

# PATRICK WHITE: AUSTRALIA'S POET OF MYTHIC LANDSCAPES OF THE SOUL

*MAN – LANGUAGE – AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

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Ryszard W. Wolny

WYDAWNICTWO  
WYŻSZEJ SZKOŁY FILOLOGICZNEJ  
WE WROCŁAWIU



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Reviewers: Prof. Andrew Taylor (Edith Cowan University, Perth, Western Australia)

Prof. Ewa Kęłowska-Ławniczak (University of Wrocław, Philological School of Higher  
Education in Wrocław, Poland)

Proofreading: Barbara Woldan

Layout and typesetting: Sylwia Rudzińska

Cover design: Konstancja Górny

**ISBN 978-83-60097-23-6**



WYDAWNICTWO WYŻSZEJ SZKOŁY FILOLOGICZNEJ WE WROCŁAWIU

50–335 Wrocław, ul. Sienkiewicza 32, tel. (+48 71) 328 14 14

fax (+48 71) 322 10 06, <http://www.wsf.edu.pl>, e-mail: [wsf@wsf.edu.pl](mailto:wsf@wsf.edu.pl)

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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My sincere thanks must go, in the first place, to Andrew Taylor, one of the most prominent Australian poets and academics, my mentor and friend at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia, and then both a companion and guest of honour at numerous conferences and symposia I organised in Poland, first, for inspiring me to write a book about the writer who changed the way Australian literature was received in the world and, then, for his invaluable patronage over what I have been doing in regards to Australian literature.

I am also grateful to another great Australian poet, novelist and former Professor of Australian Literature at Sydney University of New South Wales, Peter Skrzynecki, for generously granting me his Patrick White library with many priceless first editions of the Nobel Prize winner's novels.

I owe my gratitude to Professor Andrzej Ciuk, Dean of Faculty of Philology, University of Opole, for his continuing support and encouragement both as a colleague and friend. I am further indebted to Mr Ryszard Opala, MSc, Chancellor of Wrocław Philological School of Higher Education, for making my project to publish this book possible, as well as the School's editorial staff, Ms Sylwia Rudzińska and Ms Barbara Woldan.

Finally, I have to thank my wife and daughter, my Mother and brother and my Australian family for their unconditional and unwavering faith in me, and my friends and colleagues in Poland and elsewhere in the world for the gift of friendship they unhesitatingly offered me.

*Ryszard W. Wolny*

Katowice – Wrocław, July 2013



## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT

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HV	<i>Happy Valley</i>
LD	<i>The Living and the Dead</i>
AS	<i>The Aunt's Story</i>
TM	<i>The Tree of Man</i>
V	<i>Voss</i>
PWS	<i>Patrick White Speaks</i>
RC	<i>Riders in the Chariot</i>
SM	<i>The Solid Mandala</i>
Vi	<i>The Vivisector</i>
ES	<i>The Eye of the Storm</i>
FL	<i>A Fringe of Leaves</i>
TA	<i>The Twyborn Affair</i>
MMO	<i>Memoirs of Many in One</i>
FG	<i>Flaws in the Glass</i>
SOED	<i>Shorter Oxford English Dictionary</i>
NESB	Non English-Speaking Background





## PREFACE

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Even though there has been a substantial number of books published on Patrick White's contribution to the world literature, particularly in the decade shortly after the Australian had been granted the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973, none of them was able to treat this outstanding figure comprehensively enough to cover all aspects of his writing including, apart from his great novels, also his plays and poetry – the fact, on the one hand, disappointing, but, on the other, quite understandable.

Writing is, in the first place, choosing and one has to choose not only how to write but also about what to write. Stemming from this conviction, this book, however limited in scope, proposes a reading of some of his most important novels from an autobiographical point of view, that is to say, from the point presented in his *Flaws in the Glass* (1981) and other writings, particularly in the context of his relationship with his mother, father and other members of his immediate and extended family and later his life partner, Manoly Lascaris, which allows to fully understand the main characters Patrick White constructs in his fiction.

*Flaws in the Glass*, subtitled *A Self-Portrait*, just to signal the writer's fascination with painting, takes us on an unusual journey through his formative years of childhood and adolescence, to the time spent in London, New York and the Near East, in Greece and Australia. His main motif, constantly recurring in his autobiography, is his mother, Ruth, who then appears as Mrs Hunter, an old dying tyrant, in *The Eye of the Storm* (1973). A thesis that I formulate in this book is that she was the major source of misogyny that developed later in him and responsible for what had happened to him in his youth, particularly in an English boarding school, the stay in which he treated as a prison sentence. In *Patrick White: A Tribute* (1991), Dorothy Green emphasises the importance of White's autobiography, arguing that it is "the only necessary guide to reading the

novels” (4), and which, overall, may make one believe that the intimate details contained there approximate it to the condition of intimist writing that now becomes an acknowledged genre (more in Chapter Two).

Another, not less important aim of this book is to bring White and his oeuvre to the greater attention of scholars of literatures in English in Europe, particularly in Poland and other Eastern European countries, for whom Patrick White and his mystic world still remain a virtually unexplored territory of experience and for whom his notorious obscurity is one of the few things they can hesitatingly say of him. Hopefully, the posthumously published novel, *The Hanging Garden* (2012), may stimulate White scholarship also in the northern hemisphere to raise the issues of how far one can go in editing other writer’s texts so that they still bear his/her name (paradoxically, the novel has been prepared for press by two female Sydney University professors, Margaret Harris and Elizabeth Webby, which adds a particular flavour to his apparent misogyny and which goes against his last will for all unfinished texts and personal documents be burnt and never released).

\* \* \*

The first part of this project is devoted to Australia and Patrick White’s art of autobiography in the belief that it is a matter of vital importance to locate White within the surroundings that he wished to locate himself since Australia, remaining a mystery till the last of his days, was always “the purest well from which the creative artist draws” (“The Prodigal Son”) for him and the whole generations of artists, poets, painters, composers, playwrights who came with and after him. Particular attention is paid to White’s autobiography, first, in *Flaws in the Glass* and, then, in his 1958 essay “The Prodigal Son,” which, although more general, details his social views he had on returning to Australia for good. The importance of autobiography in White cannot be overestimated. On many occasions, White explained that his characters are fundamentally and naturally himself, that is to say, that he is all his characters, including some female ones. His idea was, and this is exemplified in the last chapter of the book, to create an androgynous self, the self that would contain both male and female elements – more in a psychological and dramatic than sexual

sense, which causes that his alleged misogyny is more complicated than it may look at a glance.

The second part focuses on what seems to constitute the main body of White's literary output: symbolism, vision, mysticism – all located within the landscape of Australian imagination, where desert's emptiness is both symbolic of Australian spiritual vacuum as well as a mystic space of reconciliation with the divine, and the city – the city of Sydney and its suburbs, imaginary and real – the place of visions, sufferings, sacrifices and, finally, a crucifixion of a Jew to repeat, to paraphrase, to reconstruct, in a modern sense, Christ's passion. The Australian interior has always had this touch of magic and mystery not only due to the fact that it had, for a long time, been largely unexplored and therefore unknown, but also because of an unsettling landscape and "ghost" people who, in Voss (1957), demanded from a daring white explorer the highest sacrifice of his life to make this land "man's land," to make it knowable and habitable for all Australians regardless of race and ethnic background. White's preference for spiritual, intuitional over material, sense-based forms of knowledge makes him transcendental also in the sense of his insistence upon individuality, isolation and neo-Platonic idea of nature as mystery.

Patrick White's writing, on the whole, inscribes itself within the European modernist tradition of psychologised colonial writing as inaugurated by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), which explored the alleged conflict between civilisation and savagery alongside its ethical consequences, but White's contribution has been far more complex not just because of the progress of time, different approaches and methods, including Jungian unconscious and stream of consciousness, but rather because of his concentration on the individual mind and a detailed psychological portraits of his characters, both male and female, he draws so meticulously in his novels, the selection of which will be the focus in this book.

This book will discuss neither Patrick White's poetry nor his plays; nonetheless, it remains obvious that his prose fulfils the conditions of poetry: it is fundamentally based on rhythm, uses a variety of figures of speech, principally metaphors and similes, variations in syntax (he was accused of violating the English language – the issue will be further discussed in Chapter One) and, most characteristically, his diction in his prose is very poetic, which reinforces the point Thelma Herring made

almost half a century ago that he is among “those who have tried to extend the frontiers of the novel in the direction of poetry” (1970: 3).

Also, in regard to his dramatic talents – his eight plays need another book to be properly discussed – it should be clearly stated that they are visible and audible in virtually each line of the dialogues in his novels that might have equally well been used in the theatre.

Doubtless, this book, like almost all books, has its limitations, imperfections, shortcomings, obscurities, inadequacies, but, like others of this kind, may help in one way or another, primarily by encouraging to read and/or re-read *White*, which implies taking a challenge and decide to part with prejudices and prejudgements, to “cleanse the doors of perception,” to listen with the “ears behind the ears.” And this means a lot to me.

## INTRODUCTION

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In the highest circle an ultimate mystery lurks behind the mystery, and the wretched light of the intellect is of no avail. One may still speak reasonably of the salutary effects of art. We may say that fantasy, inspired by instinctual stimuli, creates illusory states which somehow encourage or stimulate us more than the familiar natural or known supernatural states, that its symbols bring comfort to the mind, by making it realize that it is not confined to earthly potentialities, however great they may become in the future; that ethical gravity holds sway side by side with impish laughter at doctors and parsons.

Paul Klee, *Credo*

Patrick Victor Martindale White (28 May 1912–30 September 1990) was not an intellectual writer. Not even an intellectual himself. He was just a humble builder, a maker, a composer, a painter; that is to say, a poet – a poet of words. He conscientiously constructed his landscapes – both physical and mental – of the colours his imagination was able to produce. He painstakingly charted, like a true cartographer or an early explorer, the lonely paths to what is commonly referred as truth, the visions of which were clearly prophetic and worriedly unorthodox. That, alongside his fierce denunciations of modern Western society, particularly Australian post-war middle class, eventually earned him an undeserved title of “Australia’s Most Unreadable Novelist.” It may rightly be argued that Australia in the 1950s and 1960s was yet not prepared for the writers like White: generally, the readers still expected literature to be life-like and easy and they were not interested in “works of the imagination that unsettle the surface of things” (Dutton 1963: 3). His departure from realism was reflected in his mysticism and symbolism alongside his liking of mythologizing since he wished to uncover “mystery and poetry” of life and to replace the obsession with material possessions with a rich inwardness which stirred imagination and prophetic

abilities, to give the generations of Australians this extra dimension they, he feared, lacked so much, which made their lives so flat and unimportant. He wished to populate this “Great Australian Emptiness,” both in the sense of the continent and its inhabitants’ minds, with complex characters, with problems different than accumulation of material possessions, with intricacies of human motivation, with the spiritual and the eternal.

In terms of literary period classification, White belongs to (late) modernism and (early) postmodernism; yet, his most important writings were published long before any serious debates on postmodernism, mostly in Europe and the U.S., even started. In *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (2005 [1985]), Selden, Widdowson and Brooker maintain:

The term “postmodernism” has been the subject of much debate especially during the 1980s and 1990s. Some see it as simply the continuation and development of modernist ideas; others have seen in postmodern art a radical break with classical modernism; while others again view past literature and culture retrospectively through postmodern eyes, identifying texts and authors (de Sade, Borges, the Ezra Pound of *The Cantos*) as “already” postmodern. Yet another argument, associated principally with the philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas, claims that the project of modernity – which here designates the philosophical, social and political values of reason, equality and justice derived from the Enlightenment – is as yet unfulfilled and should not be relinquished. (197)

Patrick White seems, therefore, to be the one of those who tried to continue this vast project of (European) humanism on the Australian soil, mostly unsuccessfully in his time. As a novelist, he continued the line of the “grand narratives” of social and intellectual progress initiated by the European Enlightenment, by transferring them into the Australian bush, like in *The Tree of Man* (1955), or taking it into the desert, like in *Voss*. Yet, like a true modernist, he fundamentally questioned the notion of “reality” and “historical truth.” He belonged to that – not too numerous at his time – group of Western writers who, as early as in the 1950s and 1960s, were able to predict the direction in which human sciences would progress and anticipate the dominance of the sign or image (and the visual in popular culture) over the real and its gradual and inevitable disappearance. A dedicated modernist, he persistently tried to uncover

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and disclose the intricate operations of human psyche, thus his narratives of epic proportions have been deeply psychologised and his use of the stream-of-consciousness technique always consistent.

White was among those who predicted the moral depravity of middle-class, later turn-global, consumer capitalism, the issue of which he expressed in, among others, "The Prodigal Son" (1958) and he also held Australians responsible for maintaining this nefarious condition of the world.

At the earlier period of his writing career, Patrick White experienced considerable problems with his national identity, which, in the manner of late twentieth-century postcolonial theorists, like Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989), among others, believed was a dynamic, changeable phenomenon. The personal experiences, doubtless, reflected in a variety of his writings, threw off sparks for the then and contemporary Australia, forecasting what was to become one of the hottest issues in today's debates and discourses of postcolonial studies, that is, the problem of self identity, national identity or hybrid identity. By formulating a very fundamental question why to study Australian literature, Huggan (2007) touched upon the problematic that probably occupies the minds of the researchers in not only English-speaking countries:

The question is nothing if not direct, and it deserves a direct answer. Australia has a large, diverse, and exciting body of creative writing that is at least the equal, possibly the envy, of many national literatures. Its compelling themes – the quest for belonging and identity, the pull between land and language (Goodwin 1986), the continuing attempt to recover and come to terms with an often violent past – reveal links with other nation-oriented settler literatures: American, Canadian, New Zealand, South African. But they also resonate with the concerns of an international, increasingly a globalized, modernity. Australia's literature is a distinctively, even a defiantly national achievement, but its writers just as unmistakably belong to the wider world. While Australian literature stands on its own, it also represents a genuine 'Anglophone alternative' (Birns 2002): a refreshing challenge to the imagined supremacy of British and American literatures, and to the high-handedness and parochialism that continue to underline the teaching and study of English literature at many schools and universities, both in Australia and elsewhere. (2–3)

Postcolonialism and postcolonial theories may offer, and they certainly do offer, a possibility of re-reading White from more contempo-

rary positions, particularly, in terms of hybrid identity, “white” mythology and race, but it seems of importance to see White’s literary output also in the light of new historicism (autobiography, in the first place) and, partially, of deconstruction. Obviously, in the main, White’s writing is a product of European metaphysics, in which ideas prevail over material ramifications of reality (the last colonial metaphysical writer, as he was called); however, if we scrutinise his texts circumspectly enough, we may come to a conclusion that Jürgen Habermas was right when he argued that the project of modernism had not been finished yet since – and this is the thesis that may be formulated here – White’s writing exhibits some traces of what might be called a deconstructive thinking in terms of the strategy inaugurated by Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (1976 [1967]), one of them being “violent hierarchy,” which he always opposed. An instance of this could be the privileging of nature over civilisation or/and civilisation over nature, the issue current in Australian (white) literature since its early beginnings in the late eighteenth century. When we say that “nature” preceded “civilisation,” we are asserting a violent hierarchy in which a pure presence lauds itself over a mere supplement. However, if we look closely enough, we find that nature is always already contaminated with civilisation; there is no “original” nature, only a myth which we desire to promote and which White wanted to undo most evidently in *The Tree of Man* (1955), attempting, as it were, to equate civilisation with nature and/or nature with civilisation. The simplest possible exegesis of this Derridian supplementation would be to say that civilisation preceded nature, but that would be a simple reversal of the centuries-old hierarchy in which civilisation was substituted for nature. Civilisation is a second comer, a supplement that contaminates the original nature, thus we immerse ourselves in an abysmal regression: what was first? As a result, we shall never be able to reach the original moment of “pure” nature when it was not contaminated with civilisation, not even when we reverse the hierarchy and argue that there was no nature until after civilisation. A deconstructive reading, therefore, would go on to recognise that the couplet cannot be hierarchized in either direction without “violence” since (Australian) civilisation is both addition *and* substitution of (Australian) nature. In other words, what Patrick White did in *The Tree of Man* was to recognise that there is no fundamental difference between the two and the all-powerful difference



is undone, at least in his novels (this issue will be discussed more fully in the chapter devoted to the landscape of Australian imagination).

The aim in most – if not all – of his novels was, however, to uncover, as he insisted unremittingly, “the mystery and poetry,” the latter not necessarily having to be the metrical composition but rather the grandest, the most refined and sublime condition of human existence. He tried to find inspiration to construct his idiosyncratic set of beliefs and his own interpretive method in a variety of sources, including mysticism, Gnosticism, transcendentalism, Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean voluntarism. However, he did not start writing his novels having a definite, well-organised system in mind; on the contrary, it was a long and winding path he had to travel before he reached what grew organically in him, before he understood himself. Always struggling with himself, his parents, his own countrymen, their narrow-mindedness, he was never prepared to compromise, to take what was suggested, imposed, trendy; therefore, he rejected realism and nationalism, Australian myth-making and cheap popularity. He, instead, turned collective Australian heroism into individual failure, changed cherished and worshipped materialism into disdained spirituality, transformed an acclaimed cult of Australian physical youth and beauty into an obsession with ugly and decaying body of (usually) old women. Only nowadays are we able to fully appreciate his complicated and eloquent prose largely thanks to new methodological tools that we have at our disposal, New Historicism and Derridian deconstruction, in particular, to bring to life White’s “own romantic reconstruction of the past” (emphasis added, FG 39).

Patrick White, doubtless the most prominent Australian writer ever, is Australia’s only Nobel Prize Winner for Literature (1973) for, as the Swedish Academy stated in their commendation, having “introduced a new continent into literature” with his epic and psychologized narrative art. Being born in England, White has – for a considerable period of time – been regarded as an English writer totally alien to Australia. His parents, a pastoralist family, came from the Upper Hunter region in New South Wales. They brought him back to Australia as a six months old baby. At thirteen, he was sent to England for secondary schooling. At eighteen, he persuaded his parents to allow him to go back to Australia to work as a jackeroo on his uncle’s sheep station before being sent back to England again to study modern languages at Cambridge University.

He also spent some vacations in Germany and developed a lasting interest in German and French literature. After taking his degree, intent on forging a career for himself as a writer, he settled in London to write novels, plays and poetry. White's first novel, *Happy Valley*, was published in London in 1939 and *The Living and the Dead* in 1941. The novel, which even White did not like much, set a pace for his later writings. Dutton (1963) suggests that

[his] style is much purged from the excesses of the earlier book, although the stream of consciousness of each character is pumped rather forcibly from time to time. However, to any sympathetic reader following White's progress it would be obvious by now that White's style is not baroque but gothic; it is not composed of delicious flourishes on a plain structure but of subtly related materials from which no details can be detached without upsetting the whole. Likewise the colours of the illumination, the gargoyles and the dark corners, are all deliberate. White can write plain prose if he wants to, but he clearly thinks that the novel, or his sort of novel, needs something more than plain prose, something that will give the novel the range of reference with which poetry is acquainted. (15)

Gothicism of White's writing, alongside a tendency to make his prose sound as if it were poetry, was not noticed immediately by the critics as his distinctive mark. Nonetheless, the then critic, Edwin Muir, expressed his great praise for the young writer, seeing in him a follower of such acclaimed novelists like James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence:

*The Living and the Dead* is not a book that can be dealt with in the everyday vocabulary of the reviewer. To read it is an experience resembling one's first experience of the work of Joyce and Lawrence; it is of the same order; it has the same unexpectedness; and one feels it may turn out to be even more significant. Mr. White has a passionate spirit of exploration, in his dealing with experience, which is given only to writers to whom imagination is a calling. (Dutton 1963: 19)

In 1940, White was commissioned as an Air Force intelligence officer and served in the Middle East. His experiences in the Western Desert led him to the reading of Australian explorers. Eire's *Journal of Expeditions into Central Australia* evoked in him "the terrible nostalgia for the desert landscapes," a feeling that was to influence his later novels, above all *Voss*. There he also met Manoly Lascaris, who then became his life-

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long partner. His first visit to his parents' country after the war made him decide to settle in Australia. *The Aunt's Story*, set in Australia, the South of France and the U.S.A., was published that year (1948). It was a very uneasy and uncomfortable novel since White made an insane female character a dominating voice in it to judge upon those who were, or at least thought they were, perfectly reasonable and sane.

Much anticipated literary success came much later with the publication of, first, *The Tree of Man* in 1955 and, then, *Voss* in 1957. The two epic novels, completely alien to the taste of contemporary Australians, were highly acclaimed internationally, in the first place the U.S. and the U.K., and then in Asia, particularly in Japan, for, as it seems, an innovative treatment of the theme popular and frequently used in literatures worldwide: the individual versus the world. In the former, it is the man (Stan Parker) and then his family and the following generations of his family versus the Australian bush, in the latter – it is the man (Voss, the German) versus the Australian desert, both utterly unheroic epics in prose that stunned the world and Australia, in particular. Apparently, the inspiration to write them came from Frederick McCubbin's triptych "The Pioneers" (1904), which was a paean to European pioneers' endeavours to settle vast and seemingly intractable stretches of land. Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* was, therefore, a long and ironic reflection on that painting and a revision of the commonplaces of the saga form for a post-war readership, just as *Voss* attempted the same revision of quest romance. Both the cases of White and of Australian narrative painting suggest another of the wellsprings of inter-war saga, and its attempt to discover the nature of Australia's Australia.

His disenchantment with the materialism and shallowness of the Australian middle class and with what he called "the Great Australian Emptiness" found its issue in the 1958 essay, "The Prodigal Son," in which he articulated his concern with his country's future. White wrote it for the journal *Australian Letters* that introduced him as "perhaps Australia's greatest living novelist." Other than just an occasional letter to a newspaper, it was White's first incursion into public debate, which provoked a storm of criticism from various literary circles that accused White of elitism and intellectual snobbism and, therefore, Chapter Three will be devoted exclusively to "The Prodigal Son" since it was White's first attempt at sketching his autobiography and revealing it publically.

It is important to recognize White's conflicting loyalties to England and Australia. In many respects the English background and influences are obvious in his writing, which is particularly noticeable in his autobiography, *Flaws in the Glass* (1981). Even though all the later novels are wholly or mainly set in Australia, they belong to the European epic tradition insofar as they are inspired by and based on Greek mythology, Judeo-Christian mysticism, Carl Gustav Jung's psychology, and the Joycean stream-of-consciousness technique: "part of White's greatness lies in his ability to invent and give expression to mythopoesis. He is one of the outstanding mythmakers of the twentieth century. White's sources are classical and biblical myth, Plato and the Cabbala, Eastern religions and Jung, as well as Aboriginal mythology" (Coad 1993: 2).

