

Patrick White: The Politics of Modernism

There is no doubt about the achievement of Patrick White (1912–90). The substantial corpus of books is there—twelve novels, three collections of stories, the plays, the autobiography. He is the one Australian writer who is known internationally. But though he is well-known, when we come to ask what he is known for, it is not so easy to get a succinct answer. What are his novels about? Are they about anything other than themselves? To define what White is we have to begin by defining what he is not; and this leads immediately into the nature of modernism. For White is the great Australian modernist. And modernism as an artistic movement is very much a system of exclusions. Much of the impulse of modernism was a denial of preceding traditions and a refusal of certain possibilities of continuity. The way in which modernism most immediately proclaimed itself was in its refusal of what had been the dominant nineteenth century mode of realism. If modernism was to be new, then it had to deny the existing, make it seem old and outdated. So that concern with the knowable, with recognizable psychological motivation, with the inventory of named objects, with causality and morality, is abandoned.

White is puzzling here because at first glance those huge, substantial novels like *The Tree of Man* (1955) or *Voss* (1957) look like classic realist novels. They seem to have a cast of characters that ranges across the social classes, they seem to portray, and in their very bulk enact, the substantiality of the material world. But that is very much an illusion. Objects and insects, flora and fauna are never very specific in White's work.

'Look', said Palfreyman, pointing at a species of diaphanous fly that had alighted on the rail of the bridge.

It appeared that he was fascinated by the insect, glittering in its

life with all the colours of decomposition....¹

But what species, what colours?

The initial impression of White's work as traditional, bulky realist fiction evaporates when you look at, or for, the detail. For it is by impression rather than detail that he works, with emotional correlatives rather than observed or inventoried life. He explains the mode himself when he writes in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) of 'The rather scrubby, indigenous trees, not so much of interest to the eye as an accompaniment to states of mind....'² This refusal of the specific, this absence of concrete categorization, is consistent. The 'small, grey bird, whacking his beak against the bough of a tree which hung beside the entrance to the cave'³ that Turner shoots in *Voss* is characteristically unnamed. Now it might be replied that *Voss* is a novel set in Australia of the 1840s, a world of new and unnamed insect and birdlife to the immigrant. At this level the absence of realistic detail is realistic. But the dominant note is of a dreamsetting; and the point is less a realism of the as yet unknown and unnamed, than an exploitation of the surrealism of this unknown.

But it is certainly the case that White is playing with the realist tradition. He is not totally freefloating. For all the surrealist components, these are not surrealist novels. They gesture at a realism which is then denied or inverted. One of the characteristics of nineteenth century realism was its celebration of the bourgeoisie as its subject, presenting them as fit subjects for art, ennobling them. But we are a long way from the worthies of George Eliot's world with White. White's bourgeoisie have become grotesques, figures of contempt, judged and condemned from the standpoint of the sensitive, alienated, upper-middle class 'outsider'. The positive humane force of a George Eliot is lacking. Of course there are sympathies, markedly; but these sympathies are reserved for the outsider figure who cannot accept the middle-class world view, the figure generally derided by the middle-class norm: Laura Trevelyan in *Voss*, Arthur Brown in *The Solid Mandala* (1966) Hurtle Duffield, the outsider as artist in *The Vivisector* (1970) or the multiple

1 Patrick White, *Voss* (1957), Harmondsworth, 1962, p.47. All quotations from this edition.

2 Patrick White, *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), Harmondsworth, 1964, p.12. All quotations from this edition.

3 *Voss*, p.322.

outsiders of *Riders in the Chariot*, Miss Hare, Mrs Godbold, Himmelfarb and Alf Dubbo.

The significance of White's refusal of realism becomes clear when we recall the dominant realist tradition of earlier Australian fiction. Indeed, it is a mark of the huge success of White that the former realist tradition is now something we have consciously to recall, so successfully and substantially has he interposed his non-realist vision. Henry Lawson had established a committed, left-wing realist mode: democratic in its sympathies, egalitarian in its perceptions of character, naturalistic in its causality and motivation, precise and laconic in its verbal manner. This was the tradition that was developed by Katherine Susannah Prichard, Vance Palmer, Christina Stead, Jack Lindsay, Alan Marshall, Judah Waten and others.

