy between the public and private sectors. Someone like Waldo could work in a public institution, in a facility run for the benefit of all of society and financed by publicly generated tax revenue. White may have, as his biographer David Marr suggests, have had contempt of such 'public servant scribblers' as Waldo instilled in him by his mother, Ruth Withycombe, from an early age, but, both in Ruth's era and her son's, the public sector was able to employ people who were given enough of a sense of a station in life to have literary aspirations, however misplaced. The latter-day precariat inevitably finds the ground here less stable. Certainly, in the era of liquid modernity and risk society, this assumption was imperilled, and a novelist writing forty or fifty years later could not assume that their characters could find work in such a publicly financed facility, as so many of them had their budgets eliminated and their very rationale questioned in light of neoliberal assumptions that only enterprises which sought or generate profit were worthwhile.

This political context, ironically, may make today's world more able to comprehend this novel than its original audience. *The Solid Mandala* was in White's view perhaps his 'best book'.[13] It was the only one of his books that White consistently ranked highly that was published in the central phase of his career, from 1950 to 1975. But *The Solid Mandala* has not been one of his most popular books, during its time or afterward. Laurence Steven is representative when he calls it a 'lesser work'.[14] Many who do not share Steven's explicitly moral perspective have explicitly or tacitly echoed this judgment. Its critical reception has bogged down in an overly dyadic consideration of the two twin brothers: Waldo bad, Arthur good. This is manifestly right on the most literal level. No reader will find Waldo *more* sympathetic than Arthur.

But a purely dyadic reading is limiting when it comes to deeper interpretive issues. David Tacey's 1988 book pierced through many of the pieties surrounding the Brown brothers' dyad, but at the cost of rejecting the book *in toto* and seeing it as insincere. Tacey indeed castigated White as a sham artist.[15] But Tacey had the

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[11] David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital And the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 253.

[12] Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, *After the Celebration: Australian Fiction 1989-2007* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1989) 241.

[13] David Marr, ed., *Letters by Patrick White* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 291.

[14] Laurence Steven, *Dissociation and Wholeness in Patrick White's Fiction* (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1989) 12.

[15] David Tacey, *Fiction and the Unconscious (*Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1988).

percipience to see that Waldo and Arthur are not just opposed, but conjoined. This is especially true in the way, the socioeconomic circumstances in which they lived together as bachelor brothers through two World Wars and their aftermath. Waldo and Arthur, with all their eccentricities and limitations, manage to eke out lives amid the cloistral banality of Sarsaparilla. The final tragedy is delayed until they are old, until they have lived lives of pathos and deprivation but also real integrity. Waldo and Arthur would have had a different fate as members of the precariat in the go-go metropolises of risk society. In the novel's plot-level, Waldo represses Arthur. On a meta-level, though, both Arthur and Waldo are simultaneously oppressed and secured by the overall social matrix.

It may well be advisable to read beyond the binary in which Arthur is privileged, and Waldo is denigrated. For one thing, White put so much of himself and his literary situation into Waldo. White made clear that, in Bernadette Brennan's words, he 'empathized with outcasts' (*RPW* 23), and would not want any one of his own characters bullied or denigrated by critics beyond what they deserve (which in Waldo's case is admittedly quite a bit); for another, because the contrast between the bad rationalist and the good but damaged sensitive soul is a staple of modernist fiction. For yet another because, though Waldo may tyrannise Arthur in their immediate fraternal relationship, their plight is as much their culture's as their own.[16]

It is especially important not to moralise in a binary way in *The Solid Mandala* where the dual protagonists are, after all, twins. The situation the two Brown brothers have in common is worth as much attention as what separates them. Both siblings are part of the same environment. Their very status as twins means they share a great deal, not just as polarities of archetypal yin and yang but as two very different people embedded, as so many modern subjects were, in the same social context. White's attitude towards the sterility of Sarsaparilla is both ironic and elegiac. Sarsaparilla is a limited community made tolerable by its very banality, its renunciation of instability, which is at once the constriction of late modernity and the humane realisation of its positive values. Just as late modernity decided the past is nothing worth knowing about, the era of neoliberalism and postmodernity have decided much the same about late modernity, which may be as hard to grasp in its sinew for us as the worlds of Tennyson and Shakespeare were for Waldo in his status as a librarian posing as a literary artist.