White has quite often been compared to the greatest among Russian and French novelists. White's "Australianness" and commitment to the continent are nevertheless generally acknowledged in the sense that his return brought true colours back to his palette and, in *The Aunt's Story* (1948), introduced a new style into his canon, initiating novels of depth and dedication:

Patrick White's novels have been a barometer of the destructive process. Faithful both to despondency and joy, they have responded to the storms that nearly destroyed European civilization, to the harshness of Australia and the dryness of Australians, above all to private suffering and the driving will or sloppy indifference which turns man away from life and in towards death. (Dutton 1963: 10)

In *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (2009), in the chapter on Australian novel, "The Challenge of the Novel. Australian Fiction since 1950," Susan Lever acknowledges Patrick White's prominent position in the history of the genre on the Australian soil, arguing that

[t]he novel, the literary genre most associated with the Enlightenment in Europe, has often carried progressive ideas to a popular audience. After World War II it also became a source of challenge to those ideas. Modernism in Australian art emerged relatively late in the 20th century, but its critical attitude to modernity and its distrust of rational thinking is evident in many Australian novels written after the war. The ambivalent attitude of Australian writers to modernity is expressed repeatedly in the novels published after Patrick White's in the 1950s, and White is a pivotal figure in the development of the Australian novel since World War II. (499)

White introduced into the Australian novel what it had not known before: the grand narration of epic proportions combined with modernist narrative techniques, most notably the stream of consciousness, and with what became an acknowledged writerly practice on both sides of the Atlantic: Freudian and then Jungian psychoanalysis and archetypal psychology, the things unheard of before in the Australian novel. Furthermore, he gave the novel the quality of poetry:

One of White's achievements was to establish the pre-eminence of the novel in Australia. Before the publication of *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*, Australian poets – such as Kenneth Slessor, Douglas Stewart, R. D. FitzGerald, A. D. Hope, Judith Wright and James McAuley – held the high ground of Australian literary art. White's novels demonstrated that high art could be achieved in the prose form, as he pushed the novel towards the metaphoric and symbolic languages associated with modernism. In his hands it was no longer the novel of character, nor narrative, let alone of 'social issues'. *The Tree of Man*'s ordinary people had a mythological dimension, *Voss*'s explorers wrestled with the unavoidable limits of embodiment, as the novelist speculated about the relationship between physical and metaphysical worlds. This had been marked as the territory of Australian poets who sought to renew the myths and to test language for its symbolic possibilities. *Voss*, the explorer, belonged with Francis Webb's Leichhardt (*Leichhardt in Theatre*, 1952), Stewart's Scott of the Antarctic (*Fire on the Snow*, 1944), and McAuley's *Captain Quiros* (1964), rather than with Eleanor Dark's prosaic Captain Phillip (*The Timeless Land*, 1941). (499)

Lever is by all means right to emphasise the role of Patrick White in giving the Australian novel this absolutely unheard of quality in prosaic writing in the Antipodes: the metaphoric and symbolic dimension that made it equal with European and American masterpieces of the time. Also, thematically, White's writing was a novelty in Australian novelist art: even though it undertook universal motifs, such as an individual vs. Nature (the acclaimed nineteenth-century American epic novel *Moby Dick* readily springs to mind) and sets it against the Australian nature (the bushland), it is still not very typical of Australian novels in general since it does not promote the Australian pioneering spirit in a realistic and heroic way, but treats it rather as a pretext to deeper reflections on life and individual destiny, not always heroic but always symbolic and metaphoric – the style not appreciated in his lifetime and not even now by the other great Australian novelist:

In a 2007 article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, David Malouf wrote that 'Like James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and William Faulkner, Patrick White was a practitioner of High Modernism, a style and an approach almost no one attempts today. This is fashion, and fashions pass' (David Malouf, 'Castle Hill Lear', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 Jan. 2007, p. 12). But White was not only a high modernist, he was also a writer whose work shows sensitivity to shifts in cultural understanding, as it does his own shifting beliefs about art. Unlike Samuel Beckett, White returned from Europe to live among his own people – suburban post-war Australians – and to struggle with the limits of their experience. (499)

When Patrick White was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1973, the Swedish Academy's commendation referred to the author's epic and psychological narrative art as having introduced a new continent into literature. This standpoint may seem surprising now, but at that time it was a generally valid Swedish (and European) perspective – up to then literary criticism had largely ignored post-colonial writing and other new literatures in English. In many non-European countries, however, Patrick White was a well-known name, and he had already won prestigious prizes. His Nobel Literature Prize was the first to be awarded to an Australian, it is true, but the quality of Australian literature in general and of Patrick White's writing in particular had long been recognised not only by Australians but also outside the country. To White's fellow-countrymen, the Nobel Prize confirmed his status as a major novelist whose fiction had, for more than twenty years, been regarded as an important contribution to the literature of the English-speaking world.

### **European or Australian?**

As has already been mentioned, at the earlier period of his writing career, Patrick White experienced considerable problem with his national identity. White's loyalties, then, may roughly be divided into two groups: the one around Australia with her unique environment and peculiar crash of traditions (native and migrant), and the other around the common European heritage of Judeo-Christian civilisation. And precisely these divided loyalties, this peculiar dichotomy of the mind produced what no other Australian writer before White had done: the shattered, unheroic picture of the land in which one has to suffer pain before they are allowed

to love it. White's view – largely the outsider's view – lacks the insider's original one-sidedness and apprehension against making any major and substantiated criticism, so his writings, as if it were, naturally “enlarged” the understanding of Australia. As Dutton prophetically forecast this in the early 1960s, while calling it was time for imagination and humility to take their place, “Australia will undergo the discomfort of having its understanding enlarged by a writer of genius; White has sufficient humility to stick it out” (1963: 9). We must agree with Graham Huggan (2007) who, much later, argued that

[t]o see Australian literature in a postcolonial context is to recognize the dialectical interplay between one, frequently mythologized location (e.g. ‘Australia’) and another (e.g. ‘Europe’, ‘Asia’, ‘America’). To put this another way: Australian literature has helped make Australia what it is by engaging with what others have made out of Australia. In this sense, the ‘postcoloniality’ of national literatures such as Australia’s is always effectively *transnational*, either derived from an apprehension of internal fracture (e.g. via the figure of the culturally hyphenated migrant), or from a multiplied awareness of the nation’s various engagements with other nations, and with wider world. (viii)

Patrick White's writing is in this sense “postcolonial” since it engages his two identities or, in the language of postcolonial theory, his hybrid identity, one English, the other Australian. Also, what we have to stress here is the fact that White and his writing has, for most of the time, been marginalized in Australia because of the incandescent anxiety among the critics and the reading public of the characters in his novels being “unAustralian,” lacking what seemed to be the main issue in the then literature – the national character, the pioneering spirit of the settlers and the masculine power over the nature and other humans, including the indigenous peoples. The literature that did not exhibit such qualities was damned to perdition, at least in terms of commercial success and general acclaim.

Simon During (1996), probably rightly, considers Patrick White a “late-colonial transcendentalist” (17), which, on the one hand, indicates his affinity with European Romanticism in terms of his reliance on imagination, transcendence, spirituality, but, on the other, shows that he lived, as if it were, behind and beyond his time, and his late-colonialism is rather a sign of his inability, or unwillingness, to tackle the problems of post-colonialism as the country emerged from the colonial period well



before he had been born. The fundamental issue in postcolonial theory, that is to say, the relation between the colonisers and the colonised seems to be most definitely limited and narrowed down, basically, to the personal problem of his own identity, which is, nonetheless, also a post-colonial problem, a dynamic phenomenon of hybrid identity discussed by practically every significant postcolonial theorist, Homi Bhabha, Bill Ashcroft, Ania Loomba, just to name a few.

Yet, what may puzzle White's contemporary readers is his apparent insensitivity to Aboriginal cause in majority of his writings, which comes as a surprise in the context of his extraliterary activities and political orientation but which does not surprise in the context of the claim of his being late-colonial. His treatment of the black Australians inscribes him in the long tradition of colonial literatures where they are just a background of main plots and never main characters with perhaps an exception of Alf Dubbo in *Riders in the Chariot*. Moreover, in *Voss* (1957), an Aborigine is given a task of beheading the white protagonist, which completes the controversy and makes a critic's task double challenging.

One cannot, however, overestimate the importance of Australian landscape in Patrick White's writing. As we shall later see, on numerous occasions, he himself emphasised the role it played, first, in his final settlement in Australia and, then, in his art. With a few rare exceptions, most notably *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Solid Mandala* being city novels, all his other major novels are set in Australian bush, deserts or islands (*The Tree of Man*, *Voss*, *A Fringe of Leaves* and *The Eye of the Storm*).

As a man who studied foreign languages at Cambridge University and spent some extended periods of life outside Australia and England, White was able to enrich his literary language with quotations, dialogues or single words from the German, French and Hebrew. Himself being considered a "colonial" in England and a "Pom" in Australia, he was very sensitive to the issues of Australian/English accents, vocabulary and phraseology, which he so faithfully – and sometimes comically – presents in his novels, particularly, Australian idioms mimicking the working class speech or the pretences of the (sub)urban middle class.

Finally, what should be stressed as a fundamentally vital aspect underpinning all his writing is autobiography, above all *Flaws in the Glass* (1981) in which, in a truly confessional manner, White admits his homosexuality, characterises his family, focusing on his parents in particu-



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lar, cousins, friends, lovers, mentors, artists, publishers – in a word, the people who populated his world in the time of its writing and in the past. Therefore, in order to properly understand the complexity of his characters, attention will be given to various periods in his life and the people with whom he was acquainted and who may be significant in construction of at least some of the main characters in his major novels, Australia being, naturally, the most important one beside a whole range of male and female figures derived mainly from his immediate and extended family, including himself. Interestingly enough, Patrick White believed that writing – particularly novel writing – is writing about oneself, not a social writing in which characters are derived from a society in which the writer lives. Thus, as he shows in, for instance, *The Solid Mandala*, one personality, that is he himself, may be presented by two characters – twin brothers – who exhibit two sides of human psyche, sometimes conflicting but having a lot in common in the background of a complicated set of family relationships.

Therefore, the last chapter of this project focuses on White's woman characters that he constructed on the basis of his own female family members, most remarkably, his mother, Ruth, who appears in many of his novels, most dramatically in *The Eye of the Storm* as a ruthless Mrs Hunter.



# PART 1

## AUSTRALIA AND PATRICK WHITE'S ART OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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## CHAPTER ONE

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### Australia: From a (Post)Colonial Perspective. The Politics of Location

When describing the first century of Australian colonisation (1788–1867), Simon During observed that it coincided with an important period in the development of European culture, which he termed “modern literary subjectivity” (in Ryan and Wallace-Crabbe, eds. 3). In his view, it referred to

an eighteenth-century shift in relations between reading practices and everyday life, a shift partly based on the emergence of new literary genres such as the realist novel (especially in its sentimental mode), travel writing of picturesque school, gothic fiction, pornography and, later, the romantic lyric. ... Indeed we need to distinguish between two kinds of literary subjectivity: a popular form, in which reading fiction became an occasion for very specific psychological/visceral intensities, and a committed form in which, typically, more self-consciously literary texts provided aesthetic experiences able to be transferred into life basically through deployment of the imagination and sympathy. (in Ryan and Wallace-Crabbe, eds. 3–4)

During believes that modern literary subjectivity has been inaugurated by the publication of Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*, the latter giving rise to the whole genre of travel literature the aim of which was to invite readers to respond to landscapes in a sentimental, aestheticizing manner, evoking in the process their own sensibility. He provides an example of a not very frequently referred to book entitled *Account of Pelew Islands* (1788) by George Keate (1729–1797), an English poet and essayist. Its actual title was definitely more descriptive, very much in the vogue of the century and the newly born genre: *An Account of the Pelew Islands, situated in the western part of the Pacific ocean; composed from the journals and communications of captain*

*Henry Wilson and some of his officers, who in August 1783 were there shipwrecked, in the Antelope, a packet belonging to the honourable East India Company.* It is noteworthy that in 1779 Keate published *Sketches from Nature taken and coloured in a Journey to Margate*, which basically was an imitation of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*.

Therefore, the theme of travel dominated Australian settler literature largely due to this literary sociability, which also extended to the distant colony. Both physical and metaphorical transportation of ideas and imagination bore fruits in the form of the first book of poetry locally published entitled *First Fruits of Australian Poetry* by Barron Field.

The process of Australia's colonisation did not in any way make it a beleaguered country; on the contrary, as McCann et al. (2005) argue, the "sprawling networks of exchange, violence and desire ... have been moulding the modern world for at least past two hundred years" (28), and so Australia became an extension of the Western world and, consequently, Judeo-Christian ideology.

One of the most characteristic features of Australian literature, especially in its early stages of development, is, however, its recitability stemming from the tradition of orality, ballads sung over the camp fire, short narrative poems being recited in public places during public occasions – narratives commemorating fallen or victorious heroes, or just short stories. This feature is particularly important in the context of Patrick White's writing and its apparent unreadability. While discussing one of the most popular turn-of-the-century Australian bush poet, A. B. "Banjo" Paterson, Graham Huggan (2007) noticed that what characterises his poetry most is the motif of a battle – no matter whether victorious or not – and its degree of recitability, "a quality characteristic of the shift from popular orature to literature, and a measure of the compulsive, collectively self-mythologizing storytelling that has remained a feature of Australian literature, from the mock-demotic yarns and bush ballads of the 1890s to their more self-consciously sophisticated counterparts in the present day" (1). This self-mythologizing storytelling has, doubtless, been what Australia needed as, first, a colonial country and, then, as a postcolonial one. Australia has always needed some national foundation myths like her counterparts in Europe or Asia (today we would emphasise the latter), but with her inglorious past and an absolute lack of invading neighbours (with an exception of a brief Japanese invasion

of the Northern Territory during the World War II), it was difficult to achieve that using the apparatus available from the big ones of Europeans epic like Homer, Dante or Petrarch. So, *The Man from Snowy River*, the ballad telling of the legendary exploits of a horseman, fulfilled the role of a foundation epic of Australia, being a distant parallel and cousin of *Beowulf*, a narrative of the legendary exploits of a Geatish warrior, a ninth-century foundation epic of England.

Therefore, the twentieth-century most popular genre in Europe and the U.S.A., the novel, became the vehicle for the Australians to construct their identity in a wider sense since novels, particularly in Britain and then in Australia, became the carriers of new ideas and forums for discussions and endless disputes of what, in Australian context, it means to be Australian, and they first formulated nation-wide myths of Australian pioneering spirit and of it as a lucky country, the country of great opportunities.

After the Great War, one of the most prominent literary figures to contribute to what we may now term Australian “nationalist” literature was Fijian-born Katherine Susannah Prichard (1883–1969) who made the first steps into the literary world in London by winning the Hodder & Stoughton All Empire Literature Prize for her debut novel *The Pioneers* (1915). In *The Making of the Australian Literary Imagination* (2002), Richard Nile argued that

the significance of *The Pioneers* was to launch the literary career of one of Australia’s most influential and important nationalist writers of the twentieth century. In a writing career that spanned from the first world war to the mid-1960s, Katherine Prichard published thirteen novels, two volumes of poetry, six political tracts, five collections of stories, an autobiography and numerous essays and stories scattered through various journals and magazines. (26)

Prichard’s early novels set a direction in which Australian fiction progressed. Apart from the mentioned *The Pioneers*, several other titles should be mentioned, such as *Black Opal* (1921), *Working Bullocks* (1926), *Coonardoo: The Well in the Shadow* (1929) or *The Goldfields Trilogy* published after the Second World War: *The Roaring Nineties* (1946), *Golden Miles* (1948) and *Winged Seeds* (1950), the issues at stake of which, apart from the pioneering work of white settlers in Australia, were the social and personal stories of working class people, the miners, in particular.

And, what is also of significance, herself being a founding member of the Communist Party of Australia and the great admirer of the Soviet Union's social and literary policies, she went into polemics with her colleague writers in regard to a correct application of the doctrine of socialist realism to Australian fiction, the convention of which Patrick White, among others, loathed wholeheartedly and categorically rejected.

Katherine Susannah Prichard was a real pioneer in more than one sense: she was also a pioneer in the publishing field. The fact that Australian literature started to be published – albeit by British publishers – cannot be overestimated, particularly in the face of British cultural imperialism policy, which, with rare exceptions, have not changed fundamentally since the colonial period and, as Nile asserts,

British publishers such as Hodder & Stoughton [who published Prichard's novels, R.W.] have been a factor of Australian cultural history in much the same way as overseas financiers and industrialists might be seen to have presided over Australian economic life. The book trade, more generally, makes plain the adage that Australia is a client state of European and American capital and that Australia is a culture taker, more so than a culture maker. (28)

Even though all this finally led to a gradual cultural emancipation of Australia and the Australians, there remained an irreconcilable split between the English and the Australians, the mutual bias and prejudice in regards to culture, literature and the intellect:

The Better Classes – the Lower Classes; the English – the Australians ... Generalisation and juxtaposing are tempting games. What makes a situation funny to an Englishman and cruel to an Australian? Perhaps the early days in Australia were too brutal to encourage a cutting wit. The free settlers seem to have been industrious worthies rather than wits. Even the Irish left wit and imagination behind them in Ireland, bringing with them their particular brand of Catholicism, their cantankerousness, and their love of booze and racehorses. (White, FG 33)

British cultural imperialism is still a fact; yet, in many respects, including postcolonial studies, we may speak of Australia's gradual emancipation from Britain as a home country. In "Mission Impossible: Introducing Postcolonial Studies in the US Academy," an Introduction to *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (2005), Henry Schwarz makes a distinction between American postcolonial studies and the postcolo-



nial studies practised in Australia, New Zealand and Canada (OZCAN) as specific for these white-settler countries and Britain as their centre of origin:

OZCAN postcolonial studies grew in part from the institutions of Commonwealth literature, a distinct subfield of English department activity that tended toward the study of Anglophone cultures around the world united by their former or continuing participation in the British Empire. Like the United States, the OZCAN countries undertook strongly nationalist projects in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to construct for themselves literary and cultural canons distinct from those of Europe. These canons served to undergird a sense of cultural distinction from England, a distinction (or what Pierre Bourdieu has famously called “cultural capital”) quite useful and necessary in pressing claims for political and cultural autonomy from the motherland of its white settlers. As in America also, Australian and Canadian institutions of taste tended to write their stories of national distinction as the identity of the settler populations who displaced the preexisting natives. Unlike in the United States, however, Australian and Canadian whites had been more or less peacefully separated from the home country, and their political autonomy had been attained in a somewhat more inclusive fashion. (13)

The issues upon which Schwarz touches above are the issues current in White’s writing: on the one hand, we see continuity with the great European – also English – tradition of writing (Marcel Proust, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce), but, on the other, a tendency towards emancipation or rather extension, which probably is a good word bearing in mind the size of the Australian continent, an extension that would include the vernacular elements, such as Australian deserts, peculiar landscapes, plants, vegetation, Aboriginal words. The latter, or more precisely, the problem of Aboriginality brings us to the hot issue in Postcolonial Studies nowadays, the issue of **race** and **racism**. In Preface to his *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (2007), Graham Huggan clearly declares that

Australian literature has been constitutive, rather than merely reflective, of the history of social relations in Australia, and that this constitutive role is perhaps most visible in the discourse it has produced, and continues to produce, about race, both within the national context and beyond. ... [It] is both producer and product of continuing racial tensions and anxieties, born in part out of legacy of colonialism, but also attributable to the changing place of a nominally postcolonial nation in an increasingly globalized world. (vi)

Race, particularly in contemporary Cultural Studies and in the times of political correctness that rejects its essentialist and biological notions, loses its prominence as a discursive issue, but, specifically, in Postcolonial Studies, it is still a highly disputable problem. In *The Empire Writes Back* (2002 [1989]), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin assert that

[r]ace continues to be relevant to post-colonial theory for two reasons: first, because it is so central to the growing power of imperial discourse during the nineteenth century, and second, because it remains a central and unavoidable 'fact' of modern society that race is used as a dominant category of daily discrimination and prejudice. While we may argue that race is a flawed and self-defeating category which traps its users in its biological and essentialist meshes ..., in practical terms race remains a real issue in contemporary personal and social relations. (207)

What is of particular importance in the context of race relation in Australia is a gradual coming to prominence of discourses other than the British imperial discourse, which, to a considerable degree, also involves the discourse of, about and by the black race. Thus, as argued by Ashcroft et al., "[r]ace raises the issue of representation which has always been central to post-colonial studies: the representation of the colonial other by imperial discourse and the contesting self representation by colonial subjects" (207).

Australian colonial subjects, majority of whom were Aboriginals, produced a variety of representations in which it would be very hard to find a common denominator apart from an obvious rejection of imperial discourse. Disregarding historical and racial differences, the main point of friction has always been the relation to land and environment. Australian Aboriginal cultural archive has traditionally drawn its resources from nature and its forces contrary to white settlers who brought with them, in the main, town and city culture, which in the twentieth century developed into suburban culture, a phenomenon characteristic of, particularly, post-war Australia. The discourses the white Australians produced denied them authentic knowledge about themselves in the environment foreign to them. In "Aborigines and Contemporary Australian Nationalism: Primordiality and the Cultural Politics of Otherness" (1997), Andrew Lattas writes:

The inability of suburban white Australians to place themselves in their 'natural' environment is seen to deny them an authentic 'natural' self. Removed from a knowledge of their 'real' situation, they are positioned as removed from self-knowledge. The reality and truth of the self is thus measured partly by its capacity to adopt, to enter into a balanced and efficient eco-energy system relationship with nature. This is what whites must relearn: the hidden rational economy of nature, its self-sustaining logic. (231)

Lattas sees a connection between the discourse of ecology and Australian nationalism through a medium of myth and various mythologies white settlers produced and have been producing and a constant questioning of Australian identity:

This discourse of ecology often engages itself with the myths of nationalism; that is, it is an engagement with those myths about space which settler society produces and gives form to its subjectivity. The discourse operates as myth, not so much because it is false but because it articulates an imaginary space full of primordial formative truths about identity and society. The thesis of this chapter is that the production of Australian nationalism is mediated through the production of an identity crisis. The continual questioning of who we really are is the essence of Australian nationalism. It produces the reflective space of distance and removal, which creates the alienation which we ascribe to ourselves as the secret truth constitutive of our identity. (231)

In *A History of Australian Literature* (1988), Ken Goodwin comes back to the times of early colonialism and the process of shaping of Australian nationalism:

The contrast between gloom and hope runs roughly parallel to the contrast between colonialism and nationalism in the first century or so of settlement. Language, with its often unrecognised cultural biases, tended to pull the settlers back towards British values. The land, with its many phenomena unnamable in the English language, tended to pull them towards a sense of national uniqueness. (1)

Australian nationalists, we have to bear this in mind, have been mainly those who opposed commonality with and derivativeness from Britain, which often served as a disguised form of support for Irish political and cultural aspirations and, in the longer run, contributed to the movement, also in the form of political parties, towards Australian republicanism. Nevertheless, the early white settlers' environmental or ecological, as we

would say today, awareness located them at almost the same level as the native inhabitants till cities grew up and suburbia developed. To some extent, this division was later reflected in a division within Australian fiction in the post-war period, that is, the division between descriptiveness of social realism, often associated with left-wing nationalism, and a more reflexive, poetic and ironic, spiritual and mystic writing, the type preferred by Patrick White. Naturally, such a division had not rare exceptions since the author of *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) made a name for himself also as a vociferous advocate of Australian republic cause and in his public life he manifested on many occasions his open hostility towards British monarchy and royal family. His literary opponent and proponent of socialist realism in Australian fiction, Katherine Susannah Prichard, was at heart a romance writer. As Dorothy Green has it in *Patrick White: A Tribute*

In the era when social realism in the arts was accepted as a norm, White set out, as Henry Handel Richardson had done before him, to re-examine the nature of realism, to question the apparent opposition between the flesh and the spirit. The impulse may have come from Johnson's *Rasselas* as the explicit allusions in *The Aunt's Story* and the title of a lost play, *Return to Abyssinia* indicate. He ranged more widely than any other Australian novelist over the social spectrum from wealthy property-owners to derelicts – an endless gallery of figures with each of whom he had an extraordinary empathy, endowing even walk-on characters with momentary life. (1991: 4–5)

Another significant group of writers that developed from this early division were Indigenous Australians, NESB (Non English-Speaking Background) migrants and war refugees who shared a similar sense of alienation in Anglo-Celtic environment, both linguistically and socially. Additionally, Aborigines and refugees (voluntary migrants to a lesser extent), were displaced also in the sense of their removal, sometimes forceful and brutal, from the land they used to own or occupy for generations, which generated in them a feeling of loss, degradation and humiliation. In a short time, they became a discriminated minority and entered what, in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001), Huggan calls “staged marginality,” that is to say, “the process by which marginalized individuals or social groups are moved to dramatize their ‘subordinate status’ for the benefit of a majority or mainstream audience” (87). Such people certainly could not, and would not, call Australia Home.

## England as Home

In *A Fringe of Leaves*, one of the female characters, Miss Scrimshaw, remarked markedly, “Living at such a distance nobody can fail to be refreshed by visitors from Home” (9). In *The Solid Mandala*, there is this conversation between two women:

“They come out from Home,” Mrs Poulter said, “when the boys were only bits of kids.”

Mrs Dun was partly pacified.

“All these foreigners,” she said, “we are letting in nowadays. I admit the English is different.”

“Oh, Mr Brown senior was a gentleman,” Mrs Poulter said. “But not any better than us.” (15)

Patrick White’s characters in these passages, as can be easily conjectured, are English and even though they permanently reside in Australia they do not consider themselves Australians: their national awareness is at their lowest in the sense of making a new, independent nation, they still regard themselves as English and their real Home is England. Mrs Dun exhibits a typically xenophobic attitude towards foreigners, most likely of NESB, just because they are not English like her. This character presents the features White abhorred so much – the English stiff upper lip and the rule he expressed in his self-portrait, *Flaws in the Glass*, “the English know better.”

In postcolonial studies, Home is understood as the centre, the point of dominance, the centre of power over the dominium. In colonial times, Australia thus became a periphery to England and the side effects of England’s superiority and Australia’s inferiority have been still noticeable. Within the colonial model, the power comes from the invisible, mental centre to which some of the colonials/migrants from England wished still to belong. Norbert and Eleanor Hare, the characters in *Riders in the Chariot* and the middle-class owners of an extravagant mansion called Xanadu, were absent for a long time during its construction “because it was the period when Australians of That Class – and Norbert was soon of That Class – were returning Home to show they were as good as anyone else” (16–17) – of course, anyone else in England, their Home country. Mrs Godbold, another of his *Riders* prophets, acknowledges her Christian faith to Home. When asked by Himmelfarb if she

has faith she answers quickly, "Oh, yes, I believe. I believe in Jesus. I was brought up chapel, like. At Home. We all believe" (RC 284).