White's work is in confrontation to this. Indeed, his opposition to it was something he made absolutely explicit in one of his few explicit pronouncements. Returned to Australia

It was the exaltation of the 'average' that made me panic most....⁴

In response he wrote *The Tree of Man*, and then *Voss*:

Above all I was determined to prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism.⁵

You only have to put *The Vivisector* beside Honoré de Balzac's classic nineteenth century study of the artist, *Lost Illusions* (1837–43), to see how White idealizes the artist. The entire economic context that Balzac remorselessly establishes is absent in White's account of Hurtle Duffield. Duffield becomes successful, his paintings sell, but the detail of how this is achieved remains a total mystery. To Balzac, this was something that had to be explained. Without in any way denying the aesthetic, the creative, the artistic, Balzac presented his realist account of exactly how the artist survives, or fails. He explored the political manipulations and the economic base.

⁴ Patrick White, 'The Prodigal Son', *Australian Letters* 1 (1958), reprinted in Patrick White, *Patrick White Speaks*, Sydney, 1989, p.15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.16.

In *The Vivisector* Hurtle is ostensibly demystified. There is the gesture of exposé. Hurtle murders in his destructive relationships with those who love or get close to him; his selfishness, his sexuality are presented. But in 'exposing' the artist these only serve to aggrandize him as someone outside the norms of ordinary bourgeois responsibility; this is the familiar artist figure, sexually weird, dressing oddly, with a taste for strange company. And the central mystery remains—the economics of art. How does Hurtle make it? The explanation given is 'rich Americans' but that is no explanation at all. It simply arouses our suspicions, and White does nothing to allay them.⁶ Art is not presented in any social context; the novel celebrates the artist's anti-social qualities—the destructiveness, the alienation, the isolation. *The Vivisector* conforms to the expectations and limitations of modernist myth; and like so much of modernism, is evasive when it approaches those areas that we want to know about.

So that although *The Vivisector* is a very long book, the amount of information it delivers is comparatively slight. The exclusion of the economic and political from the novel is a characteristic of modernism. Confronting socialist realism with its focus on the representatively human, on the socially progressive, on the readily intelligible, modernism chose to privilege the alienated, the outsider, the decadent, the deviant, celebrating human isolation and non-cooperation, expressing despair rather than hope. White works firmly within these assumptions. *The Vivisector*, as its title implies, is an apologia for the art generated from destruction. It is critical of the bourgeoisie and petit-bourgeoisie of course, as so much modernism is. This is not a criticism from a cooperative or socialist perspective, however, but from the self-elevated outsider stance of the alienated, superior, élite artist. It is a critical position that allows no social hope, since it depends on the superior one against the mass; and the middle-class mass are presented with all the contempt the middle-class had previously preserved for its representations of the working class.

One reading of the work would be to relate the decadence of the artist to the decadence of the society, though this is not what White

6 On the CIA's funding of abstract expressionist painting through private foundations, see Eva Cockroft, 'Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War', *Artforum* (June 1974): 39–41; and the television documentary, 'Hidden Hands', Channel 4 (U.K.), 1995.

seems to have in mind. Hurtle's sexual relationship with the young girl, the taboo paedophilia theme, is hard to interpret in any socially representative way. It either suggests that the artist has tastes that the mass of society would condemn and cannot understand: or, negatively, the artist has tastes of a compulsive selfishness that take no account of any other person. It is an episode thrown in to challenge the reader: are you too straight, too conventional, too bourgeois, too Christian to accept this? Hopefully, most of us are.

Explorations of the interrelationship of the artist and society are not White's theme. The focus is on moments of epiphany: sudden flashes of seeing, that's how it is, and off Hurtle goes to paint. The seemingly trivial produces the stimulus. White is not making a case for the social representativeness of art at all; quite the opposite. The stress on deviance—and a deviance not socially generated—offers a critique in the sense that society is wrong, the 'normal' world is rejected. But no other vision of possibility is put in its place. And just as the artist rejects society from this sad outsider stance, so the artist experiences society's rejection and incomprehension and irrelevant responses in the art-gallery reception in the penultimate chapter. Hurtle walks out. White is acutely aware of the nature of his alienation.