Nathanael O'Reilly's reconsideration of White's stance towards suburbia prudently sees White as largely anti-suburban.[17] Yet it is, O'Reilly argues, White himself who, with George Johnston, effectively founds the Australian tradition of writing about suburbia that eventually incorporates more positive portraits. O'Reilly complicates Simon During's awareness of the suburban aspect of White by suggesting it was something the author already knew, and did not have to be unearthed in him by external critical analysis.[18] Brigid Rooney's resituating of White in intellectual history succeeds in situating him politically without being reductive or burdening him with too much contextual baggage. Rooney feels that White showed 'palpable empathy'

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[16] As Bernard Bergonzi put it, White has 'affection' for his characters very different from a 'mere' admiration of them. Bergonzi, 'Bouillabaisse,' *New York Review of Books*, 17 March 1966, 20-23.
[17] Nathanael O'Reilly, Between the City and the Bush: Suburbia in Contemporary Australian Fiction,' Dissertation, Western Michigan University, 2008.
[18] Simon During, *Patrick White* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

for the 'most repressed suburbanites'.[19] Rooney goes on to say that White, in contrast to many of the stereotypes of him, 'presented himself as someone who valued, identified with, and cared about the ordinary person.'[20] But his self-portrait in *The Solid Mandala* seems the furthest extreme from this. Waldo, White states in *Flaws in the Glass*, is 'myself at my coldest and worst.'[21] When a writer makes this sort of admission so manifestly it is striking, but it also most likely denotes there is something more there. That several who knew White described him in this period – before the Nobel Prize, and before his political activism and breaks with most of his closest friends had made him into a very different social entity – as essentially a kind and generous person: not in the least a Waldo.[22] White's portrayal of himself as a monster has in it an element of theatricality. One might add that this self-castigation of the artist is very late modern, we think of Nabokov's sense of himself as the parasitic critic Charles Kinbote (and John Shade/Kinbote as a dyad is very much an Arthur/Waldo) or Robert Lowell's searing self-excavation in 'The Dolphin.' This scepticism about the artist is a token of late modernity's both stifling and enabling attitude towards creativity.

The worlds of both Waldo and his creator, on their different levels, are a combination, perhaps made possible by what A. A. Phillips called 'the cultural cringe', of Victorian decorum and propriety with late modern welfare-state egalitarianism. Waldo's copying out of Tennyson represents late modernity's sense of working with, and reusing, received paradigms, a sense of the simultaneous exhaustion of creativity and fear of the idea of original creativity somehow incipiently totalitarian. The literary exhaustion and self-irony of the artist was on one level a real response to cultural trauma, on another a deliberate restraint, a shying away from the grandiose and self-confident.

White's reputation declined after his death partially due to certain circumstances peculiar to himself. Among these was his late public acknowledgment of his own sexuality – and the late development of an Australia in which these aspects of himself could be revealed to the public.[23] Yet, even more, White's reputation generally declined when late modernity's reputation declined, and is showing signs of arising now that late modernity is doing the same. It may seem contradictory to say that late modernity is at once irretrievably past and rising to salience. But a period can only come into view when it is concluded. A period's obsoleteness and its historical allure are part of the same moment of awareness, even if largely practised by different constituencies with diverging ideological sympathies. A look back at late modernity can undo neoliberalism's claims to decisive hegemony.

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[19] Brigid Rooney, *Literary Activists: Writer-Intellectuals and Australian Public Life* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009) 41.

[20] Rooney 38.

[21] Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass* (New York: Viking, 1981) 147.

[22] Personal communication: Vivian Smith, 13 January 2010.

[23] In Andrew Clark's profile of White for *New York Times Book Review*, although White refers to his own 'sexual ambivalence,' Manoly Lascaris is not mentioned, while White's dogs, a clear parallel to Waldo's and Arthur's, are. ('The Private Patrick White,' *New York Times Book Review,* 27 April 1980, 8) That this reticence occurred even after the publication of, and during the promotion of, the avowedly queer *Twyborn Affair* (1979) shows that it was not until *Flaws in the Glass* (1981) that White was absolutely declarative about his sexuality and relationships.

This is being seen in twenty-first century work such as that of the British poet Sean O'Brien, with its evocation of the period of the welfare state as decisively in the past. The emergent historicity of late modernity is even more complicated in light of how the very supersession of late modernity was enacted by the postmodern turn to historical settings as constitutive of meaning. This turn is seen even in White's later historical novel, *A Fringe of Leaves*, and much more overtly in the historical cast of Australian fictions of the next generation such as those of Peter Carey and Roger McDonald. Late modernity bypassed this historical turn. It preferred circularities, obscurities, evocations, and discernments.[24]