But, obviously, there is also "home," the place of childhood, the personal space, where the scenes of childhood are the "purest well from which the creative artist draws," and to return home means to return "to the stimulus of time remembered" (*Australian Letters* 38). On the other hand, home is also the place in which you keep your own secrets; you protect them from the view of others. Home, therefore, becomes that territory which hides something mysterious, secretive, and cagey.

Australian Aborigines, though basically nomadic, have also developed a sense of home in their camps while on the move. As argued by John Rickard in his *Australia: A Cultural History* (1999), home was an established institution even in temporary conditions:

Although accustomed to moving about the country, the Aborigines had a strong sense of their home in the camp. Dwellings, although not universally used, were important citadels of shelter and rest, and even the humble bark hut featured as a motif in Aboriginal art. Widows and unmarried women gathered around one fire, bachelors around another, while each family usually had its own. Such an arrangement was more in the interest of order than privacy, and part of the vitality of camp life stemmed from its openness and communality. After the separate pursuits of the day the camp provided the focus for social and cultural sustenance. (7)

But what if you do not feel at home in your home country? You travel. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise to admit that Patrick White also travelled a lot, which has, naturally, been reflected in his various writings. He attributes this feature to his parents' love of travel:

If Dick [his father] had been round the world before without any of it rubbing off on him, Ruth [his mother] was determined on worldliness. Without losing her native innocence, she did acquire quite a lot, and as she junketed up the Nile and across the Aegean, gyrating in Budapest, Vienna, Paris and London, always London, something of this determination must have transferred itself to the embryo in her restless womb. (FG 9)

White's numerous voyages, particularly in the period when he resided in London, shaped his sensibility and understanding of other nations than Anglo-Celtic. At some point he felt this specifically artistic and modernist feeling of unbelonging: he no longer felt home in his

home country, that is, Australia and was aware that England is not his place, either. In *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (1996), Caren Kaplan argues that “Euro-American modernisms celebrate singularity, solitude, estrangement, alienation and aestheticized excisions of location in favor of locale – that is the ‘artist in exile’ is never ‘at home,’ always existentially alone,” (28) which, of course, can be extended to Australia, where basically each and every artist, particularly writing shortly after the Second World War, was an ‘artist in exile’.

## Landscape

The role of landscape, but also of setting/settlement/surrounding in White’s fiction can hardly be overvalued. In his famous autobiography, *Flaws in the Glass* (1981), he writes:

Till well into my life, houses, places, landscape meant more to me than people. I was more a cat than a dog. It was landscape which made me long to return to Australia while at school in England. It was landscape more than anything, which drew me back when Hitler’s War was over. As a child at Mount Wilson and Rushcutters Bay, relationships with even cherished friends were inclined to come apart when I was faced with sharing surroundings associated with my own private mysteries, some corner where moss-upholstered steps swept down beside the monstera deliciosa<sup>1</sup>, a rich mattress of slater-infested humus under the custard apples, or gullies crackling with smoky silence, rocks threatening to explode, pools so cold that the breath was cut off inside your ribs as you hang suspended like the corpse of a pale frog. (16)

Patrick White’s preoccupation with largely Australian landscape, the surroundings associated with his own private mysteries, makes him a poet of both private spaces of inwardness and public territories of outwardness, and that he preferred places to people – at least at a certain period of his life – indicates his abilities to draw inspiration from the thingly underpinning of nature and man to find the unity between the inanimate and animate matter. His philosophy of nature, his metaphysicality consisted in the fact that pleasures of the body lead to the pleasures

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<sup>1</sup> Any of various climbing aroid plants constituting the tropical American genus *Monstera*, some species of which have perforated leaves; esp. the Swiss cheese plant, *M. deliciosa* (SOED, CD-ROM).



of the soul, and places, landscapes, surroundings are the starting points of intellectual and spiritual expeditions, the travels of exploration and mystery.

While discussing White's *Happy Valley* (1939), Dutton markedly observes that "[o]nly an Australian can know how fundamental the ugliness of settlement, not of landscape, is to the development of the Australian personality, and how it is a symptom of the loneliness which is so often exorcised by a facile mateship" (1963: 12).

Environment is a prison, which is particularly true in the context of Australian country town life, distances and other limitations. Australians are destined to suffer in such settlements but their suffering is not pure and does not make them better; their suffering is very existentially plain and physically basic (lack of water, heat, no comfortable living) – they do not suffer in the name of an absolute or higher idea, but in the name of themselves and the (prospective) betterment of their physical, material lives, in the name of well-being and not in the name of Being. As practical people, Australians want to make their environment less hostile, less facinorous and to subjugate, overpower it.

## Australia as Other

Distance, remoteness, emptiness of the interior makes Australia the Other of Europe, of civilisation, of the homely. The concept of the Other, it is noteworthy, continues to play a fundamental role in challenging essentialist models of nationalism and does away with nationalistic belligerence. Australia has for generations of cultural critics been considered as derivative, as the Other, the Other of what is regarded as the one, the proper, the original. But one has to be aware of the fact that, in time, with all its duplications, copies, basically everything changes and so does Australian culture and, at certain stage, some of its manifestations stop being derivative.

One of the examples John Rickard gives in his *Australia: A Cultural History* (1999) is the Californian bungalow, an obvious U.S. importation, which "in its local adaptation became a recognisable part of the culture of suburban Australia, along with the backyard, the garage down the side of the house, the corner shop and the picture theatre. It is from the *arrangement* [italic original] of such elements that a distinctive suburban



milieu emerges” (xi). Australia as Other has been presented by White in his *Voss* and will be discussed at a greater length in Chapter Five.

## **Aborigines as Other**

Aboriginal Australians have for a long time been considered different not only in terms of their skin colour, physical features or descent: all these characteristics firmly belong to the sphere of race and biology. In *A Short History of Australia* (1969), Manning Clark, once the most prominent Australian historian, gives an account of two seventeenth-century Dutch sailors, William Jansz and Jan Carstensz, who viewed Australia as a savage place which

had nurtured a race of evil-natured and malignant human beings, and had bred in the animal world a similar race of unnatural monsters which had the appearance of being unfinished by their Creator. Here, indeed, was a country where the Creator had not finished his work. Here nature was vast and indifferent to man's hopes and dreams. Here nature was so hostile, so brutish that men in time believed God had cursed both man and the country itself, and hence its barrenness, its sterility, its unsuitability for the arts of civilized human beings, and its suitability as a setting for those uncouth barbarians, the Aborigines. (17)

Their biased, Eurocentric and racial account set the style of this sort of opinions and laid a foundation of the view of Australia and Aboriginal Australians for the European public for over two centuries, strengthening racial hatred, white supremacy and Eurocentrism. It was the second half of the 20th century, when Australian government and other Western democracies officially rejected White Australia policy, the former, and racial discrimination, the latter, that we can speak of a relative undoing of the opposition between the whites and blacks, this Derridian violent hierarchy, which, to some extent, is still present in other cultural oppositions such as civilisation vs. nature, male vs. female, evil vs. good, rational vs. spiritual, etc. What is optimistic, however, is that the problem of Australian Indigenous people is attracting the attention of more and more people who primarily ask themselves questions regarding differences, that is, their cultural difference, providing, of course, that the starting point of comparison is Eurocentric culture.

The first issue at stake here is their spirituality and the vision of the world, people and the land, in which there is no fundamental difference between the things material and immaterial, the physical and the spiritual, the human and the animalistic. In Aboriginal mentality and imagination, spirit beings inhabit the land alongside humans and like humans are distinguished by sex, which they are able to change and humans may, at will, turn into animal form. What sounds particularly odd from the Western rational point of view, spirit beings may transform themselves into some features of landscape, becoming thus part of the material world. And that is probably the point white settlers could and would not understand: the importance of landscape, its spirituality, and its immateriality. We have to recall once again the words of Andrew Latas about a need to re-learn the natural environment, the authentic natural self which is so much part of landscape, so much part of spiritual self and finally get acquainted with “the hidden rational economy of nature, its self-sustaining logic” (1997: 231).

### **Australia’s ugliness**

It is probably not by accident that Robin Boyd’s book, provocatively entitled *The Australian Ugliness*, came out in 1960 and within a decade it had three more imprints (in 1963, 1968 and 1970). His first chapter, “The Descent into Chaos,” presents a strikingly similar vision of Australia to the one we may find in White’s fiction, the painter’s vision, full of overlapping colours, smudges, the play of lights, the combination of intersecting lines and shades. His first glimpse of Australia came from the airplane’s window:

Outside the little oval window the grey void is gradually smudged across the middle with deep tan like a nicotine stain. The smudge grows lighter, becomes an appalling orange, then lemon. Streaks of pink break free from it and float into the grey above. Having thus set for itself a suitably pompous background, the sun now rises. Its golden light strikes the underside of the plane, which for a few minutes longer remains the only other solid object in the colour-streaked void. ... The sun has used only the top half of the universe for its performance. The bowl below the horizon is still filed with an even, empty greyness. Then a broken line appears near the rim of the bowl, as if drawn hesitantly in pencil, and below this line the grey is lighter. The travel-

lers from the north perceive that the pencil line is sketching the junction between a quiet ocean and a silent continent – that above the line up to the horizon is land and that this land is for all purposes as flat as the water. (21)

But the land is not always flat since the point of view changes, so does its perception. White developed the love of desert landscapes, probably because they are so unusual, so uncanny, so fascinating to the eye of the foreigner-turn-native/native-turn-foreigner.

## Danger and the Uncanny

In his essay on “the uncanny” (1919), Freud explores the etymologies of the German terms *unheimlich* (uncanny, unfamiliar, frightening) and *heimlich* (homely, familiar) to discover that at a certain point the meanings of these opposite terms are very close, if not identical, since the sense of *heimlich* as “belonging to the house” also produces the associated meanings of being concealed, made secret, or kept from sight. ‘Unheimlich,’ Freud comments, “is in some way or another a subspecies of ‘Heimlich’” (1974, vol. 17: 226).

Freud further relates the uncanny, first to the survival in the unconscious of a “primitive” and subsequently repressed animistic mythological and mystic view of the world; and second, to the occurrence of repetitions, coincidences and doubles. This latter he understands as the result of repressed experiences in infancy. The ‘unheimlich,’ he concludes, “is what was once ‘heimlich,’ familiar; the prefix ‘un’ [un-] is the token of repression” (1974, vol. 17: 245). The uncanny is clearly relevant, as this suggests, to literary narratives, especially science fiction, horror, fantastic and gothic genres, including instances of the postcolonial gothic, where the figure of the alien, or Other, proves to be the projection of a repressed inner self and unsettles notions of a unified personality. Indeed, if we think of literature as defamiliarizing the familiar and taken-for-granted, then it is invariably an example of the uncanny. Freud’s main illustration in his essay is itself a literary one.

Bennett and Royle (1999) elevate the uncanny to the position of one of the fundamental elements of literary production since it is in literature that the literary, “fictional” mingle with the non-literary, “real,” arguing that

[o]n the one hand, uncanniness could be defined as occurring when 'real', everyday life suddenly takes on a disturbingly 'literary' or 'fictional' quality. On the other hand, literature itself could be defined as the discourse of the uncanny: literature is the kind of writing which most persistently and most provocatively engages with the uncanny aspects of experience, thought and feeling. (37)

The uncanny is, to a great extent, a kind of defamiliarization – or what Victor Shklovsky called *ostranienie* – the literary device to make the familiar, the everyday, and the routine strange, unusual or weird, the aim of which is to refresh the perception of everydayness.

In *On the Name* (1995), Jacques Derrida dissociates the idea of secret with the truth but connects it rather with the profound discourse of the inexhaustible *Unheimliche*:

*There is something secret.* But it does not conceal itself. Heterogeneous to the hidden, to the obscure, to the nocturnal, to the invisible, to what can be dissimulated and indeed to what is nonmanifest in general, it cannot be unveiled. It remains inviolable even when one thinks one has revealed it. Not that it hides itself forever in an indecipherable crypt or behind an absolute veil. It simply exceeds the play of veiling/unveiling, dissimulation/revelation, night/day, forgetting/anamnesis, earth/heaven, etc. It does not belong therefore to the truth, neither to the truth as *homoiosis* or adequation, nor to the truth as memory (Mnemosyne, *aletheia*), nor to the given truth, nor to the promised truth, nor to the inaccessible truth. Its nonphenomenality is without relation, even negative relation, to phenomenality. Its reserve is no longer of the intimacy that one likes to call secret, of the very close or very proper which sucks in or inspires [*aspire ou inspire*] so much profound discourse (the *Geheimnis* or, even richer, the inexhaustible *Unheimliche*). (26)

There is something secret in names, in finding or giving names, in functional possibility of homonymy:

Certainly, one could speak this secret in other names, whether one finds them or gives them to it. Moreover, this happens at every instant. It remains secret under all names and it is its irreducibility to the very name which makes it secret, even when one *makes the truth* in its name [*fait la vérité à son sujet*] as Augustine put it so originally. The secret is that one here calls it secret, putting it for once in relation to all the secrets which bear the same name but cannot be reduced to it. The secret would also be homonymy, not so much a hidden resource of homonymy, but the functional possibility of homonymy or of *mimesis*. (26)

In his numerous essays about secrets, “Fors” (1986b) or “Passions” (1992b), Derrida argues that, contrary to a popular belief, secrets, paradoxically, do not conceal themselves, they are visible, they are on the surface of things, but cannot be revealed providing they are true secrets. Derrida, and poststructuralism in general, is sceptical about a possibility of any reading that would identify secrets with an ultimate or true meaning; rather, secrets are to remain undiscoverable and yet unconcealed. In *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (1999), Bennett and Royle speak of another perspective of thinking about secrets and literature:

This would be from that of the reader rather than the text, and in particular as regards the notion of the reader who is interested not so much in the idea of secrets in the text ... but rather in the possibilities of secrets *within herself* or *within himself* [italics original], secrets that may have to do with dreams, memories, fantasies, speculations and desires set off by the text, thoughts and feelings that may never have been experienced before – that is to say, in a surprising way, secret thoughts and feelings. It is in this context that literary texts can be acknowledged as having uncanny powers, including an ability to alter people’s very sense of themselves, of their identity and ‘place’. (228–229)

Australia, as a setting, as a character, as a place, makes an invader-explorer feel not at “home,” while her secret – unconcealed and exposed to his eye – lies there, at a hand’s distance, undiscoverable and unknowable, which only makes her and the white man uncanny.

Patrick White favoured the trope of the uncanny in his writing, which contains numerous tragic descriptions of Australia’s exploration which required sacrifices of human lives; therefore, it contains a plethora of dead corpses, decaying flesh, rotting matter, torn or burnt hair, etc. He was fascinated with danger, the dramatic, the unusual. As a child, he was even involved himself in starting a fire. In *Flaws in the Glass* (1981), he confessed:

On the mountain there were always threats of explosion, whether natural or human: a telephone torn from the wall by lightening; the eruption of a bush fire with scrolls of smoke and pennants of dirty flame advancing through shaggy scrub. I often flung stones at human beings I felt were invading my spiritual territory. Once I set fire to a gunyah<sup>2</sup> to show that it couldn’t be shared with strangers. Years later I persuaded myself that I hadn’t been acting

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<sup>2</sup> An Aboriginal hut, a bush hut (SOED, CD-ROM).

merely as a selfish child, but that an avatar of those from whom the land had been taken had invested one of the unwanted whites. (FG 16)

The spiritual territory of which White speaks is yet another apt depiction of the continental emptiness of Australia, its sacredness, its peculiar religiosity, all mixed with his conviction that he has been chosen by the ancient descent of a god to earth in incarnate form, an Aboriginal avatar, to be their defender, the defender of their land. Thus, Australia's emptiness is her condition of being and that is why her image is so equivocal, evasive, and uncanny. As Richard Campbell (1977) has it:

But emptiness is not nothing; it is the uncanny limit of our self-assertion, a beyond, an 'outback' which indwells our existence, curbing any pretensions to absolute knowledge or authority. This deep, inarticulate sense of a limit is the correlative of the recognition of the contingency of our being-in-the-world. Practically, it means that we are driven back into our situation, to grapple with the recalcitrant nature of what is given – [a condition that produces] our so-called materialism and pragmatism. Theologically, it means that the absence of God is not nothing; it is the particular mode of his presence. ... [Perhaps] a more positive articulation of how we know ourselves to be contingent beings 'thrown' into a reality which transcends us and defies our efforts at domestication, might yet provide a basis for an authentic religious consciousness in this country. (187–188)

White, like Derrida after him, saw a possibility of dismantling names in order to uncover the hidden secret of the bearer, a possibility of constructing their identity. In *The Vivisector*, we read:

"On the back of the photograph someone had written in brown ink: 'Hertel Vivian Warboys Duffield'.

'That's my name' – dreamily – as though they both didn't know. Why amn't I "Vivian Warboys" as well?'

Pan puffed. Then he said: One name's enough for a boy to carry around in Australia.'

It was a good enough explanation. Of course everybody knew by now, everybody in Cox Street, but any stranger who didn't, laughed. "'Hurtle"? What sort of a name is that? And it made you start what Mamma called sulking, because you couldn't go on for ever explaining to every stranger that came: "'Hurtle" was the name of a foreign woman that married into my grandpa's family. Only it was "H-e-r-t-e-l", not "H-u-r-t-l-e". When I was christened the parson got the spelling wrong.'" (Vi 10–11)

In *The Eye of the Storm*, in turn, Mrs Hunter recalls the words of her husband, who commented upon her avoidance of using a friendly version of his name in their mutual contacts:

*You know, Betty, you are the only one who has never called me by a friendly name. Not 'Bill': just to attempt it made her feel she was shaking her jowls like a bloodhound. How can I? When 'Alfred' is the name you've been given. I mean it's your NAME – as mine is 'Elizabeth'. She raised her voice and drew down her mouth to produce a dimple she held in reserve; but on this occasion it failed to persuade him. (ES 15)*

If one wished to find out the likely source of inspiration for White's preoccupation with names one would point out to his autobiography, *Flaws in the Glass*, in which he recalls his childhood memories connected with his own Christian name and its diminutive form with which he was addressed as a toddler: "Aren't I Paddy?' 'You're Paddy. But Patrick is your *real* name'" (FG 2).

This found its reflection in another novel, *The Solid Mandala*, one of his city novels and where White is Waldo, the twin-protagonist whose name stirred a controversy among the female residents of Sarsaparilla who treated names as indications of either social status or unfulfilled dreams of child's ambitious parents:

Mrs Dun waited, but could not wait long enough.

"What's the other one called?" she asked at last.

"Waldo," said Mrs Poulter.

Mrs Dun's teeth snapped. Shut. She made a slight worrying sound.

Then she said: "What sort of a name is that?"

"I dunno!" Mrs Poulter sighed before laughing. "One of the names people think of. The father was only George, but I expect that Mrs Brown wanted to go one better, at least for one of the twins. It was all those books. Mrs Brown used to read, too. Like 'er husband. You'd see 'er with 'er crochet, or a bowl of peas. They put Waldo to the books. Waldo was at the Library. (SM 17)

Waldo's name was a result of Mrs Brown's passion for books and an advancement – in social terms – compared with his father's plain George and White's father – Dick. White attached a great value to names of his characters, seeing in them their characteristic feature, their true self. Waldo asks Dulcie, the girl with whom he got acquainted at Mrs Musto's party:

“What’s your other name?” he asked.

“Feinstein.”

She pronounced it frankly, and in a foreign way, which made Dulcie Feinstein sound suddenly darker, exotic, though superficially there was nothing foreign about her. He put the tip of his tongue between his lips to stop the smile of pleasure coming to them. Not that his trend of thought wouldn’t have stopped it in due course.

“My name’s Brown,” he said.

“I know. I heard Mrs Musto when you came.”

That made it sound worse.

He said: “It’s the most horrible name anyone could ever have. *Brown!*” He drew it out as though blaming the person responsible.

“Probably most people hate the name they’ve got,” she said. “Take Dulcie.”

“It’s not *bad*,” he said slowly. “It’s sort of exotic.”

That was a word he had decided to adopt.

“No, it isn’t. It’s awful, really. It means ‘sweet’. And Dulcie’s a plump girl with fair hair and blue eyes. A complexion.”

She was so anxious to reveal the true state of affairs, get it over quickly, that she was licking the dark shadow on her upper lip between the rushed phrases.

Arthur had been right, Waldo realized. Dulcie would probably grow a moustache. (SM 94–95)

Dulcie was yet another of White’s female characters who embodied his idea of feminine ugliness and plainness, which – towards the end of his writing career – earned him a largely undeserved label of a misogynist (more on this issue in Chapter Seven).

### **Language Transgressions: White’s Australian idiom – the “other” of English**

Patrick White purposefully chose Australian idiom to convey what he thought encompassed the essence of Australianness: “Reffo” – for refugee (FG 112) – Australian slang, “Then, realizing, he added: ‘But you do not know their lingo’ (V 169), Hebrew words – *tallith* and *yarmulka* (FG 112) for elements of devotional garments, German *Modedamen* for fashionable ladies. Noteworthy are his peculiarities in implementation of the English syntax: “My Uncle James I am not conscious of having met” (FG 12), “What with the baby and the new nurse it was



a time of upheaval” (FG 14), “Which, naturally, was of too fantastical a nature, too expressive of his nothingness” (V 215), “While the Hellenophile continues humbly to hope” (“Prodigal Son” in PWS 13), “the water ejaculating warm and sulphurous out of the earth” (FG 51), “Ronald Waterall I came across my first day at Cheltenham in the house of our imprisonment” (FG 53). Apart from these and many more examples, White’s language may be characterised by the use of various figures of speech, principally, metaphors, similes and also alliterations, which are to be found in poetry.

## Poetic language

White uses the oldest stylistic figure – beside the Old English kenning – to make his language sound bound and/or poetic, even though he basically and as a rule writes in prose, that is alliteration as, for instance, in the statement, “Old Mrs Morrice was small and self-contained, with wrinkles and rings” (FG 24). He utilises metaphors in an onomatopoeic form, compound nouns and personification: “flick-knife commentary by yellow-crested cockatoos” (FG 51).

White, on the average, writes in short phrases that remind of “poetic prose” or “prosaic poetry,” maintaining the conversational character of them:

A belief contained less in what is said than in the silences. In patterns on water. A gust of wind. A flower opening. I hesitate to add a child, because a child can grow into a monster, a destroyer. Am I a destroyer? this face in the glass which has spent a lifetime searching for what it believes, but can never prove to be, the truth. (FG 70)

Considered fragments of sentences in prose, the phrases like “A gust of wind. A flower opening” can easily make a metrical composition since the pattern of recurrence is regular and clearly audible. His use of capitalization and punctuation also recalls poetry (“Am I a destroyer? this face...” and “but can never prove to be, the truth”). The latter example plays, of course, on ambiguity but at the same time the comma could equally well function as a signifier of an end-stop line (“but can never prove to be/ the truth”) and this is what probably was originally intended

since, correctly, the phrase should have been “but can never prove to be the truth”).

White also constructed long adjectival phrases when he wanted, for instance, to characterise himself as a man of a lost faith: “a lapsed Anglican egotist agnostic pantheist occultist existentialist would-be though failed Christian Australian” (FG 102), which, on the one hand, terribly complicates the issue but, on the other, demonstrates that words are unable to reflect the intricacies and complexities of meaning and, in a Derridian strategy, they should be placed under erasure since even though they are not adequate it is impossible to write outside of words. On top of all this, White quite frequently uses Aboriginal words, e.g. *gunyah* (FG 16).

Like in Salman Rushdie, the overall aim of Australian writers, particularly those of NESB, has always been to reclaim the language in an act of self-empowerment, to conquer British English. Patrick White did not have to think in terms of postcolonial theory to do this: his aim was, as it seems, to be as close to the people whom he met on his way, with whom he chatted, whom he recognised as neighbours. He worked his way through their idiolects to ultimately come up with his peculiar style, syntax, punctuation, grammar. His aim was rather to reclaim the language as an artistic tool, as a paint he had on his palette. His project was by far harder, more artful, truly modernist. He treated language a medium of all arts, including drama and painting: we have to note also White’s inclination to use painter’s glossary (e.g. “blotched” in FG 20). He also recalls Roy de Maistre, one of his relatives, who was the painter and the influence in his life: “I first met Roy in London in the Thirties, when he became my friend and one of the most important influences in my life. From him I learnt most of what I know about painting” (FG 24).