This solitariness is a characteristic of most of White's protagonists; and again, it is a characteristic feature of modernism. 'The image of man in the work of leading modernist writers is by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings', Georg Lukács wrote.⁷ One of the great achievements of *Voss*, the skilful sleight of hand, is the way in which an illusion of communication and relationship is established between the two unapproachably solitary figures, Voss and Laura, through telepathy.

Telepathy is one of a range of unexplained phenomena, doubted by rationalists and materialists, that became a characteristic of modernism. Magic, occultism, theosophy, psychic phenomena were a basic part of the founders of modernism, the French symbolists, Strindberg, W. B. Yeats and their heirs through the twentieth century. A fully fledged onslaught on realism, as *Voss* was proclaimed by its author to be, might predicably be expected to incorporate something from this area. The

⁷ George Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1957), London, 1963, p.20.

issue becomes, however, whether this is part of a belief system in which White shares, or something appropriated for aesthetic effect or structural convenience. Is this anti-realist icon meaningful only, or primarily, in its denial of a certain concept of realism; not expressing anything in itself? In this second interpretation, whether White believes in telepathy or not becomes unimportant. The purpose is the aesthetic effect, the opening up of new possibilities for the novelist, the introduction of a new fictional possibility, for design or pattern or structure. This raises the central problem of modernism: does it matter if it means anything or not? The work is held to be primarily about itself, it is a fiction whose theme is fictionality; telepathy hence is a fiction around which to weave a tale. But doesn't it matter whether or not the fiction is true? Is this a true relation of the phenomena of telepathy? Brief moments of telepathic communication have been experienced by many people. But the extensive communing of Voss and Laura is a very different phenomenon.

If we remove the focus from telepathy itself, and examine what its presence excludes, another explanation for its role in the novel appears. Instead of focussing on the telepathy as a significant component of the novel, we can reinterpret it as an avoidance of an ordinary relationship between a man and a woman; its significance is not in its psychic qualities, but in its refusal of recognisable, representative heterosexuality. The 'real' experience of Voss remains that of men together in the bush away from the presence of women.

And when we return to the men together materials, it is to find yet another exclusion, yet another rejection. In this novel that in its theme purports to be an epic of Australian history, an archetypal account of a journey of exploration which we might expect to see as representative of classic Australian values, there is none of that celebration of mateship, the male camaraderie in the outback. That theme is touched on when Voss tends to Le Mesurier, cleaning him up after he has lost control of his bowels, or when Palfreyman shaves Turner. But these are comparatively isolated episodes. The fully-fledged companionship is in Voss's strange communing with Laura. Ordinary mateship, that model of socialist support given mythic dimension by Henry Lawson, is here reduced into comparative insignificance by the telepathic communing, a new, non-realist mateship myth to displace the old, socially based tradition.

In *Riders in the Chariot* White includes a little episode that explicitly rejects mateship:

Once the foreman, Ernie Theobalds, who had just received a flattering bonus, was moved to address the Jew. He asked:

‘Howya doin’ Mick?’

‘Good,’ replied the Jew in the language he had learnt to use. The foreman, who had already begun to regret things, drove himself still further. He was not unkind.

‘Never got yerself a mate?’ Ernie Theobalds remarked.

The Jew laughed.

‘Anybody is my mate’, he said.

He felt strangely, agreeably relaxed, as though it could have been true. But it made the foreman suspicious and resentful.

‘Yeah, that’s all right’, he strained, and sweated. ‘I don’t say we ain’t got a pretty dinkum set-up. But a man stands a better chance of a fair go if he’s got a mate. That’s all I’m saying. See?’

Himmelfarb laughed again—the morning had made him rash—and replied:

‘I shall take Providence as my mate’.

Mr Theobalds was horrified. He hated any sort of educated talk.

The little beads of moisture were tingling on the tufts of his armpits.

‘Okay’, he said. ‘Skip it!’