This equation is necessarily double-sided. It cannot be denied that, as seen in White's own post-1973 work as well as that of other novelists, a revived sense of historical possibility was liberating and opened a door beyond the (ironically, in light of White's 1958 denunciation of dun-coloured realism) dun-coloured limitations of Sarsaparilla and its late modern present. One of the reasons late modernity has traditionally been so threatening to the postmodern, and, tacitly, to the neoliberal is, as Borges put it in 'The Library of Babel,' the certainty that 'everything has been written annuls us, or renders us phantasmal.'[25] Both Waldo and Arthur wish to write a Greek tragedy. Yet neither can ever do so. Waldo has never seen one (a reflection perhaps of the lingering cultural marginality of White's modernist Sydney). Arthur is so simple as to misunderstand tragedy as any sort of life-and-death, and does not realise that his circumstances are tragic and his brother's even more so. Overt references to tragedy are not foregrounded. But it is precisely because they are not foregrounded (true also in their father's reading of Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, which might predict his sons' fate), that the Brown twins are *not aware* of the tragic conditions of their lives, that the narrative in which they are encased is late modern and not postmodern. Postmodernism, or the fictions that flourished in liquid modernity and risk society, tended to involve alternative or anterior discourses that got the writer out of the late modern predicament where 'there was no personal problem, no world problem, whose eloquent solution did not exist – somewhere in some hexagon'.[26] Borges's paradigm for this late modern pre-emption of all new knowledge was the institution in which Waldo works – the Library.

2. Waldo, Librarianship, and the Welfare State

White's portrait of Waldo-the-librarian should be considered against what was, by all evidence, his keen interest in libraries, his respect for the values for which they stood and his frequent use of them, and his reliance on those who worked in them – both the Mitchell Library of the State Library of New South Wales (the first library where Waldo works, see *PW* 450), and the University of Sydney's Fisher Library report that White was rather frequently in touch with librarians over various reference matters, and, in a pre-digital age, relied on Sydney libraries for research. That White chose to live in metropolitan Sydney meant both that he wanted to be close to amenities such as large research libraries and that he respected the fact that Sydney had developed

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[24] Of course, White had used historical settings before, as in *Voss*, but here the thrust was symbolic, epistemological, and national, whereas in *A Fringe of Leaves* the perspective was much closer to the self-conscious, historiographic, and reanimative torque of postmodern historical fiction.

[25] Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions* tr. Andrew Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998) 118.

[26] Borges 150.

these institutions up to an international standard.[27] This does not mean to say that Patrick White thought all libraries were good, and *ergo* Waldo himself good. Certainly White many times over showed contempt for researchers and academics. But White's practical interest in libraries does mean we have to re-evaluate the almost automatic assumption among White critics that Waldo's employment as a librarian means he is a failed artist, a frustrated creator, and that librarians in White's view are 'only' custodians of knowledge, inferior to creators of it. As mentioned before, the trope of the library in the avant-garde productions of late modernity assumes a privileged role. What has been stressed less is how the comprehensiveness of the late modern library in which all knowledge is contained can be likened to the social network of the mid-twentieth-century welfare state, which strove to guarantee equality for all even at the perceived cost of flattening, or insufficiently highlighting, the exceptional.[28]

The Mitchell Library holds Patrick White's typewriter – a generic typewriter, of the pre- (short-lived) electric typewriter age. Darren Wershler puts it well when he says, 'typewriting symbolized all that was antithetical to poetry; it was cold, mechanical, awkward. Now, however … we believe that typewriting *is* poetry: precise, clean, elegant in its minimalism.'[29] White's typewriter, once a generic contemporary implement, becomes with the passage of time and the onrush of new technologies not just a period-piece but iconic of a period, of a style of thought and the mode of transcription that traced it. The Mitchell also houses Patrick White's desk – capacious yet functional, unadorned by curlicues or frippery, geometric, containing nothing about it that would mark it out as 'a writer's desk'. Its top is made of linoleum, a substance particularly and uniquely trendy in the mid-twentieth-century, seeming at that time the latest thing, a less vulnerable, perishable alternative to wood or glass.[30] One might imagine a less roomy version serving Waldo quite well at the Municipal Library. With a functional, utilitarian white lamp, and with the combination of circular and rectilinear design in the drawers, the desk embodies an adaptation of modernism into the everyday and dependable that was at the heart of what characterized late modernity. Waldo indeed combines two aspects of the twentieth century – an at times anti-humanist, hard-edged mandarinism and a dependence on government funding for employment – which were not often endorsed by the same people, although critics such as Michael Szalay have made suggestive connections between modernism and the welfare state.[31] White himself, indeed, in his

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[27] John Beston, 'Patrick White,' in Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer, eds, *A Companion to Australian Literature Since 1900* (Rochester: Camden House, 2007) 251, says that *The Solid Mandala* is only one of four White novels set totally in metropolitan Sydney. Its Australian setting was sufficiently firm to garner it the Miles Franklin Award.

[28] For a look at Australian library history in the years of the novel's setting, see J.W. Metcalfe, and W.B. Rayward, *Developing a Profession of Librarianship in Australia*, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1995). For all the recent interest in the history of the book, publishing history, and distant reading, a sense of libraries as an institution is still somewhat lacking in Australian literary history, especially in the mid-twentieth-century period.