And, finally, the ugliness of Patrick White’s style of writing. Today, we generally consider his handling of English syntax as idiosyncratic, but back in the 1950s it was a shocker to Australian critics. One of them, Robert Francis Brissenden (1959) wondered:

How is one to explain his extraordinary use of relative pronouns? The following phrases are typical: “he lazily passed his hands over his relaxed body, of which the strength had created nothing” (*The Tree of Man*, p. 151)<sup>3</sup>; “the... beautiful house, of which the material structure had begun to dissolve” (*Voss*,

<sup>3</sup> White 1965 [1955]: 151.

p. 162)<sup>4</sup>. ... But White goes out of his way to be unusual, sometimes achieving sentences as ugly as this: "There were certain books for instance. He would interrupt his study of which, and sit in the silence of his square room" (Voss, p. 16.)<sup>5</sup>. This seems not only awkward but also un-English. (411)

Of course, from a contemporary perspective these modernist attempts on the part of White to modify, change, experiment with the English phrase to give it a texture of painting, a melody of music seem straightforward. But the critic's accusation of "ugliness" proved it, in the longer run, creative, particularly if we take into consideration the direction in which experiments with the language have been going both at home and overseas. White, like a truly European modernist, challenges the commonsensical understanding of ugliness: for him, what is physiologically ugly is creative; what is materially beautiful lacks spiritual beauty. His great admiration for simplicity, "plainness," authenticity and vision is what is at stake in all his fiction.

The Australian version of the English literary language is, doubtless, his own effort to elevate the impoverished cousin's version to a form that would be different both from colloquial Australian – to a great extent a hybridised form of London cockney, and Standard English as used in Britain. White's attempts, therefore, aimed at liberating, emancipating Australians as a newly created, independent nation (1901) from the cultural imperialism of the then British colonisers and, at the same time, his language experiments inscribe themselves well into a mainstream modernist experiments with the language that occurred both in Britain and continental Europe and on the other side of the Atlantic.

Moreover, in terms of aestheticism, his experiments may also be considered a kind of aesthetic transgressions, particularly bearing in mind, as has already been argued elsewhere, his like of the "other" of beauty, reason or order. His fascination with ugliness, also in terms of language, proves productive and creative in his persistent search for "the mystery and poetry."

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<sup>4</sup> White 1994 [1957]: 162.

<sup>5</sup> White 1994 [1957]: 16.



## CHAPTER TWO

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### Australian Autobiography and Patrick White's *Flaws in the Glass*

That in the early 20th century psychoanalysis exerted a significant impact on humanities is a commonplace; yet, it is noteworthy that, in Sigmund Freud's opinion, (auto)biography was supposed to be an account of human life as history, as narration, as psychological riddle: "A real human life should, Freud felt, be considered not as an idealized Victorian exemplar but as a psychological riddle. The solving of the riddle, using the techniques of psychoanalysis, would, he told Jung, his heir-apparent, be the first step in biography" (Hamilton 2007: 136).

Life as a psychological riddle has got a particular significance in the context of Patrick White's novelistic output since without the knowledge of the history of his life it is virtually impossible to construct the meanings of most of his later novels. If we treat life as if it were a text (Jacques Derrida would certainly agree with such a contention), life then would undergo the same processes as texts do and would fall under the same (or similar) rules.

Therefore, bearing in mind that autobiography is thus that particular kind of biography where the author and a figure whose life is described are the same person (Cuddon 1999: 68), we shall try to solve the riddle of Patrick White's life by tracing down their causes and effects as they appear or as they are suggested in his autobiography *Flaws in the Glass* and "The Prodigal Son." The point of departure will be the notion of history as a narration, a story told from a contemporary viewpoint, from a perspective of today as formulated by New Historicism, the main contention of which, in its deconstructive approach, is to challenge notions of discernible, objectively existing phenomenon called history, since history is an invention – can be made and unmade, can be written and re-written

incessantly, on end. For New Historicists, literature operates, therefore, in terms of assimilation, structuring and dissemination of forms of culture and social representation, and in this light Patrick White's literary contribution to Australian culture may be formulated as an attempt to integrate the voices of dissent, irrationality and madness with the mainstream, middle-class, rational discourse:

In his early work on madness Foucault found it difficult to find examples of "mad" discourse (except in literature: de Sade, Artaud). He deduced that the rules and procedures which determine what is considered normal successfully silence what they exclude. People cannot think or speak obeying the *unspoken "archive" of rules and constraints* [emphasis added]; otherwise they risk being condemned to madness or silence (Foucault's relevance to feminism, to postcolonial theory and to gay and lesbian theory is apparent here). This discursive mastery works not just by exclusion, but also by "rarefaction" (each practice narrows its content and meaning by thinking only in terms of "author" and "discipline"). (Selden et al. 2005 [1985]: 178–179)

The relationship between psychoanalysis and literary criticism spans much of the twentieth century. Fundamentally concerned with the articulation of sexuality in language, it has moved through three main emphases in its pursuit of the literary "unconscious": on the author (and consequently the character), on the reader and on the text.

The first step in the psychoanalytical approach to literature was Sigmund Freud's treatment of the literary work as a symptom of the author/writer, where the relationship between him (rather than her) and text is analogous to dreamers and the "text" they dream (literature is radically "unreal" here).

This approach was challenged by Carl Gustav Jung's archetypal criticism in which, unlike in Freud, **the literary work is** not a focus for the writer's or reader's personal psychology but **a representation of the relationship between the personal and the collective unconscious, the images, myths, symbols, archetypes of past cultures**. White's texts generally fall under these two categories or, as we may argue, are the mix of both since, as it seems, he was convinced that he had written basically about himself in most of his novels, and the characters he had created were fundamentally his reflections or the representations of his many faces and masks he wore in his lifetime.

On the other hand, he was under a spell of Carl Gustav Jung and believed in archetypal unities and, consequently, his many novels can be interpreted as powerful manifestations of various myths, archetypes and symbols of which he might have not been even aware.

We should also note, though in passing, the third of the great psychoanalysts, who continued the works of his predecessors, Jacques Lacan. Working within the model of (post)structuralist linguistics, he linked with it the notion of desire, thus extending considerably the area of analysis to include, among others, feminist psychoanalytical criticism, which, as Elizabeth Wright (1990) argued, is concerned with the interaction of literature, culture and sexual identity, locating gender in human history. White would have probably agreed with the idea of the interaction of literature, culture and sexual identity but certainly not with the feminist biasedness (he was permanently accused during his lifetime of misogyny); however, he was never convinced that he should engage himself actively in gay movement or queer theory: he was a great believer in practice and despised, as he called them, "academic turds."

There has been a consistent interest in contemporary Literary Studies in the Unconscious (it was Freud who gave this term a capital letter and definite article) and the notion and effects of "repression," linked often with debates on sexuality. Some other concepts – for example, *Nachtraglichkeit* (referring to the "working through" of trauma) and the "uncanny" – have come into renewed prominence, quite possibly because they are compatible with contemporary concerns and a readiness to accept and probe uncertainties of time, subjectivity and meaning.

Concepts such as these have therefore gained a new critical currency in the context of post-structuralism and cognate tendencies in postcolonial studies where this interest in destabilized borders and identities is evident in the use of terms such as "hybridity," "syncretism" and "liminality." Also, where postcolonial literatures have confronted the repression of past pre- or anticolonial histories they have often had recourse, too, to the tropes of gothic or horror stories in narratives of haunting, nightmare, phantasms, ghosts and spectres. Here again there are cross-overs between psychoanalysis and insights in post-structuralism.

Freud introduced the concept of "Nachtraglichkeit" in his case study of the so-called "Wolf Man" (Freud 1974, vol. 17: 3–122), the concept later elaborated by Jacques Derrida in his essay "Fors" (1986b). The "Wolf

Man” is said to witness an act of sexual intercourse between his parents at the age of one-and-a-half, but the traumatic shock of this incident is deferred until he is capable of bringing some mature sexual understanding to it. The implication is that an event has in effect two occurrences: an original happening and a later interpretative construction of it, or, in a still more radical gloss on this concept, the event is seen only to acquire significance in so far as it is remembered. That is to say, there is no first event other than its construction at a later stage, since meaning is always the retrospective result of a process of “working through.” As Selden et al. claim,

[t]his implies a radically non-linear notion of memory and individual history, effectively positing that a memory at a later date is the “cause” rather than the “effect” of the supposed earlier, original, incident. This suggests, as above, an unexpected affinity between Freud and later poststructuralist concepts of “belatedness” and “deferral” and is of relevance to the writing and study of *autobiographies* and historical fictions, which problematize standard notions of historical sequence and causation. (2005 [1985]: 154–155)

An example of a study which follows through these implications with reference to Freud’s concept is Peter Nicholls’s reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (in Selden, Brooker and Widdowson, eds., 2005: 441–456). Morrison’s *Beloved* is also a ghost story in which the dead daughter, named Beloved, returns as a young woman; the novel, along with other of Morrison’s fiction, is discussed in relation to “haunting” in David Punter’s *Postcolonial Imaginings* (2000).

## Confessional literature

Admittedly, autobiographies may be classified as confessional literature for the simple reason that in autobiographies the author confesses things that were not generally or publicly known about themselves; in other words, autobiographies are to a great extent self-revelatory and, from contemporary perspective, also sensational in disclosing details from the life of the author that had been cautiously guarded from the public eye.

The tradition of confessional literature is long, beginning with the highly acclaimed *Confessions* (*Confessiones*, AD 397–AD 398) of St Augustine of Hippo in thirteen books, in which he confesses his childhood



sins despite the fact that he could not remember them exactly, but he is certain he committed them, his youth gang mentality, when he used to steal with others even though he had plenty of goods since he came from a well-to-do family, and how he finally converted to Christianity, which may be interpreted that he became a good person in the long last. Notwithstanding the fact that *The Confessions of St Augustine* – as some modern English translations have it – is not properly literature by not belonging to three major literary genres – it is by its high merit and excellence of expression that it is considered worthy of literary criticism.

What the tradition of confessionalism, as inaugurated by St Augustine in medieval times, presumably wanted to establish was the self-truth about the author or, to put it mildly, one of the versions of truth about the author that he wanted to be officially acknowledged as the only truth about himself. From the position of New Historicism and, generally, Poststructuralism, which, by and large, questions the very idea of *the* truth, autobiography and confession seem to be almost an impossible task in this respect.

In one of the interviews with David Attwell, *Doubling the Point* (1992), J. M. Coetzee refers to his 1985 essay on confession, "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky," stating that

[t]he essay came out of a rereading of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, two novelists for whom my admiration remains undimmed. I read them on what I take to be their own terms, that is, in terms of their power to tell the truth as well as to subvert secular scepticism about truth, getting behind sceptical ploys to get behind them ("What is truth?"). I accept Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, in different ways, as writers of real philosophical sophistication... [They] also were the heirs of a Christian tradition more vital, in some respects, than Western Christianity. Whether my overall thesis can be sustained in debate with philosophers I have no idea. But I do see the capacity to push self-analysis through to its limits – analysis not of *one's* self but of *the* self [italics original], the soul – in both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as greater than in a purely secular thinker like Freud. (243–244)

Coetzee's thesis of a possibility of a self-analysis or, rather, *the* self-analysis runs parallel to what White proposes in his autobiography, namely, an analysis of the self, his soul, which, naturally, takes us away from rationalism, where the subject of the analysis cannot be its object, and move us towards spirituality, the *soul*. By no means, however, can we take

Coetzee's (and White's unacknowledged) statement literarily, word for word. What most likely is at stake here is this element of imagination, of spirit, of the invisible that escapes scientists' attention since it cannot be easily pinned down and defined or worded.

## Intimist writing

In the long tradition of European autobiographical writing, we may now distinguish a newly recognised trend called intimism or confessional intimism, which basically derives from painting<sup>1</sup> and denotes minor type of Impressionist painting practised in the fin de siècle France, but recently been applied to writing, too. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (Second Edition, on-line) defines intimism as the writing that records intimate, personal and psychological experiences, and which can be extended to encompass all intimate themes, introvert meditations, secrets of the soul, privacy. In "Laying Bare One's Soul: the Literary Philosophy of Intimism," Laura Whaples, explains that

[i]ntimism, put simply, is the expression of personal thoughts and feelings in literature. This refers to both the expression of the author's inner self and that of his characters. It can be seen as an extreme form of Romanticism, but it is more than simply that, and distinct enough to be considered a separate style. Like Romanticism, Intimism stresses the uniqueness of the individual and tends to focus on the unusual or neurotic personality; an Intimist would agree with Walter Pater's idea that "the addition of strangeness to beauty" (Holman 466) is ideal, but the Intimist's concept of beauty often leans toward that which is found in the "soul" of a character. The Romantic rebellion against reason and formal rules is familiar to the Intimist; for an Intimist, emotion reigns over reason, and Intimist expression's only rule is that the writer's words portray as accurately as possible the feelings that he is trying to communicate. An Intimist piece of writing should be realistic in its representation of the inner state of an individual, but realism in all but a particular character's psychology is unnecessary. If appropriate to revealing an interior experience, aspects of an Intimist work may not be grounded in the "real world" at all. (on-line)

<sup>1</sup> noun [mass noun]

A style of painting showing intimate views of domestic interiors using Impressionist techniques, used by artists such as Bonnard in the early 20th century (McIntosh Dictionary, on-line).

Patrick White's confessional writing should be viewed also in the context of his laying bare his own soul in order to show how it operated and, consequently, to make his writing as sincere as possible, no matter how much self-fashioning there might have been.

## **Australian autobiography**

Australian literature abounds in various kinds of biographies and autobiographies, the writing tradition of which was inaugurated by white settlement in the eighteenth century and the desire of the colonists to contain their life stories. The popularity of this genre continued well into the twenty-first century also because of new methods of looking at older texts, particularly those written in the times of exploration of the continent in the nineteenth century. Characterising Australian autobiography in *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, David McCooey sees it as spectral:

Australian autobiography is a spectre. It deals with those spectral categories of identity that shift in and out of discursive focus: subjectivity, Indigeneity, ethnicity, nationhood. And it has a spectral presence for Australian literary history, in which autobiography is simultaneously central and marginal. At its narrowest, the term covers a small body of literature, taking until the 1960s to achieve historical significance, only to then quickly become inadequate to cover the full range of autobiographical practices available to contemporary writers. Broadly defined, however, autobiography is nothing less than the source of Australian literature, the pre-eminent mode of colonial writers, canonical fiction writers (such as Franklin, Furphy, and Richardson), Indigenous writers, minority writers, refugees, and lyric poets. Another way in which we can think of autobiography as spectral is its association with expressions of the uncanny (the unsettling interplay of the familiar and the unfamiliar) and ongoing crisis. These terms – spectres, the uncanny, crisis – will underpin this discussion of Australian autobiography from earliest times to the present. (323)

In the chapter entitled “From biography to autobiography,” Gillian Whitlock (2000) writes:

One of the pleasures of these books is their ongoing interrogation of ways of writing about the self and subjectivity ... [N]ineteenth-century Australian life-writing remains very much alive, and continues to emerge anew in

the present. The past is not settled. Extensive bibliographical and critical work continues to challenge Australian literary history by revealing hitherto “invisible” lives in nineteenth-century materials ... Furthermore, the recent work of critics who draw on the methods of feminist criticism, deconstruction and/or new historicism has produced re-readings of many nineteenth-century texts. (232)

A vast range of texts by travel writers such as an Australian classic, Watkin Tench, and others mentioned in Chapter One, changed categorization from journals, or descriptive writing, to autobiographical acts. A proliferation of writing of this kind in the first decades of the Colony – most notably memoirs, diaries or letters – compensated for a considerable absence of established main literary genres, that is, poetry and drama, in the first place, and not yet commonly recognisable novel, in the second. All these texts, from our perspective, do not give an unequivocal image of either the social relationships within the settlement nor the individual lives, perhaps with an exception of acknowledged leaders, such as Capitan Cook (even though there might be some controversies) or explorers like Ludwig Leichhardt or Burke and Wills. Nonetheless, as argued by Whitlock, the past is not settled and some “invisible” lives – the secret, private life of Patrick White is a good example here – are to be disclosed and scrutinised to reflect the complexities of the times, be it eighteenth, nineteenth or twentieth century.

It seems that the recurring theme of majority of autobiographical writings was a sense of estrangement, unbelonging due to migration, either enforced or voluntary. Throughout the centuries, the focus of attention shifted from transportation of convicts from the British Isles, through mainly European migration up to the mid-1970s, to finish off with Asian migration in the late 20th century. We cannot, naturally, ignore the continuing problem of Aboriginal displacement, which, needless, always accompanied the white settlement and found its way onto the pages of a variety of autobiographical writings. Migration, Aboriginality and the legacies of colonisation contributed substantially towards what nowadays seems to be the problem that occupies the minds of most Australians, both academics and average citizens, that is, national identity:

The postcolonial location of Australian literature emerges in such seemingly diverse ways as thematic interpretations which focus on “the uncertain self”, concerns that Australian autobiographical writing is almost obsessively con-

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cerned with manhood and masculinity, the issue of expatriatism and identity and, more recently, the pre-eminent place of biography and autobiography as a means of foregrounding Indigenous resistance. (233)

Whitlock rightly observes that Australian autobiography is almost obsessively concerned with the notions of manhood and masculinity, which is particularly true in case of not only Patrick White but also of the pioneers of Australian literature like Henry Lawson. Even though, migration, travel and expatriatism still remain the main themes, more current is the problem of the self and subjectivity as it is articulated in White's autobiographical writings.

### **Aboriginal biography and autobiography**

It is interesting to notice that Australian literature also incorporates Aboriginal biographies and, since the 1980s onwards, also autobiographies, which signifies a fundamental change in white Australians' attitude towards Indigenous people in a sense that they stopped being just objects of scrutiny by, say, mainly ethnographers and, consequently, Aboriginal writers' lives became subjects of biographies and then also autobiographies by themselves:

Until 1970 ethnobiographic representations of Aboriginal Australians by far exceeded autobiographic writing; since then there has been a decisive shift so that the latter is increasingly dominant, indeed overwhelmingly so by 1985. The changing presence of Indigenous peoples in biography and autobiography is an important indicator of an ongoing process of cultural exchange where appropriation and decolonisation co-exist and contest in the aftermath of invasion and settlement. Here the politics of who is authorised to speak, and who becomes the subject(s) of biographic writing, and when and where and why, are brought to light. (Whitlock 242)

Aboriginal writing is an important element of Australian policy of cultural emancipation also in the sense of gaining a ground and platform for those whose voices have never been heard before or whose voices have been stifled by the oppressive apparatus of the colonizers' power, that is, the British first and then the white Australians.

## The grand portrait mode: White's autobiography

The importance of autobiography in White's writing cannot be overestimated. In a famous conversation with Christina Stead, another Australian celebrated writer, at his Sydney place in Martin Road, White positively shocked her by declaring that the important characters in his fiction "are latent bits of myself" (in Whitlock 2000: 234), which she found particularly odd since she believed that fiction characters are and should be modelled on real-life people and, as we may surmise, the author should not get in the way of their construction with his/her own subjective views; in other words, art should be as objective as possible according to what Anglo-American New Critics, especially T. S. Eliot, asserted back in the 1920s (the conversation occurred in 1969) and with what majority of European and American modernists would agree. Interestingly enough, both Stead and White, in general opinion, followed modernist and European style in their creative writing, which may, at least to some extent, account for Stead's astonishment at White's confession. This, and many other things, indicates that Patrick White was not a declared modernist in European sense. Even though he had a great admiration for some European novelists, particularly French, he, nonetheless, was able to work out his own idiosyncratic style, which seems to be, broadly speaking, a merge of Anglo-European tradition of grand narratives and native Australian practice of autobiographical writing stemming from journal, letters and memoirs writing. White's fiction appears to play a role of a bridging element in interconnections between the Old and the New World, between European conservatism and Australian progressivism, also in terms of literary creativity. His writing focuses, in the first place, on himself. As he once admitted frankly, "All the characters in my books are myself, but they are a kind of disguise" (in Wolfe 28), which may indicate how complex his personality, his mentality and his self was.

One of the most significant and, at the same time, controversial elements of Patrick White's identity was his Australianness, which was so ferociously questioned by, among others, Alister Kershaw in his article "The Last Expatriate" (in *Patrick White Speaks*). But his sense of being both Australian and European – not necessarily English, even though he was born in England – does not deny itself: in postcolonial terms, it would most naturally be a hybrid identity. From the very start of his

literary career, he was conscious of the fact that it is not enough just to tackle Australian realist motives to become a successful writer: it needs to be complemented by the great European tradition of modernism and psychological novel.

The other element that should be brought to the fore in regards to White's identity is his sexual orientation, equally controversial in his time and equally "unAustralian," as he acknowledged in *Flaws in the Glass*. *Flaws in the Glass* (1981) is an amazingly frank self-portrait. In this he reveals the truths about his homosexuality; his feelings of inhabiting different personae and sexual identities; his lifelong feud with his mother; his alcoholism, and his later political radicalism. It certainly helps to understand his complex fictions, but more importantly his relationship with Australia and England, which was by no means easy:

It was the summer of 1926. I was fourteen, and they had taken the house at Felpham, Sussex. For my mother, the fuzz of green landscape surrounding us was English, pretty, so much more desirable than glare and drought and the threat of snakes. My father saw it as pasture for lamb and beef. For myself it meant solitude in which wounds were healed, until country voices reminded me I was a foreigner. (1)

The feeling of being an outsider, a stranger, a foreigner never left him no matter whether he was in England or Australia: for the English he was a "colonial," for the Aussies, he was a "pom" (prisoner of mother England). He also recalls the time he spent in a Sydney boarding school before being sent to England for his further education and the moment when he had to reveal his Englishness in front of the class of Australian boys and a female teacher, Miss Melba, when she entered their classroom:

We clattered to our feet as she paraded in, dressed in brown, a springy queen of toads hung with diamonds at 11 a.m.

Coming at once to the point, she commanded, 'Hands up everyone born in Australia?' ...

A moment of shame for a small boy, I couldn't hold up my hand with the others.

'Where were *you* born?' She pointed sternly at the outsider in the front row.

When I told her, she muttered with the knowing glint of the professional expatriate, 'Not a bad place either.' (19)

Little wonder that his identity – as a young boy, he probably thought in terms of one, *true* identity – was the greatest problem he was not able to solve by himself and that is why the greatest mystery for him was he himself:

There was the Long Room, at one end of the garden, at the other the great gilded mirror, all blotches and dimples and ripples. I fluctuated in the watery grass; according to the light I retreated into the depths of the aquarium, or trembled in the foreground like a thread of pale-green sapphire. Those who thought they knew me were ignorant of the creature I scarcely knew myself. (1)

In London, he had his first glimpses of Englishness contrasted with his diminished ego, his – as he calls it – “nonentity”:

If at school I walled myself up inside my pride, in the holidays I crept out of it. The London streets gave me confidence. My nonentity allowed me to flow with the tide. I strutted at times, enjoying anonymity amongst the pink, engrossed faces and the pallid distracted ones. I devoured the arrogance of those who had nothing to fear, insolent, tailored men, and their long lean women bleeding under cloche hats, furs thrown open on salt-cellars and meagre breasts. Their remoteness and the fact that they would have disdained me did not wither, but on the contrary, fertilised the soil in which the seeds of colonial snobbery lay. (1-2)

His narration of the past actually occurs in the time he is writing about the events from his childhood: that is how he interprets them now with just vague memories of occurrences he was then able only to feel intuitively. As he argues elsewhere, “[o]ne of the frustrating aspects of childhood is not being able to peel off the webs of mystery which cling to certain events and own haphazard presence in them” (18); therefore, what he does is peeling off these webs of mystery in a sense of reinterpretation of the events and constructing the meaning, which is closed off to a young, inexperienced and naïve child. Thus, the glossary he is using is by no means the fourteen-year-old boy’s vocabulary (“confidence,” “nonentity”), not to mention poetic diction, the metaphors he uses (“I devoured the arrogance”).

The arrogance of the English is notorious in White, here also gender-wise: men are insolent, women are – you can expect this of a misogynist – “bleeding under cloche hats” and have “meagre breasts.” Their remoteness suggests not only a class distance but also a distance – reservedness



– towards them as people, as race, as nation, as – in the long last – imperialists. The feeling of inferiority never leaves him. It was even strengthened to a point of self-alienation and melancholic malady when Great Aunt Grace called him Patrick, to which he replied:

Aren't I Paddy?

'You're Paddy. But Patrick is your *real* name.'

I had seen it written on the hairbrush, but as though it belonged to someone else. In this world of lantana and ox-blood brick I seemed to belong to neither of my names. Deliberately I stubbed the toes of my boots against the burning asphalt and began to sulk. I was good at that. (2)

His appearance only reinforced his self-hatred. He confessed: "I hated the appearance I had been given, but would not have known what to substitute had I been able to choose – unless something strong and handsome, as ordinary as those I despised and envied" (3). His dreams of strength and beauty were torn to tatters early in his childhood and he was constantly reminded, even by his family, of the pitiful image he had in their eyes:

I was approaching old age when I met the poet R. D. FitzGerald, who recalled an incident from my childhood. His brother had married one of my distant cousins. The poet ran into the couple on a day when they were expected by my parents at our house at Rushcutters Bay. On next seeing his relations he asked how the visit had gone. 'Oh, all right ...' my cousin sighed, 'but that dreadful little boy was there.'