And went away as if he had been treading on eggs. (307–8)

White’s sympathies are clearly with Himmelfarb here, not with the foreman’s recoil from ‘educated talk’. But it isn’t ‘educated talk’ at all, it is talk profoundly uninformed of the traditions of Australia and of the history of resistance to economic exploitation enshrined in the concept of mateship. White is powerfully empathetic with the plight of the persecuted Jews in Europe; his sustained account of the experiences of Himmelfarb, the professor of literature, is amongst the most moving and humanly felt episodes of his work. But this sympathy is markedly not extended to Australian working-class traditions.

The account of Himmelfarb’s life in hiding and his ultimate dispatch to an extermination camp in Nazi Germany has its representative significance. That he is saved from extermination and escapes from the camp after an uprising is markedly less typical. His fate in Australia,

victim of a mock-crucifixion on Good Friday from the consequences of which he dies of heart failure, his house burned down by his drunken, anti-Semitic, proletarian workmates, is grotesquely untypical of Australian social reality. White's gesture of sympathetic compassion for the Jewish Himmelfarb is a mark of his break with the racist attitudes of his Anglo-Saxon ruling class background in the squattocracy; his attribution of racist violence to the Australian working class, however, indicates how small and temporary a break from those values he achieved.

The paralleling of his eccentric and grotesque episode of Himmelfarb's crucifixion with the historically attested killing of six million Jews cannot but suggest that the Australian working class shared a complicity in the holocaust. Yet there is no known historical evidence to support such a case. The portrayal of the proletariat as murderously and destructively anti-Semitic owes little to reality, but much to White's patrician fears of the unknown workers, leading him to create and disseminate class myths as offensive and divisive and in their social effects evil, as any of the anti-Semitic propaganda of National Socialism. 'It could be imagined that such scenes are commonplace in factory life,' Jack Beasley remarked. And he continued:

'There is nothing accidental in the choice of workers as the perpetrators of this outrage.... It is White's moment of truth, the ultimate in his literary transmutation of ideology. The obscene jest must carry its mockery of some of the finest elements in our literary tradition. And the workers must be the vehicle of the outrage because White, the ideologue of decay in our society, takes a compulsive stand against those who stand for the future, for optimism, for life.'⁸

For all the modernism, there is something markedly old-fashioned about White's patrician treatment of the lower orders. It is more characteristic of the class distinctions of English middle class fiction of the 1930s. In recording the demotic, you can suggest it either through rhythm and word order, or spelling. To use a different spelling serves for class

⁸ Jack Beasley, *Journal of an Era: Notes for the Red Letter Days*, Earlwood, 1988, pp.103-4. Originally published in *Realist Writer* 9 (September 1962).

demarcation, condescension, discrimination. It is possible to write 'should have' or to abbreviate it 'should've'; White tends to write 'should of' when the lower orders speak, which adds a grammatical illiteracy in the visual representation. This is unnecessary unless the concern is to stress ignorance. White's demotic is generally offensive, concerned not to replicate pronunciation or intonation, but to mark off the vulgar from the respectable, the threatening mass from the privileged élite. And these endemic snobberies of taste and class spread from the local particularity of accent into larger disabling conceptual ineptnesses. As Brian Kiernan put it,

the wider analogy between the 'evil' of those who prefer plastic to wood, inhabit brick veneer or fibro homes, and go on Sunday drives, and the evil of Nazi genocide seems a confusion of moral with aesthetic values.⁹

The bourgeoisie emerge hardly better than the working class from White's treatment. The 'savage analysis of Society', as Vincent Buckley remarked, served to establish its 'unreality', in comparison with which Voss's journey achieves its 'epic stature'.¹⁰ The Sydney world is seen as boring, snobbish, restrictive, preoccupied with material possessions and status. If Voss is in opposition to that, he can be assumed to represent something in opposition to those values. Voss may be deluded, comic, psychopathic, transcendent, mad. These interpretations may seem to be contradictory, but they all share in the extraction of Voss from commercial and social values. Explorers, however, characteristically and representatively explore for commercial and colonial purposes: to annex land for enclosure, to seek minerals for exploitation. Indeed, White makes it clear that Voss is financed by Mr Bonner. But the historical and economic realities are then evaded with the presentation of Voss as markedly unconnected with those expected values. The myth of going into the desert to find one's soul, a characteristic of Australian modernism as H. P. Heseltine notes,¹¹ is privileged above any socio-

9 Brian Kiernan, *Patrick White*, London, 1980, p.80.

10 Vincent Buckley, 'The Novels of Patrick White', in Geoffrey Dutton, ed., *The Literature of Australia*, Ringwood, 1964, p.423.