[29] Darren Wershler, *The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of Typewriting* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007) 8.

[30] I am grateful to Shirley Walker and the staff of the Mitchell Library for permitting me to see the desk when it was not on public display, 13 January 2010.

[31] Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State*. (Durham: Duke University Press; 2000).

later years, as a writer who both maintained an affinity to the symbolic and mythic aspects of high modernism yet moved increasingly and visibly to the left politically, was himself a connecting strand between the truncated aestheticism of modernism and the systemic administrative structure of the modern state. Waldo's life, in both its vocational and artistic dimensions, is at the hub of the twentieth century's associational forms.

Waldo's literary aspirations are not mocked as romantic. They are sturdily ascetic and disillusioned in the late-modern mode. Waldo does not use the word 'silvery' of his brother's grey hair 'out of respect for literature and truth' (*SM* 27) in the same way a poet growing up on Eliot and Pound and Hopkins would not. But this hard-edged, anti-subjective asceticism is also, by the time he employs it, a middlebrow truism just as much as late-Victorian sentimentalism had been. It also represents Waldo's own frustration and rage at his felt mediocrity. As David Tacey puts it, 'inspiration does not come, or he refuses to allow it to emerge.'[32] Because Waldo is circumscribed, everybody else must be circumscribed. Aspiration, inventiveness, ingenuity, is not allowed. The world must stand in a kind of static, if secure, gridlock. The name Terminus Road suggests this, as do many representative images in the book, such as 'regimented boxes which now stand where the trees are cut down' (*SM* 148) and the scene where 'the old men were still fascinated with what they knew, though often overwhelmed by it' (*SM* 48).[33] These no-way-out images signal the stasis that characterises this era. Neoliberalism is a dialectical riposte to this complacency.[34] The risk it foregrounds tries to revive a sense of openness in the postmodern subject. But, if late-modernist stasis limits Waldo, postmodern risk has the potential to swallow them entirely. Waldo and Terminus Road are yoked in a context or reinforcing mediocrity. But Waldo can, albeit at an often-miserable emotional level, exist there.

Waldo is a failed artist enmeshed in the mediocrity of his age. But how different is this from White's successful artists who, at least imaginatively, contend and sometimes prevail over that mediocrity? Waldo's hatred for everybody is not that far from *The Vivisector*. In this novel, White presents an artistic mentality that is a deromanticised, ruthless sense of the artist, an artist who takes from rather than gives to the community, is not full of Wordsworthian bounty. But in *The Vivisector* we are meant to understand that these are sacrifices of his/her own character the artist must make to produce good art. Waldo is not represented as making good art. Instead this Sydney librarian catalogued and envied those who did, such as T. S. Eliot. This is a persistent phenomenon in late modern fiction. Nabokov meant to preveniently mock everyone who reads *Pale Fire* as being like Kinbote. Yet so many of its readers identified with Shade, who the novel has, in effect, told them they cannot be. Late modern novels tend to emphasise people disconnected from any purpose, leading marginal or half-understood lives, people who like Waldo or Kinbote or Samuel

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[32] In Peter Wolfe, *Critical Essays on Patrick White* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1989) 132.

[33] Perhaps we will come closer to understanding Patrick White if we adequately historicise him. The field of Patrick White studies is perhaps the only part of the academic humanities world where Fredric R. Jameson's admirable injunction to always historicise was not heard; perhaps, belatedly, and admittedly out of sync with the fate of historicism in the broader academic world in the 2000s, an audition of it in terms of White studies may prove heuristic.

[34] I am grateful to Peter Mathews for suggestions on this point.

Beckett's Molloy are indefeasibly *outside* of their own lives. It takes a certain amount of searing self-knowledge for author and/or reader to recognise themselves in these portraits.