Visitors were always charmed till my sister, a pretty, dimpled child, told what I had been saying about them. I was this green, sickly boy, who saw and knew too much. If I was shy and withdrawn, it was only till provoked. Then I could answer back. (4–5)

Most likely, young Patrick realised then, in his early childhood, that he would never fulfil his parents' dreams of becoming their true heir in the sense of being a strong masculine type who would follow their walk of life:

My parents were very disturbed by having a delicate son on their hands. I was kept out of draughts and protected by woollen combies. They needed me to give them a sense of their own continuity by inheriting my share in a considerable sheep-and-cattle station. A grazier's heir should have been sturdy, but nobody would insure the life of the one they had got. (5)

Another meaningful conclusion at which he apparently arrived in his early boyhood was that his sexuality was to play a role in his further life. Even though he could not consciously realise why, he knew his own sexuality was unusual:

It was on the walk home from the baths, around the age of seven, that I had the first erection I remember. While looking down I suggested to my father that something unusual was happening. He became prim and embarrassed, shifted his wet bathers from one shoulder to the other, and told me to step out. At the same time there was the passing glimmer of a smile. (5)

All these confessions, written from the hindsight, sound somewhat unconvincing and unauthentic unless we assume that the young White kept a diary, had a very good memory or the events he describes had a traumatic influence upon his adult life. Notwithstanding a shade of scepticism with which such autobiographies are to be received, in reading them, we may have a chance to identify some possible sources of inspiration for at least some of the characters he created in his fiction and the attitude he had towards, say, women. And these are to be found, most definitively, in his childhood. Significantly, around this same age, as he says, also after the baths, he met his first poet, “Banjo” Paterson, and, most likely not by coincidence, erection and poetry or, should we rather say, male poets, became his passion: “[o]n those steamy Sydney mornings, my first erection and my first poet: first ripples on the tide of passion ...” (6).

Poetry, from the early age, was his prime object of literary interest: poets and poetry enabled him to tackle his own emotions, extend his world beyond the immediate, beyond the familiar and allowed him become different than his parents:

When I say ‘poet’, I did first aspire to poetry as a means of shaping the emotional chaos with which I was possessed. Poetry was mostly what I read as a child. To an adult like my mother, who didn’t read it, or had as a girl and failed to understand it, poetry would corrupt less than prose. When I say I had flipped through most of Shakespeare by the age of nine, I wasn’t quite the prig it makes a sound. I understood less of the language than the average adult, but I enjoyed the blood and thunder, the come-and-go, the stage directions (that magic word EXEUNT). (7)

As a young boy, Patrick White realised that he was not only different than his peers but also different than his parents (“my mother, who didn’t read [poetry]”), which, in his later age, developed into misogyny (“[w]hen the gates of my expensive prison closed I lost confidence in my mother, and the Uncle James in me never forgave”, 12). Books were, particularly in the earlier period of his life, “a release from boredom through the mystery of locked words” (7), the mystery that will haunt him for the rest of his life. He was critical of the paternal part of his ancestry, the Whites, who, contrary to the maternal part, the Withycombes, were

on the whole dry, mild, close, though with a few drunks and suicides, even homosexuals, lurking in the darker branches of the tree. (One alcoholic had a habit of locking his wife and daughter in a room, then rushing demented through the house firing off pistols.) (8)

If one has such an ancestry, though one-sided, one cannot hope for much anticipated social advancement, even in terms of sexuality. Probably the writer sought for an excuse for his own sexual orientation that, naturally, lurked in mystery for most of his lifetime. His father was less than that:

My father was small and mild. I can’t remember him losing his temper even when forced to assert himself by taking a strap on me. The whippings were left to my mother, whose technique with a riding crop was formidable. She can’t have benefited from these fruitless exercises in correction; they left her an emotional shambles. ... I resented ... my mother’s relentless determination to do everything for my own good, which included dumping me in a prison of a school on the other side off the world. (9)

It seems that sending him to a boarding school in England was the greatest trauma for him and probably the only thing he could not forgive his parents, his mother in particular:

Cheltenham was a seed sown in an ambitious colonial mother’s mind by the English head of a preparatory school in Australia. Though the man turned out to be what my parents considered a ‘no-hoper’, the damage was done. I started serving my four-year prison sentence. (12)

What distinguishes prison houses from any other houses is a peculiar smell. The English public school has also got its characteristic smell, the smell of its facilities and furniture:

Our days and nights in the house in which I was boarded revolved round the 'sweatroom' where we did our prep and led little social life we enjoyed in an English public school. My first impression of this sweatroom was one of varnish and carbolic, together with the smell of radiators you could press against for warmth if you were lucky enough to have one alongside your desk. One wall was panelled with lockers. Smelling of emptiness and varnish at the start of term, the lockers developed a riper, more furtive personality, which asserted itself through gusts of musty fruitcake, tantalising whiffs of orange and chocolate, and the more passive presence of dump, mutilated textbooks. Secrets you kept in your locker became open ones, you suspected; the only safe place was your head, dreams the only refuge after we were locked in the dormitory at night. (12–13)

The smell, as it seems, may also be metaphorical: the smell of the students' brains working in the 'sweatroom' as well as the smell of emptiness. The idea of dreams as refuge is certainly indicative of torments of being forcefully incarcerated and enslaved which, alongside lockers "developing riper personality," form a picture of mental oppression in the environment populated mostly by inanimate objects raised to the status of humans.

Not only was he separated from the country of his childhood and his family, but also he was painfully given to understand by his peers that he was a foreigner, the colonial, the other. Recalling his early days at Cheltenham, he admitted:

Morning again: a quick slick-over, eyes and armpits, in the toshroom, before a final go at prep, and the lumpy porridge and bread-and-scrape we were served at breakfast. No wonder boys are at their cruellest at breakfast in a boarding school. Accents crop up: '... me dad from Bradford ...' I was reminded of the deformity I carried round – my Australianness. I hardly dared open my mouth for fear of the toads which might tumble out, and the curled lips, cold eyes waiting to receive renewed evidence of what made me unacceptable to the British ruling class. (13)

Then, there arises a problem of one's nationality and, consequently, of racial hatred. In his childhood memories, his Australianness was a curse, but Australia as the country of his birth was, primarily and fundamentally, the "country of the mind." On resuming his, as he calls it, "sentence at Cheltenham" after seeing off his father, ponders over another question (14):

Would I have felt sentenced in Australia? The masochist in me might have seen to that. As it was, memory helped flesh out an English schoolboy's idyll: riding a pony bareback through girth-high tussock, stripping leeches from my body after a swim in a muddy creek, my solitary mooning through a forest of dripping sassafras towards the sound of the waterfall. My parents played no active part in this country of the mind. I clung to them as a lifeline. I wrote them each week a stilted childhood letter.

His formative years at Cheltenham marked strongly his sexual orientation, being the result of not only the understandable age of adolescence through which he was going but, vitally and fundamentally, the time spent in same-sex boarding school:

Any boy who had not thought about sex must soon have been made aware of it, such was the housemaster's obsession. Perhaps understandably. Shortly before my arrival the poor wretch had weathered a scandal when half his house had been expelled. He would burst into toshroom or gym hoping to catch us *in flagrante*. He was the tallest man I had seen. He smashed the light bulbs caning us. He promised to stamp out a 'morbid kink' on discovering my passion for Chekov, Ibsen, and Strindberg, and only stamped it deeper in. Never during my stay in his house did he uncover sex, though he must have disturbed fantasies in his forays through toshroom steam and the stench of seat-sodden jerseys and mud-caked boots in the more puritanical gym. We were far too frightened, I think, and at least one of us found the climate uncongenial. Even in the more brazen days of my maturity, English sex shivered and plopped remorsefully like a gas fire on its way out. The strength of the game lay in the opening gambits. (13)

As he himself claimed, Patrick White could not and would not forgive: "my inability to forgive is a trait I must have inherited from my Uncle James" (FG 12), and this probably also applies to his father who, given a task of acquainting him with, as he called it, "facts of life" (13), just warned him against the seats in public lavatories, disappointing him greatly since he waited for it with anticipation and anxiety, being not certain what the father would tell him:

My heart was beating horribly, but at least it wasn't up to me to speak; the onus was on my unfortunate father. At last he accepted his duty. He warned me against the seats in public lavatories. We were both breathless with relief at the removal of a difficult situation. ... The wounds I suffered on the snow-bound platform were of a duller kind which promised separation. I was de-

terminated to keep my grief within the bounds of that manliness I was being taught to respect, when I would have liked to tear off the rabbitskin glove he was wearing and hold his sunburnt hand to my cheek. I did nothing. I didn't cry. (14)

But the disappointment continued throughout the rest of his life, never fading away. In turn, the kind of manliness Patrick constructed for himself in his own life would have disappointed his father, too, not to mention his mother. Reflecting on this issue from the perspective of an adult, he came to a conclusion that they were all three guilty and not guilty at the same time, thus indicating the relativity of any truths or definite statements and opinions: "I was a dutiful son, if not the kind they would have chosen, some doctor-grazier, cricketer-barrister, or my mother's version of a diplomat; we were all three guilty and innocent parties, suffering one of those betrayal by fate" (14). His and his parents' personal drama with the chosen walk of life and sexual orientation has been raised to the proportion of almost a Greek tragedy, where the fate decides what will happen. This "betrayal by fate" is probably right on the side of his parents, although, as his confessions indicate, he was not fully convinced that the parents were his role models – the hatred towards the mother developed probably into the hatred of women in general and the father was weak, not at all a masculine type – all this may account for the blame be put on them, not on the fate. Nonetheless, one fact remains undisputable – they all suffered no matter what the real cause had been. Middle-class mentality in post-war Australia till the early 1980s never allowed coming-outs known at the turn of the century: they all had to suffer in silence, both the sons and their parents.

He did not love his mother but he loved her substitute, the Nanny, who taught him the basics of life and love and introduced him into the world of affection:

All the genuine love in me was directed at this substitute for a mother. Lizzie Clark came to us shortly after Sue's [his sister's] birth, when I was three. I hated her first because she brought change. What with the baby and the new nurse it was a time of upheaval. I was hateful and destructive. I stamped on her toothpaste as she unpacked. I let the water out of the hotplate as we sat at our dinner of boiled brains. ... I suspected her dark face, the curved nose with a distinct hole or single pockmark on one side, the glossy black hair, the Scots accent. I don't know how she won me over, perhaps by the wet kisses

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she planted on my unyielding mouth, drawing me out of myself until we were united in a common wet. (14–15)

These experiences with the Nanny must have had a lasting impression on the very young boy: wet kisses, most definitely, have an erotic underpinning. This and other instances of love directed toward the substitute of the mother indicate that young White had a problem with his biological mother whom he admitted he never loved with the exception when he was a very young boy and she was a very old woman:

Ruth, the titular mother, bound us to her by a series of surprises such as changes of dress, presents, tantrums, powers of organisation, and bursts of general knowledge. But she wasn't always there, what with the committees, the fittings, the luncheon and dinner parties, or else she was lying down with a headache or falling aches. Except when a little child, I don't think I loved, I only admired her after a fashion, until I pitied an old bedridden, half-blind senile woman, and pity is a pinchbeck substitution for love. (15)

The verbal distance he maintains toward the mother (“the titular mother”) and the pity he feels when she was old unequivocally indicate that she was the primal source of his later misogyny. They both were always in conflict, sometimes for various reasons though the object could have been the same. He recalls the moment the parents were disgusted when he

ran away and hid in the bush to avoid a Christmas service held in the asbestos church. Ruth despised the Mount Wilson church for aesthetic reasons: ‘I’d burn it down if it would burn.’ If she were alive today she might have got some satisfaction from reading that we are being poisoned by asbestos. But on Christmas Day of 1923 the asbestos church, erect amongst the tree ferns she rooted out methodically in establishing her English garden, was accepted as a spiritual ally in accusing her infernal child. (17)

White believed that, as a child, he was inquisitive, always wanting to know and see more but, at the same time, timid and introspective: “From an early age I was inquisitive: anxious to hear, to see, to open any unopened door, to experience, to know” (18).

## Sex and magic

In his autobiography, White does not avoid providing the reader with explicit contexts of his various behaviours and nonetheless explicit associations and/or comparisons he produces while looking back at his past, one of them being that his life was the life of illusion, half terror and half delight, like in the world of the theatre:

Theatre and magic, whether my misfired attempt at finishing off the master who took us for Latin Unseen by sticking pins in a wax image, or the vision of the child-fairy emerging from an enormous panto rose to swing above our heads on a wire in what used to be known as the Grand Opera House near Central Station, made me vaguely conscious that I was in some way involved with the world of illusion, half terror half delight, like those orgasms in a hot bath and the near ejaculations of fear which accompanied my encounters with the Mad Woman. (20)

As a declared metaphysical – or post-Romantic – writer, White frequently refers to imagination and visions, particularly by young females, the child-fairy, in this case. In some other cases, in, say, *Riders in the Chariot*, it will be the mad Miss Hare who will have a visionary power, the power denied to rational adults. Irrationality, magic and sex – what a bizarre trio – make a powerful combination of highly combustible matter. Here, the allusion to his (probably) later self- and homosexual acts in a bath seems to be obvious and is further related to his accounts of his stay at the English boarding school in Cheltenham.

His other obsession was women epitomised in the shape of the Mad Woman, almost like Lewis Carroll's Mad Hatter, but the difference being the fact she was real though magical:

The Mad Woman was real enough because I first came across her by broad daylight in our back yard rooting through the garbage bins. But even by daylight she seemed to belong to some nether world rather the realities of poverty and hunger. I could connect her blotched, alcoholic skin and munching gums with frosted glass of pubs I hurried past at the Cross, but the stinking fish skeletons and heads she was sorting and wrapping in greasy paper had undergone some magic change. I would recognise them years later as paraphernalia of the illusion referred to as art. (20)



This Mad Woman of White's fears and his near ejaculations is the ruler of both dimensions in a dichotomised vision of the world: the real and tangible, on the one hand, and the illusory, magic and artistic, on the other. She combines in herself all oppositions, contradictions and paradoxes; the Mad Woman seems to be a modernist incarnation of the seventeenth-century metaphysical *coincidentia oppositorum*, the oppositions in one, here idiosyncratically extended to encompass also art, magic and sexuality. As a truly modernist artist, White is able to tell the difference between waste and art, fish skeletons becoming thus part of theatrical practice, previously being discarded as food refuse. Here, the figure of the Mad Woman serves to illustrate the point that is going to be significant in White's further public career, that is to say, his class sensitivity and his particular interest in working class people and social outcasts. Himself being rejected, he felt especial fondness for the low life but with an element of magic. And the Mad Woman was just like that:

By day, above the garbage bins, the great hat she always wore looked insignificant, extinct. Dusk was when it flowered, becoming for me the distinctive symbol of the Mad Woman, its huge targe apparently constructed out of the trumpets of grubby, wrinkled arums. Although she appeared to me in dreams and waking fantasies I can't have met the Mad Woman more than three times in the flesh. (20)

Reality mingles with fantasy, dreams with the flesh: this is White at his best. And the poetic syntax ("[d]usk was when it flowered"), which makes his writing, in this and many other passages, so peculiar, so idiosyncratic. The same refers to his concept of place: when describing the setting in which he spotted the Mad Woman in the real for the third time, he referred to it as "where, at another time, Mrs Bonner ordered the carriage to stop and they picked up Voss" (21), thus, mixing the real with the fictitious, the account of his life with the fiction he constructed (*Voss*, 1957). These two, as it seems, become, at some stage, indistinguishable, inseparable, almost homogeneous:

I ran away. I ran upstairs. I lay on my bed. The glass above the dressing-table showed me palpitating in green waves. My heart was beating, a wooden, irregular time, as in another situation the hooves of Voss's cavalcade drummed their way down the stairs in this same house. (21)

The family house, populated not only by the biological family, but, as it is in his case, also by the characters from his novels, the produce of his mind, transfers us to the other of reality, to “magical” reality even though there is no magic involved, no magic wands, no formulas, but just the power of mind and imagination. Elsewhere in his autobiography, their house is “the Eden of my mother’s recall” (22), which finds its way to the famous Xanadu of *Riders in the Chariot* (1961).

In his boyhood, Patrick White developed, as he reports it in *Flaws in the Glass*, a lasting relationship, “the mystical tie,” with the black male servant, who would later become a model for black social outcasts, like Alf Dubbo of the mentioned *Riders in the Chariot*:

The more important, the mystical tie with Solomon Rakooka, arose from his having sailed the seas and called at foreign ports, where he had collected a variety of objects kept in a box in the small brown room opening on our back yard. I never cared to go inside the room with its rank blankets on an unmade bed, but Sol used to bring out his box and we sat together on the step going through his treasures: shells I remember, a tobacco pouch with twist top and the head and torso of an Indian as decoration; there was also a vicious-looking knife from Buenos Aires. (23)

Solomon’s social status as a Solomon Islander in postcolonial Australia of the early 20th century was, by all means, low and limited in cities like Sydney basically to menial jobs, like gardening, which, bearing in mind the indigenous love of open spaces, freedom and tribal life, led to pathologies like drinking, rowdy behaviour in public places, etc. Therefore,

Sol had to leave eventually. He was a drunk. His drinking bouts used to land him in gaol, and sometimes he brought home sleazy women of the type I had seen hanging round the pubs at the Cross. ...When he left, we all cried. Even Dad put on a performance, as he did when we buried pets, and as he had when Bird [White’s mother, RW] turned on Dicky for coming home chewing that disgusting American gum. (23)

His father’s hypocrisy or, rather, hidden racism is an indication of a far wider phenomenon: Australian middle-class racism, being the result of racism which English colonisers brought with them from the British Isles, where the English topped other nations, with the Irish being the absolute bottom. In the novelist’s personal mythology he created in

his boyhood the hierarchies were, however, different: "Lizzie our nurse taught us that the Scots were above the English, and because we loved her dearly we believed her. Her own dark complexion, beaky nose, and glossy black hair our mother told us probably came from the Spanish Armada wrecked on the Scottish coast, and Lizzie was pleased enough not to protest" (23–24).

His childhood memories of the objects and people he cherished have got a lot in common with the characters he created and the things he described and multiplied in his writing.

## Writing

"Reading and writing, always reading and writing . . . Round the age of nine I wrote a poem called *The Trump* which expressed priggish sentiments. At least they were not so much my own as those expected of me" (26). White stated practising writing early enough to realise that it is a job in which one can never be fully satisfied, and the slogan he learnt from his Scottish nurse, Lizzie, to never blow your own trumpet turned into a "warning which has echoed through my life to the present day, when trumpet-blowing has become one of our favourite national pastimes" (26).

Writing was to become later one of his most favourite themes, particularly noticeable in his most autobiographical novel, *The Solid Mandala*, in which Waldo confesses to Dulcie that

"What I really want to do," he said, "is write."

He heard himself make it sound like a natural function. Perhaps it was because, until now, he had shied away from expressing anything so personal and complicated. It would not be possible even to try with Mother or Dad. But in this girl he might be addressing the kind of complicated human being his reading told him did exist. (SM 93)

What may pass for a convincing proof of the importance of autobiography in White's writing is another significant statement from Waldo who, like Patrick White, is too shy, too introvert to admit to his parents and to the world that he wants to write about himself as a sort of therapy, as a sort of interior struggle to, first, overcome himself and then others:

“What are you going to write” she said, “do you think it will be novels?”  
 “I haven’t decided yet,” he said, “what,” he said, “what form it’ll take. Sometimes I think novels, sometimes plays. It might even be some kind of philosophical work.”

He was leading Dulcie back now towards the other members of the party. With things becoming so difficult, he had had to abandon a plan for luring her deeper into the garden by carefully chosen, oblique ways. ... It would have been so much easier if he had been able to tell her: I want to, and am going to write about *myself* [emphasis original]. (SM 94)

As a young boy, White used to write quite a lot and his other juvenilia which he mentions in *Flaws in the Glass* included plays like a melodrama, *The Mexican Bandits*, a domestic drama, *Love’s Awakening*, a tragedy in verse about a Florentine female tyrant and many others, which, of course, are of no literary value but demonstrate how White’s writing talent developed from the young age:

I wrote a prayer, too. My father found me intoning it in the summerhouse in the lower garden. Dick [,] in whom I don’t remember catching a glimmer of religious faith though he lowered his voice sightseeing in European cathedrals, and came to church with us at Christmas to please Ruth and set the children an example, was shocked by my rites in the summerhouse. In the green gloom, amongst the moss-encrusted woodwork, my behaviour must have appeared semi-pagan, almost diabolical, to a decent extrovert Australian father. (26)

Religion, or rather the lack of it, was to become one of the main themes in the novels he was to write much later. But from hindsight, it seems that he very carefully thought over various ideas concerning the Christian faith and the institution it propagated – the (in)famous “C. of E.,” the abbreviation of which he used, first, in *Riders in the Chariot*, to ridicule the moral stance of Mrs Jolley, and then in his autobiography.

### “God is Love”: Religion and sex

Religion and sex rarely connect, particularly in the early 20th-century Australia. White’s recollections of untimely sex experiences are, naturally, bound with school, with masturbations under the cover of desks, fascinations with male teacher’s muscular arms or female teacher’s smells:

If 'God is Love' was the slogan of the Bong Bong church [the Whites' family church, RW], Sex was the theme developed in the dormitories, in the tunnels of drought-stricken laurels, and the long grass hedged in by hawthorn. Often barely explicit, like a crush on the music mistress as she smelled a bunch of violets or guided one's hands at the piano, or spasm of admiration for a sportsmaster's hairy, muscular arms, there were also brutal, boyish orgasms. I imagined I was in love. I suffered my first agonies of sexual jealousy. (27)

White is not explicit whether he means male or female partners or/and objects of love, but, as it may be conjectured, these "boyish orgasms" were most likely self-induced.

### **Living sensuality**

As a boy, he developed an ear for sounds and an eye for colours; generally, he admitted that his school time was a synthesis of living sensuality with a substantial dose of eroticism:

Looking back from the point I have reached, when the incidents themselves have become blurred, I can still experience my schooldays in the country as a synthesis of living sensuality: the blaze of light, a horse galloped through flickering leaves, callous flesh streaked with mud, tasselled with leeches, and the smells, especially those of crushed ants, smoke rising from twigs and bark kindled in the open, bread and mushrooms frying in biscuit tins on a school-room stove, hot darkness and spilt semen, and through it all I hear the bird-song, alternately cynical and sweet, piano notes faltering on frosty mornings, treble laughter intertwined with the harsh braying of broken voices. (27)

White's declaration that all these memories have been constructed in the moment of writing prove, once again, that he was conscious of impossibility of writing a "true" history: the things about which he wrote in his autobiography got their significance and meaning in the moment of putting them on paper even though they might have lingered in his memory in fragmented forms. Only from a perspective of time can you put all such reminiscences together to make sense of them as a whole; in the past, however, they were just isolated, meaningless incidents. These incidents, which – in White's retrospective – are "blurred," only now get artistic significance; in the time of their actual occurrence they were banal, unworthy of mention, some probably shameful and – for middle-

-class “C. of E.” morality – also considered sinful (“hot darkness and spilt semen”).

White seems to be aware of him idealising his childhood and childhood memories, which, again, shows the power of human mind’s faculty to alter and strengthen some distant recollections of what it retains as good and positive and push away, deter what appears to be neutral, indifferent or meaningless:

As I aged, my visits to what had been the paradise of my childhood and youth became waking nightmare peopled with familiar figures deformed by time and arthritis. Everybody creaked. I began to hear a clicking in my own bones. The sassafras<sup>2</sup> I considered mine seemed to reject my intrusions; I was surrounded by a quizzical silence, watched by invisible birds. I did not attempt to re-enter the smoky gullies I had explored with Sid Kirk as guide. What I sensed was not so much hostility as the indifference of a timeless landscape to human limitations. (29)

The indifference of, as he says, timeless landscape to human limitations shows the subservient position of the human in confrontation with what is to stay forever (more attention will be given to this issue in the subsequent chapter), which, to some extent, runs parallel to what Martin Heidegger wrote about man’s thingly nature<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> sassafras noun. L16.

[ORIGIN Spanish *sasafrás*, perh. ult. from Latin *saxifraga saxifrage*.]

1. A tree of the genus *Sassafras*, of the laurel family, esp. *S. albidum* native to the eastern US, with greenish-yellow flowers, leaves, and bark with a spicy aroma. Also, the wood of this tree. L16. b) The dried bark of this tree, used as a medicine and flavouring; (more fully sassafras tea) an infusion of this. L16. c) In full sassafras oil. An oil extracted from (the bark of) the sassafras, used medicinally and in perfumery. Also oil of sassafras. M18.