11 H. P. Heseltine, 'The Literary Heritage', *Meanjin* 21 (1962), reprinted in C. B. Christesen, ed., *On Native Grounds*, Sydney, 1968, p.13.

economic investigations. White has attempted to give the exploration of Australia a mythic quality; and the effect of this myth is to deflect attention from the truth of the exploration period, the land grab. It doesn't matter for White's ideological purposes that Voss's mythic nature is open to debate or dispute, is ambiguous or even contradictory. These very contradictions focus attention on the 'mystery' of Voss to deflect concern from the economic and social issues.

The death of Voss is an important part of the mythic structure White creates. There are the allusions to the crucifixion, the spear in the side, the nails in the cross. The imagery has been seen as evasive,¹² or explained as literary 'myth' with no implications of belief.¹³ Whether meaningful in any religious sense or not, the literary effect is to present Voss as some sort of martyr. Now many explorers were killed by native peoples. Captain Cook met his end in this way. These were important confrontations between imperialist agents and the indigenous peoples. Voss, hence, becomes emblematic of the discovery and history of white Australia: mystic European killed by aboriginals. What we need to ask is how many mystic white men were killed by aboriginals, in comparison with the number of aboriginals killed by white men. The discrepancy is immense, and that very discrepancy reveals the message and purpose of *Voss*. It inverts the historical reality of the mass killing of aboriginals to present the ritual killing of the privileged white explorer. A scandalously unrepresentative event is taken as the basis of a social myth. This is, of course, the nature of official myths; the truth is inverted.

Rather than explicitly debating ideas, White's fiction excludes certain contemporary themes and enacts others. As an expression or embodiment of alienation, his fiction offers effective and moving insights; but in its refusal to offer or conceive of anything to resist the forces of alienation, it becomes a part of that very situation it diagnoses and expresses.¹⁴

12 Margaret Walters, 'Patrick White', *New Left Review* 18 (1963): 47.

13 G. A. Wilkes, 'A Reading of Patrick White's *Voss*', *Southerly* 27 (1967): 170-71; reprinted in G. A. Wilkes, ed., *Ten Essays on Patrick White*, Sydney, 1970, pp.140-1.

14 See Jack Lindsay, *Decay and Renewal: Critical Essays on Twentieth Century Writing*, Sydney, 1976, pp.257-9.

If there are no social possibilities, if the social fabric and social pretensions are a lie, if sensitive individuals are all driven to madness or destruction, then there remains nothing other than alienation to express. In such a context, in which that art that claims to have a message or answer is seen only as a part of the lie, the only role for art is autonomous pattern making, the expression of desperation or angst in symbolic form. Art becomes in effect another empty reification, not dealing with morality or spirituality or society or politics, but purely concerned with art. Pure art.

In much of modernism the artist's energy, creativity, craft and skill have all gone into producing the artefact. Hence the critical preoccupation with form and manner. Art having been promoted into that official cultural space once occupied by religion, holds the space by virtue of representing nothing other than itself. White's vision of alienation, of human isolation and futility, facilitates this art of exclusions: nothing other than art itself is seen as worthy of representation. This is the nature of modernism, that it is not the ideas but the patterns, the forms, the 'art' that are the work's concern. Whether in the end that is enough for most readers, we may doubt. Indeed, the drift away from modern fiction may well be explained by just this devaluation of ideas. Form may be fascinating for the practitioner, but empty form remains empty form. This, however, has been the project of modernism, in literature no less than the visual arts; to criticize White for this is to criticize a single practitioner of what has been the dominant movement in western art of this century. At least we can say that Australia stands with other western cultures in having an uncompromising modernist as its privileged literary icon. We are certainly part of the modern world in that.

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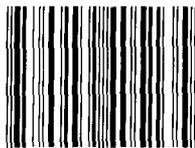
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