This self-exposure contrasts with the contextual reassurance offered by the enmeshment in historical and political identities that characterises postmodern writers, from Salman Rushdie to Thomas Pynchon to Australian novelists of the generation succeeding White, such as Peter Carey and, in a more realistic vein, Roger McDonald. In turn, though, one can assemble a perhaps slightly jerry-built set of Australian writers who fit a late modern framework, such as Randolph Stow or Elizabeth Harrower, but who, in novels such as *Tourmaline* (1963) or *The Watch Tower* (1966; suggested by White as an alternative for the Miles Franklin Award that *Mandala* won) also feature characters who, whether through prophecy or marginality, manifest charisma.[35] The early Thea Astley might also come in here, especially in following White's ability to set books in Australia while 'breaking away successfully from Australian imagery'.[36] In *The Acolyte* (1972) Astley is curiously sceptical about charismatic appeals in a way analogous to a Harrower who sees no charismatic alternative at all to a cruelly material world or the White of *Solid Mandala* who sees charisma as boxed in by the stifling security of late-modern paralysis. The poetry of Francis Webb, whose self-aware, denuded, histrionic-parodic late romanticism, especially as recently elucidated by Toby Davidson and Bernadette Brennan, is a far more eloquent parallel to Waldo Brown's, also fits into this sort of paradigm. From another angle, so does the modernist architecture of Harry Seidler, often attacked for the seeming hostility of his Europe-influenced modernism to Australian tradition, but whose many building designs provided the foundation for a distinctly Sydney modernist idiom. All Australian writing of this period does not fit the paradigm, of course. Some is still overtly nationalistic in a way that sidesteps the question of modernity. Furthermore, the consciously classicising poetry of A.D. Hope, the overtly religious verse of James McAuley and Vincent Buckley, and the fictions of the young Thomas Keneally who, though writing with the example of White in mind, already saw history as a field on inquiry in a way that a late modern paradigm would not. But this congeries of writers – the Sarsaparilla-era White, Stow, Harrower, early Astley, Webb – presents a suggestive, even if not determinative, conjunction.

And this conjunction was paralleled by not just the material socioeconomic conditions – a redistributive welfare state – but a particular set of assumptions about normality and eccentricity that were endemic to that period. It might be asked *why* Waldo Brown is so much a figure of this era, why such a nasty yet withal admirably idiosyncratic figure could not huddle beneath the glittering arcades of neoliberalism much as, in allegorical and fantastic form, similar figures to do in the work of a neo-Marxist like China Miéville. One might answer with the Michel Foucault of *Les mots et les choses* that the normativities and eccentricities of a given era or episteme are cognitively yoked. Somebody like Waldo might have been an outsider, but was the sort of outsider enabled by the systematic ironies and formal circularities of the modernist-welfare state era, whose homologies have been limned by critics such as

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[35] As treatments like that of P. M. St. Pierre, *Janet Frame: Semiotics and Biosemiotics in Her Early Fiction* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011) have argued, the early work of Janet Frame, if the entire dynamic were extended to New Zealand, could well be included within this rubric.
[36] Lucie-Smith 142.

Michael Szalay. Thus Waldo's pain, and that he inflicts on others, is implicated and sinuously authorised by the presiding institutional mentality of his era. Waldo was miserable, tormented and tormenting. But he at least had a job in a respectable institution, an entity devoted to knowledge and learning, a library supported by the state. Waldo did not excel there. He did not make friends there. He was neither nurtured by others nor nurtured them there. But he held down a job and coped with his disappointments and limitations for the greater portion of a lifetime. His identity is enmeshed in the overall social matrix.

Waldo was not, as depicted by White, a part of what was later termed the precariat. He was not, in his employment or financial situation, subjected to the risks of an ever-churning, relentlessly mobile global neo-capitalism with no sense either of the responsibility to provide public benefices like libraries or to provide the employment offered by such non-profit institutions. Arthur also has, for most of his life, a stable if unglamorous context. Arthur was 'inclined to use' (White 1966: 270) the library too, as a patron, not an employee. Through this use, he found inspiration and comfort there. Arthur is taken care of and is able to function in the world. Arthur is not institutionalised. He lives among people with whom he can at least seek satisfying relationships. What if there was no library, if an information science centre, a series of Internet terminals, replaced it with the few remaining book depositories possessing offering shortened and intermittent hours?[37] What if Waldo himself had no option but to work at a department store or convenience store, being the kind of dignified man the customer always sees at such places, and wonders why he does not have a better job? What if Arthur were institutionalised in a mental hospital not at sixty-five but at twenty, put in a place itself no doubt underfunded by tax cuts and budget cuts, suffering from a waning sense that the weakest in society should be cared for, that the comfort of the mentally ill is not the highest priority of liquid modernity, of risk society? J.D. Scott, who reviewed the book for the *New York Times Book Review* on February 13, 1966, called the Browns 'lower-middle-class' and 'not well-educated' and says they live 'obscure, limited, sad-seeming lives.'[38] But at least they have something. Would risk society offer them anything more than does the welfare state?

What Andrew McCann sees as the colonial aspects of suburbia in White – annealing time – also, though, anneal the forces of inequality that the socioeconomic equations of late modernity held temporarily in check. The very circularity of *The Solid Mandala* is late-modern. One can come in at any moment and be somewhere in the middle of the narrative. There is egalitarianism to it. This circularity furthermore renders it hard for the society to reject anyone, to leave someone abjectly outside the circle. Waldo leaves the first library in a huff, and his departure is welcome to those who work with him. But he finds a job at another one. Not with the highest recommendations. But a job is a job. The library is a place that takes in Waldo in. It

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[37] G.J. Leckie et al, *Critical Theory for Library and Information Science: Exploring the Social from Across the Disciplines* (Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited: 2010), speak of the 'commodification' of information as a posited value in the neoliberal era.