2. Any of various similarly aromatic and medicinal trees of other genera and families; Austral. any of several trees of the family Monimiaceae with aromatic bark, e.g. *Doryphora aromatica* and *D. sassafras*. Also, the wood or bark of such a tree. E19.

Brazilian sassafras either of two S. American trees of the laurel family, *Aniba panurensis* and *A. amazonica*, whose wood yields a fragrant oil. swamp sassafras the sweet bay, *Magnolia virginiana*. (SOED, CD-ROM).

<sup>3</sup> See my *Cry over the Abyss: The Discourse of Power in the Poetry of Robert Browning and Algernon Charles Swinburne* (Opole 2004) in which I discuss this concept.

## *Genius loci*

As has been mentioned before, White's fascination with landscape, location, setting cannot be overestimated – he persistently comes back to this issue, particularly within the context of his criticism of Australian middle class and their preoccupation with material wealth:

All the real inhabitants of Mount Wilson [his cousins' place] as opposed to the fashionable rich who came and lived in modernised houses and left on exhausting a whim, had absorbed, I felt, something of the mountain's fatality. The spirit of place strengthened them as they dragged our increasingly painful physical existence. They knew they belonged there. (29–30)

The spirit of place, the *genius loci*, is an inherent part of the location, gives the character to it, thus making its presence inevitable and welcome. White, additionally, connects the novels he wrote with the places in which he lived:

All the houses I lived in have been renovated and refurnished to accommodate fictions. The original structure is there for anybody who knows: 'Lulworth' for *Voss*; 'Dogwoods' for *The Three of Man* and *The Solid Mandala*; Martin Road for *The Eye of the Storm*; the cottage, the homestead, the sheds, the dunny at 'Bolaro' for *The Twyborn Affair*. In some cases it has not been so much architecture as atmosphere which has transferred the house to the page. The spirit of the stairs at Martin Road as I groped my way down most mornings in the dark conveyed the interior of a Paddington house I saw as Duffield's [Hurtle Duffield of *The Vivisector*, RW] without ever having been inside. In the theatre of my imagination I should say there are three or four basic sets, all of them linked to the actual past, which can be dismantled and re-constructed to accommodate the illusion of reality life boils down to. (FG 154)

The atmosphere, the spirit of the place or even a single household object, may affect what eventually finds its way to the pages of fiction. Once again, White stresses the power of imagination to dismantle, undo the past and re-build, re-construct, as if it were, re-do it to form something that passes for reality in fiction, which he calls "the illusion of reality."

## **Australian culture, humour and satire**

The pathetic condition of Australian culture, its parochial character stemming from infrequent contacts with external world, and the Australians' inability to use their wit is further reiterated in Patrick White's comment on Australian humour:

I see Australian humour as pretty woolly till the middle of the Twentieth Century. It seemed non-existent when I returned to Australia after Hitler's War. Then as cities grew, and with them a new generation, an abrasiveness began to creep in, an increasing sophistication as young people travelled, and the outside world rubbed off on us. Even so, satire remained suspect if aimed at 'warm' Australians, the majority of whom are not the golden-hearted beings they would like to think. All of this is understandable. (33)

The Australian provincial complexes have had their reflection in the kind of satire popular at that time but, as White rightly observed, the middle-class citizens were not happy at all when their hypocrisy, narrow-mindedness and bigotry were exposed and ridiculed, the theme of which found its issue also in his fiction. Characteristically, he believed that crisis, both political and economical, is the right moment for creativity, for satire and extravert jesting and, paradoxically, this was the time of two world wars:

Black humour and satire germinate in wars, disillusion, and hunger. So it strove in Berlin, and there has always been a vein of black in the British people's most extravert slapstick, derived from hunger and exploitation in the past, and in the present century from close involvement of the civilian population with the two great wars. (FG 33)

As usual in his commentaries, White makes it on a personal note, going back to the time of his boyhood in England, mixing appreciation with bitter irony:

So I think the humour I most appreciate derives from those bitter days when I was a despised Colonial attempting to pass myself off as an English schoolboy, than hanging round the theatres in the Thirties, the London streets during the Blitz, and the long boredom and isolation of war in the Western Desert where most of my companions were frustrated British. (33)



White seems to be unable to forgive the English the tough lesson the boys gave him at school and he carries the memories with him through the adulthood. But the recollections of his childhood from a much later perspective are analytical, if not psychoanalytical in Freudian sense, deeply inquisitive and show the distance he maintains in relation to himself:

I was born with that silver spoon, the metaphor popular novelists and Sunday journalists love to trot out. Unfortunately, or not, I was given eyes, hyperactive emotions, and an unconscious apt to take over from me. My childhood should have been a happy one, and was when anxieties and foreboding did not bring on asthma, that curse of half of my life. Adolescence was probably not much different from the unmade bed in which every young person of average sensibility tosses and turns interminably. In early manhood I began to see that the external world was no other than the dichotomy of light and darkness I sensed inside me. The principles instilled into me by my parents and Lizzie were only related to my rational self. My mentors could not have imagined any of the darker undertones, or the implications of my deviant sexuality. I have struck by most of their principles while knowing in my irrational depths what it is to commit a murder, or be murdered. (34)

Admittedly, the mind's split into rational and irrational parts has some sort of scientific or psychoanalytical grounding, but White did not really care of what some "academic turds" might have said on the topic – he relied exclusively on his intuition and analytical instinct, which was culturally oriented and conditioned, and that is probably why he included his homosexuality ("deviant sexuality") into the domain of irrationality that cannot be shaped or influenced, least schooled or wiped out.

The problem of his sexuality is an issue White wished to diagnose and explain, firstly, to himself and, then, to his readers, which most likely was of secondary importance since, undoubtedly, in the 1980s, and earlier, he did not mean to shock; rather, he seems to be embarrassed and discomfited:

I can't remember being much worried by evidence of sexual ambivalence. I indulged my sexual inclinations at an early age. What disturbed me was the scorn of other boys, not for my sexuality, which they accepted and in some cases enjoyed, but for a feminine sensibility which they despised because they mistrusted. It is much the same situation when predominantly masculine men despise women for subtleties the male lacks, while making use of their sexuality. (34)

He never addresses the issue of homosexuality straight; instead, he uses euphemisms, circumambages, and circumvention to make the point. But that changes in the process of writing and the neutral “sexual ambivalence” becomes, emotionally featured, “the fact of my homosexuality”:

In my case, I never went through the agonies of choosing between this or that sexual way of life. I was chosen as it were, and soon accepted the fact of my homosexuality. In spite of looking convincingly male I may have been too passive to resist, or else I recognised the freedom being conferred on me to range through every variation of the human mind, to play so many roles in so many contradictory envelopes of flesh. I settled into the situation. I did not question the darkness in my dichotomy, though already I had begun the inevitably painful search for the twin who might bring a softer light to bear on my bleakly illuminated darkness. (34–35)

The statement “I was chosen” may, of course, indicate his passivity (“I may have been too passive to resist”) but, at the same time, be an alibi in case he were accused of actively propagating homosexuality, an accusation not rare in fundamentalist circles. He does not seem to have the courage, or certainty, to acknowledge, to admit to himself the way he has chosen; instead, he prefers to hide behind the mask of words, speaking of “the freedom being conferred on me” to adopt various mental and sexual stances. He seems to forget his own statement to the effect that the truth ends where the words start. His logocentrism fails him again when he uses the metaphor of darkness to speak of the other part of mind (“dichotomy”) to which he removed his (“deviant”) sexuality.

While in France as a young man, he recalls, he was ready for seduction:

I was at the right age for seduction by the facile and the frivolous. We had as inspiration the bright adolescent adults who careered about London in the Twenties, and though we had never been closer to them than on the pages of a magazine, they waved, smirked, and gnashed their way into our youthful imagination. So our *petite bande* roamed screeching through Sickert’s mud-coloured streets, ignoring the disapproval of shopkeepers standing in doorways, and the even more shocked sensibilities of those thin French cats flattening themselves against the merchandise. We sat chattering at our favourite café, smoking *Gauloises* with queasy nonchalance, while floating apart on waves of *Pernod fils*. (37)

The artistic, decadent atmosphere of a French city, reinforced by celebrated brands of cigarettes and alcohol, stimulated sex affairs, called for romance.

### Foreign languages: complements to life

From a hindsight, White realised how important in shaping of his character, attitude and *Weltanschauung* was his knowledge of foreign languages and cultures: "Looking back, the two languages I read at Cambridge were in some sense complementary, and part of the blundering search for a means of self-expression and fulfilment" (35).

He believed that "a passion for France can only develop with maturity ... Germany has, or had, a mental climate to appeal to romantic, turgid, confused youth" (36), which explains a lot also in terms of his literary tastes and preferences. "It was all very stimulating," he recalled later the time when he started reading *Madame Bovary*, "and at the same time frustrating, not to be able to unlock a language with so many treasures behind its bars" (36). But his true love was the German and Germany:

Germany came later. ... Between '32 and '35 I spent the greater part of every vacation in Germany. I had to catch up on a language which, until I visited the country, I could never take seriously: comic, hedgehog words constantly colliding, syntactical structures to get lost in. Then while exploring the country itself I became obsessed by its Romantic literature, which in later life was dispossessed by my passion for the French. I moved drunkenly through German landscape, the feverish greener-than-green which so often gives out a smell of rotting, the black-green of pine forests, the austere, dead-green North, scruffy with sand as it approaches the Baltic coast. (38–39)

White repeats here certain English stereotypes of long-standing about foreign languages even though, and this sounds genuine, he believes that the two languages mentioned above complemented his artistic, creative life (his French was at the start "the orgy of mirror-watching phonetics," 35). The French and German added to his palette of colours with which he painted his characters and landscapes:

In Hanover, the city with which I became most familiar (later the *Heimat* of Voss and Himmelfarb) I was cosseted by a homely *Bürger* family, who fed put

me to sleep under feather beds, and fed me *Kartoffelpuffer* [pancakes made from raw grated potato, author's note], *Häringsalat*, and *Wurst*. I loved it all, and them. I returned over and over to the Oertels, until human relationships crumbled under political pressure. (39)

Hardly ever does White speak in his fiction of political events, even the historic ones; yet, in his autobiography, he makes a rare exception:

But in the early stages of my love affair with Germany, in spite of some disturbing personal clashes with the Nazi mentality, the burning of the books while I was in Heidelberg, and shadowy, persecuted Jews living along the same street, Hitler was still an object for scorn and cynicism among liberal-thinking Germans. We laughed our heads off drinking *Schnapps* on the safe balcony above the Holzgraben in Hanover, and Lotte overpainted her lips in defiance of the tin sabre. (39)

His love affair with Germany had an unexpected bearing upon his French, which, once again, reiterates his interminable problems with multiple identities and accents:

Never very warm towards me, France grew colder during my trafficking with Germany. When I returned to France I was told I spoke French with a German accent; just as at school in England I was accused of being a cockney or colonial, and back in Australia, 'a bloody Pom'. Language troubles have widened the split in my nature. This was not reduced when in Danzig, while it was still a 'free city', I asked the way of a passer-by and was told, 'Sorry, I too, am a German.' Admittedly my vanity preened itself a little on this occasion after I had recovered from the shock. (41)

White's "own romantic reconstruction of the past" (39) enables us to understand his characters and settings better. Were it not for his travels to Germany and the people he met there, the main character of *Voss* would not have been whom he was, and, little wonder, he was foreign to majority of his Australian readers and critics who knew little of Germany, Germans, persecuted Jews, dangers of nationalist politics and ideology, who enjoyed their liberal principle, middle-class life style and were not troubled by what had happened in the Old World. Of course, White seems to be uncritical but, nonetheless, he has every right and poetic licence to have his own *romantic* reconstructions of the past, particularly, if it is done in the form of autobiography.

## Vanity

Vanity is part of an artist's psychological profile and Patrick White was not free from being vain, self-indulgent and pretentious. With an air of melancholy, he recalls a scene from his childhood while admitting to his vanity:

Of course I am vain, less since losing my teeth and to some extent my sight. If I have not yet lost my mind, I can sometimes feel it preparing to defect. But vanity is deeply rooted in me. I am said to have come home from my first morning in the kindergarten and announced to Lizzie, 'I've got the best voice in the school.' 'How do you know?' 'I've heard the others, and I've heard my own, and I know which sounds best.' I often wish such conviction had followed me through life. (41)

He never attributed his vanity to his father who was for him "a plain good unimaginative Australian male" (41), but rather to his mother, Ruth, who, no wonder, was not the role model to follow and probably the main cause for his later misogyny:

Ruth was vain, but her vanity was easily deflated; like her son she suffered from diffidence. Though she despised the Whites for being rich, she enjoyed the advantages money brought. She would tell us how hard she had worked at 'Piercefield' during a far from affluent youth. We had never seen her work, except to get into an apron at Mount Wilson before she lost interest in the place, and stir a cauldron of plum jam. (41)

His mother's hypocrisy is yet another item in the long list of accusations the writer had against her and women in general. Additionally, he abhorred his mother's (and father's) dislike of work and their middle-class lifestyle:

I think I might have had greater respect for both my parents if I had seen them working. All I have to go by is a snap of Dick, an honest, boyish, burnt face running with sweat as he squats during a spell in the shade of a thinly furnished gumtree, his horse's nether lip drooping a couple of inches above his shoulder. The bland blue eyes never let the camera down, not anybody else. I remember him returning from working visits to 'Belltrees', and their other station 'Tereel' near Gloucester. The smell of his valise and oilskin invading the hall challenged the furniture to convince. Our mother had put

on her apron to welcome our father to meal she had not cooked. More than anything I was fascinated by the leggings covering his stocky calves. (41–42)

As it seems from what he writes, his artistic soul was with his father, with the way he looked, the way the things he had smelled, garments he wore. This fascination with the father's appearance was probably the beginning of how his masculinity started to shape (apparently his first erection he had at the age of seven was in the company of his father in the bath).

An obvious possibility of how to explain his (sexual) relationship with his mother would be the Oedipus complex. And that is what he says about it:

I admired rather than loved my mother. I loved to follow the rites of the dressing table, the robbing and disrobing, or as much of it I was allowed to see. Lipstick was still 'lip-salve' and hidden under the handkerchiefs. She was not a woman given to scenting herself. There was the more innocent smell of powder, the dramatic stench of singed hair when the crimping-iron had been overheated, the mysterious perfumes of dresses hanging limp in the wardrobe waiting to be brought to life. I think she enjoyed my presence, like an actress with a safe audience of one. I stimulated her vanity and some of it surely rubbed off on me. (42)

This rather intimate relationship between the mother figure and the son figure has been widely discussed and researched since Sigmund Freud's findings early in the 20th century, but, within the context of Australian autobiography, White's confession is certainly an uncommon thing. Later, in London, probably realising his sexual preferences and on the pretext of him refusing to go with his father to a cricket match at Lords', his mother had flown at him, "I never thought I'd have a *freak* for a son!" (43). Time heals wounds and changes attitudes: so did White's declared vanity at the stage of his maturity:

Growing up in a period when drabness was expected of the male sex, my vanity could not express itself through dress. When it finally became possible I was already too old; there's nothing so pathetic as trendy old men and the lipstick mummies of women. Instead I suppose I've indulged my vanity in tricking myself out in words. Not all ornamentation. Part of me is austere enough to have conveyed the truth, I like to think, but that again could be vanity. If I believe this today, tomorrow I may feel that truth is the property of silence – at any rate the silences filling the space between the words and over those I sometimes have control. (42)

Tricking himself out in words – the little language game he played – replaced in time a commonplace vanity seen in average people, and in White this constituted the basis of his relationships with himself, a kind of selfish play not accessible to others. By no means, of course, is it dress that is considered vanity in an old age, but certainly it is a belief that one is able to express the truth, and it is so for at least two reasons: firstly, that there is a centre that may be called the truth, and secondly, that the truth is knowable and expressible. White is a proponent of a middle position: yes and no (“If I believe this today, tomorrow I may feel that truth is the property of silence”), which roughly means that inexperience, youth, optimism suggest that there must be truth somewhere, there may even be *the* truth there and part of me is serious enough to be able to convey it one way or other, most likely in writing. But that is probably too optimistic if one claims one’s ability to express, to articulate it, least to understand, to know the truth. Thus, there is this other option, reserved for the experienced ones, to remain mute and to sing with the mouth shut, to see with the eyes closed, to imagine, to visualise, to paint mental pictures of truth since it is the property of silence.

### **Australia – a foreign land**

Patrick White’s decision to return to Australia was not a matter of his growing consciousness of belonging to the nation or love of the people or the land but rather a “matter of necessity” (46). As he admits, he was surrounded in England by emptiness, a “vacuum,” and needed some living space in which to live life intensely, as intensely as his temperament demanded. The choice was pretty obvious – the country of great opportunities and vast spaces, his parents’ country and the country of his childhood – Australia, the lucky country. But the reality was far from what he had anticipated:

I was alarmed at first, then permanently unhappy, to return home and find myself a stranger in my own country, even in my own family. I had been released from prison of course, but freedom was not what I expected. (I was too young to know that freedom is a theory anyway.) My gaol sentence had left its stamp; I met with suspicion and often undisguised dislike. It was a situation I have experienced visiting countries like Czecho-Slovakia and Turkey without having a word of the language. In Australia the difference lay in my

understanding every word the natives spoke, while they cottoned on more or less to the different mutterings of the foreigner, without our communicating to any but the most rudimentary degree. (46)

His disappointment is great and the emphasis is again on language and words: the words he knows and the Australians know but both sides are unable to negotiate meaning, the common ground between them. He is now convinced that he is *different* in more ways than one:

Throughout childhood and youth I had received warnings of the price I would pay for being different: the overheard remark that my parents had got a 'changeling', the jeers of English schoolboys for a Colonial in their midst, my mother's cry when she accused me of being a 'freak'. But none of it prepared me for the shock of returning to Australia after school. In the four years I spent away my imagination had created an ideal land from which my mother's ambitions had cast me out. However kind, generous, affectionate my family were on taking me back, they still did not understand the peculiar youth who had developed out of their difficult child. (46–47)

White presents here some very intimate, personal revelations, particularly in regards to his origin (a "changeling"). With confessions like these, a person of a high, literary reputation, the Nobel Prize winner, strips himself of any personal mysteries: he is like an X-rayed person going through airport gates, completely naked, defenceless and put to shame. But that is voluntary: no formal procedures demanded that sort of confessions, that sort of very intimate revelations of family secrets and secrets are the core of writing – here the secrets are exposed before the public eyes, that is, the readers' eyes.

Australia as people was a disappointment but Australia as land certainly was not, even though White's anticipations might have been exaggerated in terms of its over-idealisation and the extra work of his imagination while on exile in England:

As I could not come to terms with the inhabitants, either then, or again on returning to Australia after World War II, I found consolation in the landscape. The ideal Australia I visualised during any exile and which drew me back, [sic!] was always, I realise, a landscape without figures. The actual, noble, though often harsh and bitter Monaro scene was my spiritual sustenance in the year I spent working there. ... The scent of wood-smoke, drool of hens roosting in the two-seater dunny, cat or dog hardly more than shadow brushing up against my legs, help exorcise the community voice, as chattering with



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cold, I climbed the hill towards the iron water-tank, below us the silver river winding through a plain of white tussock. (49)

And such is the atmosphere of majority of White's novels: the nostalgic tone, a lot of details, colours and scents. White is a real painter of the moments, the moments he wants to petrify, to make permanent, to cut them out in stone so that they remain intact for ever or at least as long as the natural landscape – millions of years. There are also the voices of Australian birds, the operation of rain, drought, sun, water and an inland sea:

Again landscape played the major part in my life, the splendid sweep, the cairns and monoliths of the Monaro replaced by dead-level plains with their skeleton trees, clouds of galah and budgerigar, a formation of creaking pelicans, soil white and cracked with drought till transformed by rain into black porridge, giving way to an inland sea, on which was laid, in a final act of conjuring, an emerald carpet patterned with flowers. At Walgett I experienced every possible seasonal change and corresponding changes in myself. (50)

As Australian landscape changes seasonally so does Patrick White's temperament: he has always been with the land, Australian fauna and flora, with the objects of everyday use like water tanks (Mr Hare of his *Riders in the Chariot* drowns in a water tank). Particularly in summer, water played an extraordinary role in White's life: it stimulated his developing sexuality:

So again I preferred a landscape. It answered my needs. More passive than the Monaro, it was also sensual, sympathetic towards human flesh. Perhaps because a rare commodity, water played a leading part in my developing sexuality. I was always throwing off my cloths to bathe, either at the artesian bore during a pause from mustering, the water ejaculating warm and sulphurous out of the earth, or in the river flowing between the trunks of great flesh-coloured gums, to a screeching, flick-knife commentary by yellow-crested cockatoos, or at night in the hollow below the homestead if a good season had turned it into a lagoon. Here I was joined by the men who worked about the place, whose company I enjoyed without quite becoming their equal. (51)

The connection between landscape and sexuality within the Australian context produces an extra significance: Australian lifestyle is very much outdoor and it frequently happens that the first sexual experiences of

majority of Australians, both in the past and nowadays, are outdoor experiences and are closely connected with water and the beach. As White's example demonstrates, water experiences stimulate sexuality also in the sense of public strip, naked swimming, showering of genital areas, and exposure to public eye. He confessed that he enjoyed the company of other men, making a suggestion to his lower status as a youth and less experienced. White's language is suggestive and poetic: the phrase, "the water ejaculating warm and sulphurous out of the earth," sounds so sexual, so masculinely sexual that his homoerotic fascinations appear obvious and his poetic talents equally convincing, also in the somewhat experimental but original subsequent phrase, "flick-knife commentary by yellow-crested cockatoos." There is more of this sort of water sex games:

We continued joking, to hold more serious thoughts at bay, while we plunged, turning on our backs after surfacing, spouting water, exposing our sex, lolling or erect, diving again to swim beneath the archways made by open legs, ribs and flanks slithering against other forms in the fishy school, as a flamingo moon rose above the ashen crowns of surrounding trees. (51–52)

The description of young men's erotic water games has its coda in a brief reference to the Australian landscape which inevitably brings forth a familiar film scene or painting, always with a whole palette of colours and metaphors ("flamingo moon," "ashen crowns of rounding trees"), thus making White's language so idiosyncratic and imagery vivid.

### **In need of love**

Patrick White's early life, both in Australia and England, was marked by his constant search for love. "I badly wanted to love someone" (47), he admitted on his return to Australia after finishing school in England, but he was presented by his mother with a handful of potential wives or fiancées whom – to his mother's extreme disappointment – he did not like at all, finding them shallow and able just to talk about trivialities like cheap romances they recently read or horse races they attended.

Again, in London, to pursue his career as a writer, he realised how futile his efforts to find sexual fulfilments were:

Living in London, trying to justify an otherwise useless existence by being a 'professional' writer, my failures were the more abysmal, my few successes, though exhilarating at the time, no more than false starts. Those early effusions by lamplight at Adaminaby<sup>4</sup> and Walgett<sup>5</sup> were more honest in their lumbering after truth than my subsequent chase after a fashionable style in London, my frustrated longings for sexual fulfilment more deserving a reward than the conscious traps I began setting for love, and which usually went off at half cock. (52)

Australian experiences seemed genuine, inspiring, while his London life was lived – just as the effectiveness of his love traps – “at half cock” (one cannot fail to notice an explicit sexual allusion). The only consolation came from the hope that one day he would become an artist, a professional writer.

### **An artist – a sodomite?**

Contrary to village life of Sydney before World War II, London was a city of opportunities of various kinds including art, drama and literature, where “success offered glamour, and even failure was less painful for mouse-coloured nonentities” (57) with whom White identified himself and on several occasions declared in his writing.

But with a choice of a career for himself, White had a problem, a family problem since, as he admitted, “[a]n artist in the family tree was almost like a sodomite; if you had one you kept him dark” (57). Again, as in the case of his sexual orientation, the greatest obstacle on the way to the writing career came from the side of his mother, Ruth:

Like the more pretentious Australian women of her day Ruth saw the arts as charming hobbies which those of her own social level might safely cultivate. A professional was something she would have found too difficult to explain away. Even after I had published several books, she couldn't really enjoy her pride because I wasn't the kind of writer she could produce at Australian cocktail parties. Her friends considered me mad, scandalous, or a joke. Setting aside family loyalty and the fact that she had given birth to me, I expect

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<sup>4</sup> A small town near the Snowy Mountains located north-west of Cooma, New South Wales, Australia, in the Snowy River.