[38] J.D. Scott, 'Symbol of Totality,' *New York Times Book Review* 13February 1966, 15. Scott was a British writer living in America. For the reception of White in American periodicals, see Roger Osborne, 'New York City Limits: Australian Novels and American Print. Culture' in Nicholas Birns and Robert Dixon, eds. *Reading Across the Pacific* (Sydney: University of Sydney Press, 2010) 299-308.

keeps him off the street. This is necessary because Waldo, though better off at keeping up the appearance of 'normality' than Arthur, is at his core *as unable to function* in 'the real world' as is his twin, and is to boot without his twin's endearing vulnerability. But White pities him for it. For the sundering of inspiration from manifest circumstances is, in White's implied view, the condition of the renunciation of cognitive unity that late modernity is forced – and forces itself – to make.

3. Judaism, Homosexuality, Twinship: Cultural Contradictions of Late Modernity

Yet White's novel also concerns another aspect of late modernity. This is the situation of social and sexual minorities, and particularly the nature of identity in an egalitarian society that has not yet fully come to terms with difference, and a world whose acknowledgment of the Holocaust has not overcome the obduracy of lingering anti-Semitic prejudice. Waldo and Arthur are, jointly, the rejected suitor of the Jewish-Australian woman, Dulcie Feinstein. The key word here is *jointly*. This is masked by what is manifestly Dulcie's disdain of Waldo (who she meets as a teenager) after he has shown her his inability to love, and her contrasting affection for and encouragement of Arthur. Arthur secretly sees Dulcie even after she has rejected Waldo and married her fellow practising Jew, the carpet-dealer Leonard Saporta. Saporta is himself very much a lower middle class yet economically viable figure characteristic of late modernity. He is a man who owns his own independent small business and offers his customers personal service. The novel means to depict him positively, and the happiness of the Saporta household is an important exception to Simon During's assertion that White thought 'modern society – especially in its Australian form – was too dependent on the modern heterosexual family, and on life as lived in family houses.'[39] Yet as happy as the Saporta marriage is, and as much as the Saportas find the contentment within late modernity that has eluded Waldo and Arthur, memories of the Brown twins linger. Dulcie names her second son by Saporta 'Arthur', which fact she reveals to Waldo in their devastating 'Encounter' on Pitt Street.[40] By naming the baby Arthur, the Saportas reveal their admiration for Arthur Brown's sensitivity and talent and their scorn for Waldo's brutality and lack of feeling. There is a religious aspect here. The Saportas are represented as observant Jews, and their shared religious practice anchors their stable and happy marriage. But the presence of Arthur in their lives also adds an extramural, esoteric, mystical aspect to their faith – what the reader of *Riders in the Chariot* might call a Himmelfarbian strand.

'Saporta' is a Sephardic name present in thirteenth-century Spain, as is, in the Jewish community there, the first name 'Dulcie'.[41] It should be pointed out that, unlike Dulcie's maiden name, Feinstein, a German-Yiddish, Ashkenazic surname immediately recognizable as 'Jewish,' only those with special knowledge would read

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[39] During 49.

[40] Pitt Street is also where the weeping man in Les Murray's 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow' hurries along 'evading believers'. Murray, *The Vernacular Republic* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1976) 30.

[41] See Aviva Ben-Hur, *Sephardic Jews in America*: *A Diasporic History* (New York: NYU Press, 2009) 74; Menachem M. Breyer, *The Jewish Woman in Rabbinical Literature* (Jersey City: KTAV, 2003) 104.

'Saporta' as Jewish. Indeed 'Saporta' would be more likely be seen as Spanish or Italian. Any surname ending in an 'o' or an 'a' is often seen by the English-speaking or lay public as Spanish or Italian, as of the Latin, Roman Catholic Mediterranean or its diasporas. This is a fate that sometimes occurs even with the Irish name Costello, the Scottish name Pattullo, the Welsh name Latta and so on. By using 'Saporta,' White is linking the Saportas to a tradition of Mediterranean mysticism that also perhaps faintly evokes the Greek Orthodox Christianity of White's partner Manoly Lascaris, conclusively established by the account of Vrasidas Karalis – whose defined faith White could not share, but which he admired.[42] A similar admiration is shown for the Saportas' Judaism, there they are not the 'free-thinking Jews' whom T.S. Eliot (whose 'Waste Land' is alluded to *en passant* in the title Waldo's unfinished late-modern *Bildungsroman* entitled *Tiresias A Youngish Man*) thought it 'undesirable' to stock the ideal commonwealth with, though White would not have minded the latter either, as is shown in his positive if tragic portrait of Dulcie's optimistic, secular, 'neat-and-tidy rationalist' father (*SM* 148).[43] Both the Saportas' Judaism and Lascaris's Greek Orthodoxy and Byzantine ancestry stem from a Mediterranean world that, as Roberto Dainotto points out, was marginalised by a later centring of 'European' identity in northern Europe, away from the contact zone of the Mediterranean where divisions between East and West were not so secure.[44]