<sup>5</sup> *Walgett* is a town in north-west New South Wales, Australia and the seat of *Walgett* Shire. It is at the junction of the Barwon and Namoi rivers.

she agreed with them on all counts. She remarked after reading *The Aunt's Story*, 'Such a pity you didn't write about a *cheery* aunt ...' for although she remained convinced that she would only buy what was English-made, she also subscribed to the Australian myth that you must face the camera with a grin. (57–58)

White tried to dismantle various Australian myths including the one mentioned above which, although archetypal in its appeal, has got a peculiarly Australian connotation, particularly when connected with the myth of Australia as a lucky country, the country of optimism and *cheery* aunts (oddly enough, *The Aunt's Story* opens with the statement, "But old Mrs Goodman did die at last," 11).

His failed relationship with the father bore a fruit in the shape of his first serious male lover and the father figure, the painter Roy de Maistre, his distant cousin some twenty years his senior:

At the time when we met, his pride had not yet recovered from the defecation of a lover. A more superficial character might have used me briefly as a substitute, but after the initial skirmishes, the relationship for which I had been hoping developed instead into a fruitful, lasting friendship. I had no means of foretelling this; at the time I only saw myself as boring, undesirable, gauche. Looking back I think I was probably hoping unconsciously to consummate my love for a father with one who was everything Dick was not. My failure depressed me as much as my failure to communicate with my actual father. (60)

White's low-esteem stemming from the failed relationship with his father created a depressing vacuum he desperately wanted to fill with affection for somebody who might have served as a role model, the father's mirror reflection and, at the same time, a person to introduce him into the world of true love, sensuality and art. White recognises the role of the unconscious in the creation of his life path: since his father was a completely unimpressive person, his unimpressiveness demanded a compensation, replacement, supplement in the form of its opposite, and in this case the opposite was a flamboyant artist, a painter. Roy de Maistre taught him how to get out of the depression in which he found himself when in London and showed him how to understand the world:

He became what I most needed, an intellectual and aesthetic mentor. He taught me how to look at paintings, to listen to music. He persuaded me to

walk in the present instead of lying curled and stationary in that over-upholstered cocoon [of] the past, refuge of so many Australians then and now. (60)

The past is the burden you cannot easily get over with; the past haunts, the past visits you uninvited and lingers as long as it wishes, unless you curb it, restrain it, overcome it with what is to come, with the future. If you want to live in the now you have to believe in the future; yet, for White, there are no simple recipes:

What do I believe? I am accused of not making it explicit. How to be explicit about grandeur too overwhelming to express, a daily wrestling match with an opponent whose limbs never become material, a struggle from which the sweat and blood are scattered on the pages of anything the serious writer writes? A belief contained less in what is said than in the silences. In patterns on water. A gust of wind. A flower opening. I hesitate to add a child, because a child can grow into a monster, a destroyer. Am I a destroyer? this face in the glass which has spent a lifetime searching for what it believes, but can never prove to be, the truth. A face consumed by wondering whether truth can be the worst destroyer of all. (70)

Patrick White is a poet of the everyday, of the routine, of a "daily wrestling," of silence; he is the poet of words he painstakingly turns into meaningful signs not necessarily requiring sound or human articulation. He is aware that the real struggle is the struggle within, the mental struggle, the psychic fight, but also the struggle with the words he puts on paper, violating, as if it were, its purity and innocence. On the one hand, he sounds truly romantic in the sense of believing in the poet's/the writer's mission in the world as a legislator of humankind, meticulously constructing the image of the world, believing in the power of nature with all its meaningful and breathtaking simplicity of forms; yet, on the other, he does not believe in natural goodness of the child nor in its mission. Quite the opposite; an innocent child, the romantic model of unspoilt purity and goodness may, in his words, develop into a monster, a destroyer, which ruins the whole concept of it.

By asking himself whether he is a destroyer, he transforms or reduces his ontological being into the form of his face, maintaining, at the same time, a distance to it, using a neutral, demonstrative rather than possessive pronoun ("this face" rather than "my face"), which may be interpreted either as a wish to be as objective as possible in his own case, or it

also may signal a kind of reservedness towards himself, a sign of the split mind, his undecidedness. Yet, as it seems, the face in the glass is not the true face – it is just its reflection, an approximation, that is to say, it is the “true” face but the other way round: it is close to truth but not *the* truth. Even though he does not mull over the identity of truth, the question he formulates is whether truth is the worst demolisher of all, which, being a rhetorical question, closes his considerations on belief and a possibility of truth as destruction, yet, and this is to be emphasised here, the latter is a definite sign of White’s thinking in terms of the future, perhaps not really in terms of Nietzsche’s *Zukunft Philosophie* or Martin Heidegger’s *Destruktion*, but rather in terms of truth being able to destroy old structures, giving thus an impetus to construct new things, to rearrange old patterns.

## The Problem of Faith and Spirituality

On various occasions White expressed his belief in God but questioned Christianity, particularly, the Church of England as an inauthentic institution for hypocrites. What really fascinated him in religion was its spirituality but not the institution or its rites. A good example of his disenchantment with the Church of England was the day of his confirmation while a student at Cheltenham. He looked forward towards the day because

confirmation infused my surroundings with a numinous glow. I was always taking out my little confirmation book to study the rules. For at least a fortnight I was on the point of willing a miracle. I was spiritually refreshed at the moment of communion and in walking down from the altar with a warm glow inside me, and downcast, shriven eyelids in imitation of my mother.

On the day itself, parents of the candidates for confirmation descended on school bearing gifts of cameras, wristwatches, and other expensive toys in the best tradition of the materialistic upper middle-class. My own parents in Australia did not apparently know that presents were the order of the day, and I tried for a moment to persuade myself that my material loss was my spiritual gain.

But any spiritual growth quickly succumbed to the barren soil of an English public school. The chapel resumed its true hygienic functions: hearty hymns were belted out, and someone failed to restrain a fart. My spiritual self has always shrivelled in contact with organised religion, whether exter-

nalised in that grisly museum Westminster Abbey, the great rococo bed for an operatic courtesan in St Peter's Rome ... The ultimate spiritual union is probably as impossible to achieve as the perfect work of art or the unflawed human relationship. In matters of faith, art, and love I have had to reconcile myself to starting again where I began. (FG 73–74)

It is rather pessimistic of a writer and a visionary to admit impossibility of the ultimate spiritual union, no matter whether empirical or transcendent, which assumes a certain spiritual limitation on the human part, making it thus more of a material object, more *thingly*. White also sees human limitations in terms of artistic possibilities, not to mention love matters and human relationships, which come as no surprise at all. More intricate is his concept of a continuous circle of human activity, that is, re-starting at the beginning, which unequivocally rejects linear progress and points to a certain ineffectiveness of human intellectual and spiritual development (more on this issue in Chapter Five).

## The Jewish Question

In his fiction, particularly in *Riders in the Chariot*, White raises the problem of racial prejudices in post-war Australian society and presents the Jewish issue as exemplified by the character of Himmelfarb modelled on Ben Huebsch, his American Viking Press publisher of whom he writes:

The son of a Hungarian rabbi, he was one of a breed of noble Jews who, if they no longer manifest the orthodox aspects of their faith, have absorbed its ethic, and are guided by instinctive integrity. True Jews have become as rare as natural Christians. Ben contributed traits to the Jew Himmelfarb in my *Riders in the Chariot*, from the inherited psyche rather than the outer man, for to outward appearances he was a worldly, often cynical character. (75)

Himmelfarb of *Riders in the Chariot* is a tragic character, a complete alien in post-war Australia, who carries a heavy burden of Nazi persecution in continental Europe, and is grotesquely crucified by his co-workers on a native tree in order, as if it were, to repeat Jesus' vicarious sufferings on the cross to redeem humankind (the novel will be discussed at a greater length in Chapter Five). What is of interest in White's commentary is his emphasis on Jewish "inherited psyche" and "instinctive

integrity,” which in his fiction are signs of strength and moral superiority as opposed to a common stereotype of a Jew in canonical English literature as a mean and cynical character (e.g. Shakespeare’s Shylock of *The Merchant of Venice* or Charles Dickens’ Fagan of *Oliver Twist*).

Notwithstanding noble Jews like Ben Huebsch who had the courage to publish White’s *The Aunt’s Story* (“My pseudo-success in having a first novel published in New York,” 76), the writer was aware of inherited Christian anti-Semitism on his return to London in 1939, when a stream of Central European Jewish refugees from Russia and Austria landed in the house in which he lived:

In between the Russian [ex-admiral] and myself a couple of intellectual Viennese sisters with wheedling ways had come to roost, adding to my still limited experience of the Central European Jew. The full horror of persecution and genocide had yet not torn our complacency apart. We still flickered with irritation meeting refugees on the landing; our buried anti-semitism flared over some drama of the dust-bins. (77)

British, or generally Western, ignorance of the Central Europe and their concentration on trifles, trivialities, routines, losing sight at the same time and at the cost of big things that occur somewhere there, somewhere outside, was also part of White’s stance at that time and the criticism of which found its way onto the pages of his numerous novels.

## **Solitariness and Homosexual Society**

With some rare exceptions when he mistakenly believed he had fallen in love (a mysterious Doctor J. in New York), White lived a solitary life in London, which he thought was the way most artists had:

I had resumed a more or less solitary existence. It should not have been a matter of self-pity because I believe it is to be the normal condition of most artists. Not that I didn’t enjoy the company of friends, food, drink, books, music, theatre, and often exhilarating sexual encounters. But I expected more, and the fact that I did not find it I blamed wrongly on my homosexual temperament, forced at that period anyway to surround itself with secrecy, rather than on the instinctive need to protect my creative core from intrusion and abuse. (80)



Secrecy is part of homosexual life, part of conspiracy homosexuals have to practise in order to live their secret lives. Religious societies such as the British, where head of state is also head of the official church, as repressive in terms of sexual life of their citizens, and this is what White notices:

The repression society demands of homosexuals obviously reduces them to some extent as members of that society, but if we can quench our fears the perception gained through our temperament strengthens our hand as man, woman, artist, whichever it may be – or all in one. Homosexual society as such has never had much appeal to me. Those who discuss the homosexual condition with endless hysterical delight as though it had not existed, except in theory, before they discovered their own, have always struck me as colossal bores. So I avoided them, and no doubt I am branded as a closet queen. (80)

White comes up then with his theory who a homosexual is or, more precisely, whom he is as a homosexual, also in the context of his writing:

I see myself not so much a homosexual as a mind possessed by the spirit of man or woman according to actual situations or the characters I become in my writing. This could make what I write sound more cerebral than it is. I don't set myself up as an intellectual. What drives me is sensual, emotional, instinctive. At the same time I like to think creative reason reins me as I reach the edge of disaster. (80–81)

Being a mind possessed by the spirit of both sexes sounds typical of White. Even though he declines his aspirations as an intellectual, he, at the same time, denies any affinities with simplistic understanding of homosexuality or its superficial forms and ideological manifestations.

### **Longing for Australia**

While in London during the Blitz and listening to bomb explosions at nights, White did a lot of reading some of which was to shape his later life and writing:

I remember reading Chaucer's *Troilus and Cressida*, sufficiently remote while apposite – all those Cressids garlanding the war-torn world. Other remembered reading was Eyre's account of his walk from Adelaide to Esperance.

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Falling bombs and Eyre's Journal started in me a longing for Australia and some kind of creative urge I could not yet channel or even define. (83)

Yet, when commissioned to the RAF and sent to the Middle East, he recalls, "[n]obody believed I was Australian or that I had written the books nobody had heard of" (85). He also did not think about Australia or his family, but apparently being a dutiful son, he wrote letters to his mother on a regular basis:

Australia. It was on the map. I received letters from it while stationed on the frontier Eritrea makes with the Sudan. The sense of duty dinned into me by Lizzie had me writing every week to my mother. Ruth complained of not knowing where I was, '...can't you at least tell me the latitude and longitude...' I thought of her less as Mum, whereas Mother sounded too austere. 'Dear Maman ...' I began my reply the following week ... Whether I explained that her request was a foolish one [because of war-time military secrets, RW], I can't remember. ... In time I received from Ruth the reply to my reply, '... what a clever way of letting me know where you are ...' It left me puzzled. I could think of no possible explanation of my own brilliance, until one day exploring the map of countries we were ridding of Mussolini's rule, I came across Maman, a dot on the Sudanese frontier not far north of Kassala, the dustheap where our squadron was stationed. (87-88)

This little anecdotal experience he had with his mother reinforced his Oedipus bond with her, and the number of mentions of her in his confessional autobiography argues for this, even though in the instance presented above he hides the real cause under the guise of duty taught him by the nanny in his childhood.

### **The Tree of Life Myth**

Foreign landscapes and cultures were often an inspiration for Patrick White in his own writing. The African myth of eternal life-giving tree was also his inspiration as much as were the village of Kassala, the natives and their ghost faces:

Out of a cleft on the summit of that smooth rock, the Gebel [mountain] Kassala, a scraggy tree was growing. It was said to be the tree of life, and anyone able to climb the rock and gather a leaf would be assured of immortality. In

the shadow of the *gebel* and its version of a recurring myth, clustered a village of mud houses surrounding a dusty square. From opposite sides, rival cafés, *Acropolis* and *High Life*, faced each other, their proprietors washed-out singled Greek flanked by families of strapping Greco-Sudanese children. From being chained to my telephone I never had the opportunity to explore the village, let alone attempt to climb the *gebel*, but still remember the greyish-white rival Greeks and their ghost faces, their mud village invaded by mechanical insects and those who flew and tended them. (88–89)

His fascination with Greece and the Greeks was to continue and take the most profound of forms White might have imagined and dreamt of: the love of his life as “central mandala.” In Alexandria, 1941, he met Baron Charles de Menasce, a Jewish millionaire, who, in turn, introduced him to Manoly Lascaris,

this small Greek of immense moral strength, who became the central mandala of my life's hitherto messy design. Later on, regretting his gift, the Baron warned me, ‘Of course you must realise it won't last. It never does with people like us.’ As I write, it has lasted almost forty years, and I dare believe it will outlast the two of us<sup>6</sup>. (100)

Manoly Lascaris was almost like God-sent for Patrick White: he immediately realised that he was his other half he desperately and hopelessly searched for years in England and elsewhere and eventually found in Alexandria in Africa, this, as he called it, “eclectic whore of the Near East”:

Alexandria during those war years must have been at its most frivolous, its most corrupt. The glitter of its diamonds was betrayed by its values, which were never more than paste. There was usually a motive behind its hospitality and woozy kindness: to marry off a daughter to an English Honourable, or better still a warrant-officer with solid middle-class civilian prospects, or simply to fuck the troops, or clinch a swill contract with the Camp Commandant. Most of us loved this eclectic whore of the Near East, her pseudo-French and British pretensions, her Jewish warmth, her Greek loyalty and realism. Silken, boring Alexandria, pinned between the desert and the sea, with no outlet for adultery and bridge. (91)

So, it was the atmosphere of the great oriental city, its exoticism and eroticism that added to the miracle of love in White.

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<sup>6</sup> So it did: Patrick White and Manoly Lascaris were partners and lived together in one household till the former's death in 1990.

## **The Greeks and Modernity**

Probably due to his falling in love with Manoly Lascaris, White started to analyse the Greek character and noticed in them a certain fatality archetype, stemming most likely from Antiquity: “Most Greek eyes wear an expression of fatality, as though brooding over disasters, personal, historic, and those still in store for them. In family snapshots the Lascaris eyes overflow with this fatality. Close-cropped, and in his school tunic, hands resting the arms of the chair in which he is seated. Manoly is the Greek archetype” (101).

Among Manoly’s extended family, two of his aunts, Elly and Polymnia, are worthy of mention, the former “read Goethe every morning till the Germans invaded Greece [and] [d]uring Occupation she starved herself to death so as not to deprive younger mouths of food” (102), and the latter, “Professor of Greek at the Sorbonne, who gave her life to education, was refused a pension for not having taken French nationality, went mad in consequence, and had to be brought back to Athens, where she spent her last days in the Asylum of the Sacred Girdle” (102). Interestingly enough, she was not at all a supporter of any Church or creed, which, to some extent, was characteristic of the people of her social and academic status across modernist Europe, including Greece: “Like most ‘enlightened’ Greeks, Polymnia was not a believer – superficially, that is. Even the most sceptical cling to the aesthetics, the history of Orthodoxy, until in a crisis, whether some personal quarrel of national disaster, the blood and tears of faith come pouring out through supposedly healed wounds and opened eyes” (102), and probably both Polymnia and White himself were such cases.

Notwithstanding all these fatalities, wars, foreign occupations and madness, the Greeks, as a nation, always managed to survive and will always survive due to, in White’s opinion, their Orthodox faith: “The Greeks have survived through their Orthodox faith, professed or submerged. It is also why an unlikely relationship between an Orthodox Greek and a lapsed Anglican egotist agnostic pantheist occultist existentialist would-be though failed Christian Australian has lasted forty years” (102).

This last confession or, strictly speaking, an auto-characteristic, is not a real confession but rather a mask to hide his own uncertainty as to his

own character or religious standing. He seems to be wearing a badge of guilt not really proudly on his chest, therefore, he had to pretend to be classifiable, to belong to "has-it-all" category, but, in actuality, he was confused, his ideas blurred, like in a painting, his tongue stabling on many occasions, trying somehow to find a way out from his mixed emotions, recollected memories, the mother figure, confused sexuality and unfulfilled desires for almost half of adult lifetime.

He knew the Bible and it, no doubt, inspired him. Writing was his life mission even though he so desperately wanted to be a painter, an actor, an artist – somebody above the average, the common, the mediocre, which he hated and despised, in the army and later in Australia:

There were the stirrings of what I had it in me to write if there were ever a peace, but that didn't seem likely. So I read. I read the Bible, literary from cover to cover. I read *The Peapickers* [Australian novel by Eve Langley] and was filled with a longing for Australia, a country I saw through a childhood glow. Its people had tended to reject the Pom during the years spent there between school and university. But I still could grow drunk on visions of its landscape. (106)

The feeling of rejection was one of his constant fears and anxieties that he wanted to compensate with visions and imagination and even though he claimed that Greece was his Promised Land ("I was happy in the sense that I had reached my Promised Land, for which I had prepared with Greek lessons in Alex with Ourania Theraiou, the study of maps and topographical documents ... and endless conversations with Manoly about Greece past and present", 113–114), his genuine, authentic destiny was Australia and its landscapes.

### **Australian landscapes**

The way to get to Australian desert in fiction was a long one. The first stimulus came to him during the Blitz in London, the other – in African desert:

isolation, desert, repressed sexuality, the voice of Vera Lynn on the Orderly Tent wireless, the letters which might never reach their destination or, if they did, convey an uncommunicative message, preyed on me to the extent that

my present circumstances began to coalesce with memories of nights in my Ebury Street bedsitter reading *Eyre's Journal* as the bombs fell on London. A seed was sown in what had the appearance of barren ground. It germinated years later in a public ward of a Sydney hospital ... In my half-drugged state the figures began moving in the desert landscape. I could hear snatches of conversation, I became in turn Voss and his anima Laura Trevelyan. (103)

An “uncommunicative message” is typical of his language and the state of his awareness: he was the victim of the lack of communication, the collapse of the language of human understanding. Language, therefore, is not meant for communicating the truth, neither about itself nor anything else, least about feelings, emotions, and passions. Language constructs and deconstructs visions, reality lives in imagination, in mind:

While recovering, though still in hospital, I sketched the skeleton of the book I now knew I would write. It was only after returning to Australia and reading a school textbook that I saw a connection between Voss and Leichhardt. This led to research and my borrowing of details of the actual expeditions from the writings of those who found themselves enduring the German's leadership. The real Voss, as opposed to the actual Leichhardt, was a creature of the Egyptian desert, conceived by a perverse side of my nature at a time when all our lives were dominated by that greater German megalomaniac. (103–104)

Voss is not only Leichhardt, Hitler and Jesus – all in one (more on this Chapter Four): Voss, in the first place, is White – one of his many impersonations, one of his many visions he had of himself and the world in which he wished he would have lived and the people he would have met:

Voss's controversial origins led to strife with Leichhardt's academic guardians and confusion amongst the thesis writers. All demanded facts rather than a creative act. In time I was forgiven and Voss canonised, and it became my turn to resent the misappropriation of a vision of flesh, blood and spirit, for translation according to taste, into a mummy for the museum, or the terms of sentimental costume romance. Half those professing to admire Voss did so because they saw no connection between themselves and the Nineteenth-Century society portrayed in the novel. As child-adults many Australians grow resentful on being forced to recognise themselves divorced from their dubious antiques, surrounded by the plastic garbage littering their back yards; they shy away from the deep end of the unconscious. So they cannot accept much of what I have written about the century in which we are living, as I turn my back on their gush about Voss. (104)

White has always been against materialism, utilitarianism and practicality, be it in life or in his fiction (*Riders in the Chariot*, in particular), and was himself a proponent of art in life and, most importantly, art in art, that is to say, in his opinion art cannot and must not imitate life, be its copy, be realist; however tautological it may sound, art must be artistic. Less than in "The Prodigal Son" published before, White takes liberty to strongly criticise Australian averageness, mediocrity and lack of good taste, not to mention their intellectual abilities in not understanding his intentions in depicting the age and them in it.

## The Hebrew Archetype

Having fallen in love with the Greeks and having had experiences with the Jews, both in New York and Alexandria, in Palestine, he started to ponder upon the Hebrew archetype that might be of use for his next novels:

Lying spreadeagle on the hard Palestine soil, amongst the stones and fallen crop of a hillside olive grove, something of the Hebrew archetype entered into me. I had my first inklings of Himmelfarb. These and thoughts of an actual Jew, my friend Huebsch, coalesced when I returned to settle in Australia after the war. Incidents began accumulating round Himmelfarb's still shadowy figure. When Manoly and I bought our small unprofitable farm at Castle Hill, we were described locally as 'foreign Jews speculating in land'. There was also the occasion when I shared a taxi in Sydney, and on arrival at my destination was asked for the full fare. I pointed out that half had already been paid. His belly bursting with beer and indignation, the driver stood on the kerb outside the old Petty's Hotel ... and shouted at the top of his voice, 'Go back to Germany! Go back to Germany!' The message lodged. I knew what it was to be a reffo<sup>7</sup> in Australia. Just as I was soothed and fortified by Jewish tradition some years later, standing in *tallith* [shawl worn by Jewish males at their devotions] and *yarmulka* [skullcap worn by male Jews on devotional occasions] beside Joseph Luvis in Sydney's Great Synagogue. All these elements contributed to the writing of *Riders in the Chariot* during the somewhat bitter years at Castle Hill. (112)

<sup>7</sup> Austral. slang. derog. obsolete exc. hist. Pl. -os. M20.

[ORIGIN Abbreviation of refugee noun + -o-.]

A European refugee; spec. a refugee who left Germany or German-occupied Europe before the Second World War (SOED, CD-ROM).

The motives behind White's decision were not just personal: he witnessed very strong emotions governing people in Palestine, particularly the Jewish hatred towards the British because of the political situation and the British responsibility for their occupation of Palestine, which the Jews claimed to be their holy land:

My year-long anchorage, Palestine, was going through one of the unhappier periods of its history. It was the era of the Stern Gang. Violence was not yet directed at the enemy without. Hatred was exploding within, not only of the Jew for the British, the Palestine police, the Arab, but Jew for Jew: there was little love lost between those of German, Russian, Polish, or whatever disparate origin. Lacking Zionist ideals, the unhappiest were the more sophisticated Jews from Vienna and Berlin, every second man or woman a 'doctor', who haunted the cafés of Hadarhacarmel, along with *Modedamen* in leather hats and oil make-up à la Dietrich and middle-aged dandies forced out of a culture to which spiritually they still belonged. (109)

White treated the British as colonisers both in Palestine and Australia even though he served in their armed forces and formally was one of them, but he constantly remembered, having it at the back of his mind, how the English boys treated him and what humiliations he had to endure and, consequently, to suffer. He also noticed how dangerous the enemy within is and that the divisions within a nation along ethnic origin may lead to disaster. The then political situation in Palestine may, with all due proportions, have some bearing on racial and social conflicts in post-war Australia in the wake of huge waves of immigrants, political and war refugees from various corners of the world, particularly Europe and Asia.

### **Familiar but hostile Australia**

After the war, having spent a year in Greece with Manoly, he decided to travel to Australia with an intention to settle down there for good. It was not an easy decision for White since, himself being a Hellenophile, he was conscious that their life together in Australia will be double difficult, but for Manoly it meant a new space and a personal illusion:

At the end, so much of my life seemed to have been lived during twelve months in Greece I hankered after returning. Without having been there, Manoly wanted Australia. I interpreted this at first as a desire to spare his



family the incongruous situation of our setting up house together, and having to explain it away. There was something of that. Then by degrees I saw myself as the beachcomber all foreigners become when they settle in Greece – tolerated, but never much more than a joke. So I began tearing myself out of what amounted to a dream, preparing myself to face an Australian reality which Manoly could not have begun to understand. It was his illusion. I suppose I sensed it was better than mine. (123)

The illusions of Australia turned harsh as soon as his novel, *The Aunt's Story*, he wrote in London came out and was received very critically for its lack of realism: "Living in Australia after *The Aunt's Story* had been written, published, on the whole scorned by the pundits, and ignored by the public, I realised how much better pleased Australians would have been with my sifted factual reports [when he served as I.O. in R.A.F. during the war]. A pragmatic nation, we tend to confuse reality with surfaces. Perhaps this dedication to surface is why we are constantly fooled by the crooks who mostly govern us" (127–128).