Thus the child Arthur Saporta combines the mythic majesty of the legendary Celtic King with the hybridity and *métissage* of the Mediterranean (African-Asian-European) *oikoumene*. The younger Arthur takes the Brown twin dyad and renders it multicultural in the next generation. Yet that is only some of the valence of the Saportas' second child being named 'Arthur.' Part of what Dulcie is admitting in naming the male baby 'Arthur' – part of the embarrassment she feels in saying this in front of both her husband and Waldo on Pitt Street – is that 'Arthur' as a name alludes, yes, not to Waldo, but to a male contemporary of Dulcie's *other than Leonard Saporta*.

Despite the happiness of her marriage, Dulcie's sense of what is available in life among the opposite sex is not totally exhausted by Saporta's presence. Indeed, not only Arthur but also Waldo has been acknowledged in her relationship with Saporta. That the younger Arthur is the *second* Saporta child bolsters the idea of twinship. On the narrative level, Dulcie only knows Arthur because she knows Waldo. On the structural level, we know Arthur and Waldo are two aspects of one mandala. As Carolyn Bliss puts it, we know that Waldo knows Arthur is 'part of himself'.[45] Indeed, the readerly preference for Arthur over Waldo, the discovery we think we make from seeing the two brothers tell their stories sequentially one after another – that Arthur is a saint and Waldo a monster –, is j*ust the reading the Saportas give*, even though Arthur makes it clear he thinks of Dulcie as much and in the same manner as Waldo does.

This is, once again, not to defend Waldo *per se.* He is elitist, wants to avoid contact with humanity, and is self-deluded. Yet Waldo does genuinely aspire to be

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[42] Vrasidas Karalis, *Recollections of Mr Manoly Lascaris* (Blackheath: Brandl and Schlesinger, 2008).

[43] Christopher Ricks, *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 50.

[44] Roberto Dainotto, *Europe (in theory)* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

[45] Carolyn Bliss, *Patrick White and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986) 115.

someone who could love and marry Dulcie, even if that aspiration is revealed to be self-delusion. Waldo hopes, when he courts Dulcie, that marriage to her will enable him to write 'the novel of psychological relationships in a family' (*SM* 142), a wry comment not only on those critics who castigated White himself for not doing so but an assertion that Waldo wishes to escape from his immurement in the non-reproductive, sterile ironies of late modernity – the same ironies that protect and secure his limited life. Waldo is a prisoner of his own paradoxes, and encourages identification as much as contempt. This can only, inevitably, go a short way.

As Gordon Collier points out, even though Waldo treats Dulcie as the great love of his life and her marriage to Leonard Saporta – and the mortifying encounter with the married Saportas in Pitt Street – as the symbolic epitome of all his unfulfillment, he was nonetheless never particularly that nice to Dulcie when he knew her. Indeed, as Collier asserts, Waldo has rejected her 'mentally on covertly anti-Semitic grounds'.[46] White, by comparison, is notably philo-Semitic. This is perhaps the largest overt difference between himself and his bitter self-portrait as Waldo. Waldo would like to look on mid-century egalitarianism from a superior, cultured, haute-bourgeois vantage point. He has, though, neither the money, the ancestry, nor the social status to do this. In this, he is very different from Miss Hare in *Riders*, whose sense of superiority to those around her and conviction that she has been slighted by the world is ballasted by her spirituality and the sense of difference it gives her. Waldo wants to be like this, but cannot. He is too flawed. But the pathos of his wanting to be such a person excites our empathy, if not necessarily our aspiration, enough to make us wonder what sort of social tableau might sustain such a figure through most of a life.[47]

In so many ways, *The Solid Mandala* is the hidden twin to *Riders in the Chariot*. It is about the discontented who are *not* visionaries, and just as Waldo is an inverted negative of Miss Hare so is Leonard Saporta (and so are the entire Feinstein family) that of Himmelfarb – Saporta, an unashamed but unsecularised Jew is a median-point between Rosetree and Himmelfarb, the two Jews in *Riders*. Saporta, much like Joyce's Leopold Bloom but unlike Himmelfarb, is not an outsider just because he is a Jew. He is an ordinary, law-abiding citizen of an Anglophone commonwealth. Yet Saporta is also the ordinary analogue of Himmelfarb, the same way Waldo is of Miss Hare. Neither Saporta nor his one-time rival for Dulcie's affections are *tzaddikim.* They are closer to antitypical Jewish identities such as the *nebbish* or the *schlemiel* – the person who is nobody special. Or that society says is nobody special.

Gregory Graham-Smith has recently focused on the queer valences of the Browns' twinship, the way they do not represent an androgynous symbolic unity but 'the transgressive and resistant agency of social and sexual knowledge' (*RPW* 178). Despite White's own admission that the twins' relationship was patterned in a sense after his own with Manoly Lascaris, and despite another sense in which the Browns are two aspects of the artist himself, the thwarted heterosexual aspirations of the duet towards Dulcie Feinstein Saporta show an alignment between Judaism and

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[46] Gordon Collier, *The Rocks and Sticks of Words: Style, Discourse and Narrative Structure in the Fiction of Patrick White* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992) 102.

[47] This is not to say that the novel is not patterned and symbolic like so many of White's, but it does so in the service of a realistic, not a metaphysical, tableau.

homosexuality – as invisible minorities either singled out for persecution or mocked for their lack of social centrality and vigour in a racially and sexually essentialist society. Both Judaism and homosexuality also offer concrete non-normative identities that are not dependent on an esoteric sense of being special for distinction. But society's estimation of their mediocrity may only be a mode of defence against the potential instability they introduce. George Steiner has said 'Judaism and homosexuality (most intensely where they overlap, as in the case of a Proust or a Wittgenstein) can be seen to have been the two main generators of the entire fabric and savour of urban modernity'[48]. Or, as in White's Sarsaparilla, suburban modernity.

The Saportas' highly familial and heteronormative practice of Judaism – away from any sense of rootless cosmopolitanism or bohemian experimentation that might seem to align it with the stereotypical traits of gay life at the time – seems very different than the twins' implied or allegorized homosexuality (viz. Marr's terming of Waldo as a 'closeted homosexual', *PW* 449). Yet both Judaism and homosexuality constitute corners of minority practice that flourish even within the standardising mesh of late modernity. In era of liquid modernity and risk society, with its greater tolerance for identity politics and the emphasis on minority rights as the chief vehicle of resistance that went hand in hand for better or for worse, the relationship might have seemed more obvious. The change of the proletariat into the precariat did have the side effect of increasing diversity. But White is demonstrating that late modernity *as well as* postmodernity had its own sort of diversity. Furthermore, White uses the symbolic potential of naming to show how even the standardised but withal reassuring world of the welfare state can reach out to other possibilities, even if they are marginalised.

'Waldo' as a name in the twentieth century may have sounded parodic and unglamorous (*PW* 449 reveals White took the name from a fellow undergraduate at Cambridge who he despised); but the name has far deeper roots than this, going further back even than the middle name of Ralph Waldo Emerson, or Waldo Farber in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) which White knew and respected, and which supplied the epigraph to *The Aunt's Story*. Going back further, Peter Waldo, the late twelfth century southern French heretic, championed an asceticism that challenged the opulence of Catholic conformity, and the church classified him and his followers as heretics like the Albigensians. Waldo's name-antecedent springs up at the same time, and just across the Pyrenees, from Saporta's. These speculative tracings are not intended as mere *quellenforschungen* or trivia. They are indications of how late modernity at once hinders access to the past by boxing it up in the reliable circularity of the library but also permitting, through its striated mesh, some hints of historicity and reference. These hints are all the more valuable for being hints and not full-fledged substrates, as they would be in postmodern historical fiction such as Carey's or McDonald's. The sources of the names in the book are nuggets to be found in the library, not sustaining or animating bases for a larger and, for better or for worse, more transformative cognition. But, even as nuggets, they resonate meaningfully in the Library's framework of knowledge.

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[48] George Steiner, *George Steiner at the New Yorker* ed. Robert Boyers (New York: New Directions, 2009) 34.

As a late modern public librarian, Waldo Brown is at once master and captive of the printed book, processor of knowledge yet also captive of it. This is yet another proof that Arthur is right when he says of his twin brother: 'perhaps Waldo needs defending – from himself and others.' (*SM* 229). Waldo Brown and Leonard Saporta can now be seen as not entirely inferior to the admirable Arthur. So can we see *The Solid Mandala* as a book that testifies to a time when technology and egalitarianism could, however uneasily, coexist. White was a fiercely idiosyncratic writer whose personal trajectory and beliefs coloured much of his creative output. Yet White was also a man of his time, a time he can be placed in now in the wake of both the greater insight upon the past that an acknowledged historicity can bestow. Waldo had a miserable life and made others miserable. But he had a place in society more secure than that of the twenty-first century precariat. This sense of social security is consequential when assessing the moral and political reverberations of Patrick White's achievement.