Coming back was a blessing in disguise for White: on the one hand, he realised that Australia is not the country for intellectuals or novelists of his type, but, on the other, he was emotionally bound with it and, as he discovered later, Australia, with its desert colours, added to the palette of the colours he used in his writing:

At this period Australia was very hostile to new arrivals. Those of my contemporaries still around tried not to show they had difficulty making contact with me. Friends of my parents' generation were sceptical, not to say afraid, of this curious hybrid produced by my mother for their inspection. Though they knew there were novelists in the world because their wives patronised libraries, what could possibly become of an Australian male of their class who set out to be a professional author? My father would be spared the shame of it. An Australian chauvinist of the old order, he died in 1937. (129)

His parents always served as model – or archetypes – of Australian men and women: the father – feminine, weak, mild – the other of what Australian reading public would have expected, not a shade of an Australian pioneer's spirit; the mother – bossy, strong, the masculine type; he knew he could not live with her, not in the same hemisphere:

I knew more or less before I arrived that my mother and I could not live in the same hemisphere. I became as determined to stay in Australia as she was

firm in her intention never to return to it. ... After spending most of her life cultivating her figure Ruth had taken to tucking in. As she demolished whatever it was, the lines on the other side of her mouth worked like those in the face of an elderly, greedy man. Indeed, from being married to a mild husband who needed spurring, she had developed a man's temperament, like many other Australian women. Critics in other parts of the world have accused me of portraying almost exclusively weak men in my novels. This might come from living in a country where women tend to dominate the men, even those convinced of their virility. The women are certainly more interesting till they set out to prove themselves the equals of their men as intellectuals or bullies, when their femininity and their natural talents wither away. (130)

White constructs his characters against typical patterns worked out through millennia of western civilisation where the gender roles were defined and adhered. The sources of his hybrid writing one can most definitively find in his own sexuality with which he fought for most of his life, going against social conventions and his mother – the next likely source of his hybridity. Interestingly enough, he never depicted homosexual men in his fiction as if being afraid to uncover his genuine ego, to take off the mask of fiction in his writing.

On top of all his problems with his mother, there was this obviously predictable problem of her relationship with Manoly, whom she disliked without having met and blamed for all evil which was happening to her and around her:

Yet when faced with him fifteen years later in London, she doted on him, just as when forced to accept as a permanency the man who had dared marry my sister at the outbreak of war, she adored and depended on him. I am pretty sure she was better satisfied in the end with Geoffrey and Manoly than she was with Patrick. I was not resentful because I was not in love with one I found a disappointing mother – as I was a disappointing son: the kind of writer who made her friends uneasy, a communist, everyone was sure, and other things less mentionable. (131)

The scale of gradation indicating contempt gets a middle point: a communist, placed between a writer and a meaningful silence (“less mentionable”) signifying a homosexual. White is aware of open or camouflaged hostility of people of his parents' class, critics, and fellow writers. He knows that what he writes and who he is far from what they would anticipate from him or from what is generally anticipated of an

Australian male and a writer. On the other hand, his defence mechanisms were either focused on attacking his mother – and in an extreme case spitting in his mother's face in the street (134) or hiding away with his partner, Manoly, in a secluded farm house in Castle Hill.

Manoly wanted to live in Australia because, as it seems, he cherished the myth of Australia as a “lucky country,” the country of success and tolerance, the country of opportunities and freedom. When they settled down in Sydney, he was impressed but then the fascination withered away:

The more Manoly saw of Sydney the less impressed he became, though grateful to have escaped from Egypt where persecution of its Europeans had intensified. Here we had each other for support, he an expelled Greek, I not so much an Australian as a fake Pom and writer nobody had heard about, posing as a member of my own family. (136)

Undoubtedly, White had this inferiority complex of a writer whom nobody reads and of whom nobody has heard or known anything, which, when blended with another one – that of not being a genuine Australian but rather a bogus English, made an explosive mixture. Yet, the explosion first turned to implosion, an internal escape:

In spite of so much that was heartening in the way of humble human contacts, trees growing, shrubs flowering, and the books I wrote chiefly as an escape, I expect, into a more vital world, I hated the years we spent at Castle Hill. It was too oppressive. In that clay hollow, freezing in winter, breathless in summer, amongst the heavy ergot-bearing paspalum, hassocks of Cape weed, rusty rye grass, Patterson's curse, I was constantly ill with asthma. (139)

Physical ailing and discomfort apart, more conspicuous pain was of a mental nature: the pain of exclusion, the pain of “otherness” and ill fate:

We were this pair of amateur actors, miscast through our own determination, or pig-headedness. It was worst for Manoly in that he had attached himself to a prickly character who protested against his fate by throwing saucepans of Irish stew out the kitchen window, cursing, and getting drunk. But we were not driven out by our failures any more than Australian critics in those early days succeeded in killing the creative necessity of one they saw as an intruder, a breaker of rules, a threat to the tradition of Australian literature. (139)

That he was “a threat to the tradition of Australian literature” is White’s subjective opinion, though expressing well the concerns of many commentators, including an acclaimed Australian poet, A. D. Hope<sup>8</sup>. Nonetheless, the stingy critics did not kill the creative spirit in White:

Throughout these years I grappled with the resistant novels I had inside me. From actual experience of a calf twisted in a cow’s womb, I now see it as much like that. The earlier part of *The Tree of Man* I wrote at the kitchen table during sleepless nights when spasms of asthma prevented me lying down. Much of *Voss* was written in bed, and after it *Riders in the Chariot*. (139–140)

White, thus, acknowledges a certain writerly affect derived from actual experiences he had in his life or events he witnessed: his fiction is not a complete fiction, is not a pure fantasy, although he was able to recall a moment when he conversed with the devil:

On a memorable night, lying on this same bed, after a session at my desk and too much cheap sherry, I dreamed a conversation with the Devil. I was awakened by the telephone. A voice in extraordinary accord with my dream announced, ‘If you care to pursue it, I could lead you much deeper into Jewish mysticism than you’re already been.’ This was after I had written and published *Riders in the Chariot*, for which I had done some research into the Hassidic mystics. I declined the Devil’s offer because I was on with something else. Not long after, a Jewish painter identified the telephone voice as that of his father, who had fallen on his head from a back of a truck escaping from Poland during the troubles. I have often regretted not accepting the brain-damaged Jewish mystic’s offer, but this is the price one pays in leading the life of a novelist, part dragonfly, part shark, always at the mercy of the future and his own peremptory depths. (140)

Jewish mysticism and Judaism were to play an outstanding role not only in his fiction but also in his life. He made acquaintances with a variety of Jewish businessmen, particularly Fritz Krieger, painters and musicians, and from them he learned a lot about European culture beyond the Anglo-Celtic stream. With time, he got tired of them:

The possessiveness of Jewish friends can become suffocating in the end. Like Jewish children who escape from the bosom of their family, one retains grati-

<sup>8</sup> **Alec Derwent Hope** AC OBE (21 July 1907–13 July 2000) was an Australian poet and essayist known for his satirical slant. He was also a critic remembered, among other things, for his violent attacks on White.

tude, affection, and in the case of the *goy*-child, some of the neuroses. All the more neurotic and poignant when Jewish parent-friends never admit to the Jewishness which still oozes from every pore despite their conversion to this or that incongruous branch of religious faith. It is a situation spread with the thinnest ice. (140–141)

Jewish ability to disguise themselves and hide their true religion, beliefs, names are well-known and their universal adoptability to various conditions, climates, religions, political orientation is a common knowledge in migrant countries such as Australia. Naturally, White was aware of the fact how delicate this matter is and how fragile a *goy*-Jewish friendship may turn out to be.

## Religion

The issue of religion seems to be central in White's fiction even though, as he admits in *Flaws in the Glass*, he "had never tried to draw the graph of [his] religious faith" (143), thus indicating that religion as a concept and religion as a personal faith are two different things which have no direct bearing on each other: "I threw it all off in my late teens. Then, and in my early manhood, I was too egoistical, too sensual, to consider spiritual matters. As an Australian, perhaps too materialistic – though God knows, many of the more enthusiastic Australian evangelists, Methodist and C. of E., are more materialistic though" (143). More important for him was Manoly, his religious faith and his spirituality, which, in White's opinion, probably influenced him at a certain stage in his life:

Greek Orthodoxy's straightjacket prevented Manoly ever losing his religious faith. During the brash barren years of what I saw as intellectual and sexual freedom he was my ethical if not my spiritual guide. Because I loved him and was grateful to him, perhaps in the end he influenced me spiritually too. Looking back it is difficult to tell. I can only recall my disillusionment and despair for the wrong turning I felt my life had taken when I came back to Australia. (143)

His confessions of love to Manoly are impressive for a man who never showed his emotions in any other way, always adopting a secure mid-position between a dispassionate father and a cool mother: perhaps, the

only emotional person in his life, apart from Manoly, was his childhood nurse, Lizzie.

## Writing career

White did not consider himself a particularly talented writer: he always maintained a distance to his writing and always spoke of it with a characteristic sarcasm. He was especially appalled at the reception and readership of his novels:

My work as a writer has always been what I understand as an offering in the absence of other gifts. *The Aunt's Story*, my first published work after settling at Castle Hill, was considered freakish, unintelligible – a nothing. You only had to pick up a library copy to see where the honest Australian reader had given it up as a bad job. I brooded after that. I considered giving up writing altogether, before starting on what was in some ways the even more calamitous *Tree of Man*. (143–144)

Before 1973, the year in which he received the Nobel Prize for Literature, White had more readership overseas than at home, particularly in the USA and Japan, which only argues for the common saying that one cannot be a prophet in one's own country. White's fiction reached the top of its popularity in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s, with *Riders in the Chariot* being generally regarded as his best one. Yet, White thought that he had written better ones:

In my own opinion my best three novels are *The Solid Mandala*, *The Aunt's Story*, and *The Twyborn Affair*. All three say something more than what is sacred to Aust. Lit. For this reason some of them were ignored in the beginning, some reviled and dismissed as pornography. After years two of them were accepted; it remains to be seen what will become of *The Twyborn Affair*. Strange to think *The Solid Mandala* was ever considered pornographic, yet an Australian professor told a friend it was the most pornographic novel he/she had ever read. One wonders where he or she spent his or her literary life before *The Solid Mandala* appeared. (145)

White shows scorn for his critics, suspecting a personal attack in the form of an allusion to his sexuality and homosexual lifestyle. He was

particularly touchy in regards to *The Solid Mandala*, which he considered not only as one of his best but, in the first place, as a novel about himself:

I see the Brown brothers [the novel's two protagonists] as my two halves. Arthur might have been a portrait of my cousin Philip Garland if Philip's childish wisdom had matured; instead he was admitted to an asylum in his teens, and remains in one to this day. Waldo is myself at my coldest and worst. The Browns' neighbour Mrs Poulter grew out of our actual neighbour Mrs H., though the latter was a two-dimensional character beside Arthur's earth-mother and goddess. Dulcie Feinstein has both the goodness and the smugness of a fulfilled Jewish acquaintance. (146–147)

Autobiographical motives in White's fiction argue, therefore, for autobiographical scrutiny of at least some of his novels.

### **Jung: an alternative to Christian faith**

The now renowned Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), the founder of the concepts of, among others, the extraverted and introverted personality, archetypes and the collective unconscious, has been also influential in the area of religion and literature, and what particularly appealed to White was Jung's interest in mysticism:

The painter Lawrence Daws had given me Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*, which had a great influence on me. It projected me into my *Solid Mandala*. Jung's teaching also bolstered me up during a wavering of faith on realising I could not accept the sterility, the vulgarity, in many cases the bigotry of the Christian churches in Australia. Manoly seemed secure inside the structure of Eastern Orthodoxy. I had nothing from my upbringing in a kind of social C. of E. ... So I evolved what I think Manoly has always seen as my non-religious or mystic circus. (146)

White does not specifically say what attracted him to Jung apart from what may easily be surmised as mysticism and divided personalities, the elements which are conspicuously present in his *The Solid Mandala*:

Some of all this rubbed off in *The Solid Mandala*. It is a book full of ambivalence and unease – transitoriness. The trees we planted, tended, and loved were encroaching on the house, making it darker. We knew that we must leave 'Dogwoods'; it was impossible to continue living in what had become

a suburb, when our interests – music, theatre, film, friends – were concentrated in the city. But to make a break was hard. In my case, I hated what I loved. In Manoly's he loved more deeply, because he has less hate in him, the trees which would inevitably be chopped down.

This transitoriness of life, things, landscapes, so well depicted in the novel, is archetypal, which clearly shows White's affinity, through Jung, with more general and universal beliefs shared by basically all major world religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or Taoism, to name just a handful, and the Jungian concept of journey of transformation, to which he referred as individuation, is at the mystical heart of all of them. Like Voss and the Brown brothers, White grows, matures, and travels in order to extend the spiritual dimension of his and his characters' life. The purpose of these journeys of exploration, transformation, individuation is to uncover the self, the inner dimension and, at the same time, within their religious, spiritual scope, their aim is to meet the divine, the transcendent, the metaphysical, and that is what most likely White found attractive in Jung:

I was so afraid to sever the spiritual roots I had put down in that originally uncongenial soil. Would it an end to my writing? Bad enough when we uprooted ourselves and flew to Europe, for me the first time since leaving it fifteen years before. ... How much worse the other, permanent uprooting seemed, as I sat in the dark dining-room at the centre of the house, writing the novel which could be my swan-song. It is not surprising *The Solid Mandala* was infused with an amount of fatality and foreboding. (146)

White's "uprooting" has nowadays been replaced by "displacement," the term used in post-colonial theory, but his displacement can, by no means, be paralleled to, for instance, Aboriginal forceful displacement from their original land; what uprooting possibly means is an element in an everlasting journey towards the knowing of the self – in his context – both physical and intellectual journey through his writing.

His journey of development – the Jungian individuation – proves fruitful even within the confines of his autobiography. On page 144, he writes of "a God in whom I did not believe" only to come to a conclusion, on page 148, that it was "a God in whom, I realised, I must believe after all," which signifies a fundamental change, a significant transition from a religious sceptic (Freud) to a believer in a spiritual dimension of life



(Jung). However, one may doubt White's declaration of disbelief which was rather accidental than serious and, as he commented upon it later, farcical:

The seasons we experienced ran through every cliché in the Australian climatic calendar: drought, fire, gales, floods along the road at Windsor and Richmond. During what seemed like months of rain I was carrying a tray-load of food to a wormy litter of pups down at the kennels when I slipped and fell on my back, dog dishes shooting in all directions. I lay where I had fallen, half-blinded by rain, under a pale sky, cursing through watery lips a *God in whom I did not believe* [emphasis added]. I began laughing finally, at my own helplessness and hopelessness, in the mud and the stench from my filthy old oilskin. It was a turning point. *My disbelief appeared as farcical as my fall* [emphasis added]. At that moment I was truly humbled. (FG 144)

It seems rather questionable that such an incident was a major influence in turning his disbelief into, in his words, a farce first and then humbleness: he treated the matters of faith seriously and his commentary was probably meant to achieve a comical effect than anything else.

## Sydney: The City Landscape

White was also a lover of city landscapes, particularly the outer city landscapes, and the suburbs. He even invented his famous one, Sarsaparilla, a fictitious suburb of Sydney, in which he set his next novels he wrote after moving closer to the city centre:

When we had settled down to living at Centennial Park I prepared to write the two novels which belong to Sydney. *The Vivisector* was already forming at 'Dogwoods', but in spite time spent in my native city during childhood and youth, and frequent visits while we were at Castle Hill, I had to feel Sydney round me, day and night, in my maturity, before I could undertake the novel. *The Eye of the Storm* came to me crossing Kensington High Street, London, after a visit to my mother at her flat in Marloes Road where she was lying bedridden, senile, almost blind, tended by a swarm of nurses and servants. I knew I would write this novel about some such old woman at the end of her life, but in house in Sydney, because Sydney is what I have in my blood. (149)

Sydney is the other of London, that is to say, Sydney has taken the position of London in White's politics of location. Translocating, or displac-

ing, the plot of a dying old woman from London to Sydney – an autobiographical motive – promotes Sydney, a city on the periphery of the former British Empire, to the position of the Centre, so far reserved for London in his earlier novels and still cherished by other Commonwealth writers like, say, Kureyski. And all what was described in the novel was based, as he admitted, on true-to-life events:

An incident changed and elaborated in the novel was an attempt Sue and I made to persuade our mother to move in with the Blue Nuns of Holland Park. We had investigated this house with its large dignified rooms and peaceful atmosphere. It appealed to me so much I felt I could have moved in there and then and detached [sic!] myself for ever from the world. Ruth refused to contemplate the idea, and died in her flat after I had returned to Australia. I have always had the guilty feeling that our suggestion may have killed her, not so much the prospect of leaving possessions she could no longer see, as the thought of dying surrounded by Roman Catholic nuns. (149–150)

The feeling of guilt was to haunt him and the characters he created in his novels for the rest of his life and to the last of the pages he wrote. In this sense – as well as many others – he proves a truly Christian writer, the writer who carries a bagful of sins, imagined and real, on his back in a vain attempt to redeem him and the world. And always the motif of the mother – a clear sign of his childhood Oedipus complex – who, like a truly Anglican gentlewoman, did not wish to die among the Catholic nuns and remained English till the last of her days.

It is quite out of the ordinary to follow Patrick White's comprehensive analysis of the characters from his novel in the light of his autobiographical details alongside, naturally, his mother's and sister's, the details that may aid the reading of *The Eye of the Storm* also from the perspective of the motif of revenge:

Elizabeth Hunter's children in the book are more vindictive in their efforts to put her in a home. There was never anything vindictive in Sue, nothing of the Princesse de Lascabanes, though plenty of the latter in me, and as a frustrated actor, I can recognise myself in the vulgar egotist Sir Basil. I have sometimes wondered whether Dorothy and Basil were avengers I summoned up from the depths. Was my suggestion that Ruth should move in with the Blue Nuns my unconscious retaliation for the years to which she condemned me at Cheltenham? I hope not, but it could be so. (150)

The unconscious vengeance on the mother for the childhood injustices, the setting of scores with her, is indicative of White's complicated psychological portrait that he sketches on the pages of his *Flaws in the Glass*. Yes, indeed, these are truly flaws on the surface of crystal-like appearance most Nobel Prize winners would wish to present to the world or at least to their readers. But not White. It seems that he wanted to do justice not only to his life – after all his autobiography has certainly a confessional character – but also to his mother's life, and the thing he particularly remembered in her Australian house from the times she was determined to leave Australia was a flawless crystal bird, the symbol of perfection but also of egotism:

Perched on an ebony stand in the centre of her dining table there was a flawless bird contemplating its own reflection in a pool of water. Ruth and I fought out our worst battles at table, voices muted at first, perhaps out of respect for the perfection of that aloof creature the crystal bird, till carried away by passion we grew recklessly strident, while eating our way through Etty's excellent meals. (130)

Most certainly, White considered himself egotist, self-conceited and self-reflexive, looking too often at his reflection perhaps not in the pool of water but on the pages of the novels he had penned as if he were trying to see the various versions of himself, or as if he were trying to produce the best, most genuine, but at the same time, most fascinating and most literary version of himself. Yet, he was not flawless like the mother's crystal bird; he certainly did not view himself as an imitation of artificial perfection, even though, as he admitted on countless occasions, he had a lot of respect for creative artists, also the artists imitating nature. Mentality, he reckoned, is a far more complicated process and that is why he impersonates a malicious, malevolent and spiteful character in *The Eye of the Storm*, a metaphysical megalomaniac, a Christ-like or Hitler-like visionary in *Voss*, the Brown brothers in *The Solid Mandala* ("Waldo is myself at my coldest and worst," FG 146–147) or Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector*:

*The Vivisector*, which came first, is about a painter, the one I was not destined to become – another of my frustrations. I had imagined that if I could acquire

the technique I might give visual expression to what I have inside me, and that the physical act of painting would exhilarate me far more than grinding away at grey, bronchial prose. This could be the delusion of a writer who has always resented having to write. Some painter told me that Hurtle Duffield is not a painter, others that he is. Throughout my writing life I have encountered fiercely contradictory judgements: that Himmelfarb is/is not a Jew; that I know everything/nothing about women; that what I write illuminates, or on the other hand, that my novels are incomprehensible, boring rubbish. But I expect any writer who takes risks has had this battle fought out over his body, live or dead. (150–151)

A writer who hates writing, a writer who wanted to be a painter or an actor instead. White puzzled so many readers and critics that one more declaration in “grey, bronchial prose” is not going to change any estimations, evaluations of his fiction. That he had to grind his words is obvious enough in the context of his long novels, extensive descriptions, prolonged verbal exchanges between characters or little dynamic actions. He selected words very circumspectly, meticulously constructing his visions and landscapes of his imagination; just a humble builder of words, a poet of prose.

### **A Writer as a Painter**

A writer, like a painter, has got to have imagination to construct mental pictures in verbal signs where the latter has got paints in various colours and shades. The writer’s job does not seem easier since what he/she has got just words, worn-out and abused in everyday usage, degenerated and devoid of meaning, lacking colour in themselves. White’s idea was to combine these two together: to paint portraits with words which have got the quality of paint:

Whether Hurtle Duffield is or is not a painter, I see him as a composite of several I have known, welded together by the one I have in me but never became. Setting out to portray a convincing artist, I wanted at the same time to paint a portrait of my city: wet, boiling, superficial, brash, beautiful, ugly Sydney, developing during my lifetime from a sunlit village into this present-day parvenu bastard, compound of San Francisco and Chicago. I had a lot of exploring to do. It was not so much research as re-living the windswept, gritty, or steamy moods of the streets, coaxing dead-ends, narrow lanes, and

choked thoroughfares to release those voices, images, emotions of the past, which for my deplorably atypical Australian nature evoke guilt rather than pleasure. (151)

He paints with words: his descriptions, even in this short passage, consist mainly of adjectives that may be rough equivalents to a variety of paints on a painter's palette, and he has got plenty of them at his disposal. Yet, his vision of Sydney as a "parvenu bastard" city, a composite of two big American ones, may, on the one hand, be unsettling and critical of Australian character, pointing out its low origin, but, on the other, his vision is looking to the future, showing the city's rapid transformation within his lifetime. The memories of the past, however, evoke in White a feeling of guilt because of his "deplorably atypical Australian nature," which is yet another link in an apparently endless series of various reasons of it.

### **Class Consciousness**

As it has already been mentioned, the feeling of guilt haunted White from the very young age till the end of his life and it stemmed from, among other things, his sexuality, religion and something which has not been mentioned yet: the guilt connected with parents' affluence, which, as one may easily conjecture, goes back to the times of his childhood:

The puritan in me has always wrestled with the sensualist. As a child I felt ashamed of my parents' affluence. I was aware of a formless misery as well as material distress the other side of palisade protecting the lives of the favoured few. For that reason I have never been able to enjoy what any 'normal' member of my parents' class considers right. What is seen as a success, my own included, has often filled me with disgust. No doubt the 'normal' members of the affluent class will pounce on this confession as explanation of what they think a distorted viewpoint in all I have written, while to me the refractions from that many-sided crystal, truth, are more diverse than they would have been had I remained blinkered by the values of Australian rich. (151)

The class awareness that was being born probably gradually gave him an impulse to critically appraise a range of characters in his fiction, for instance, some wealthy Sydney merchants in *Voss*, and led, particularly in the middle of his writing career and onwards, to a raucous criticism

of middle-class materialism and mercantilism. For him, at least declaratively, success did not mean money, the accumulation of which he did not consider right, either, in opposition to the members of his parents' class. This, as well as many other factors, contributed to his poor relationships with his parents in his boyhood and later in adult life.

As Australia developed economically after the two austere decades or so immediately following the World War II, money or, rather excess of money, started to play even more meaningful role in the lives of the Australian middle class:

As we raced through the 'Sixties into the 'Seventies the social climate changed: ladies of a higher social level began cooking for their equals, their inferiors too, if the money was there. Money became everything, vulgarity chick, the crooks got off provided they were rich enough. Knighthoods could be bought more easily than ever as inflation rose and the British Monarchy commuted regularly with an eye on Australia as their remaining bolthole. (152)

White's class awareness or consciousness, to use a Marxian term, was not of the class he nominally belonged due to his parents' social status: he did not believe in the middle class, least the British upper class or royalty, whom he considered parasites living on Australia. His political views were radical, sometimes very radical and that added to hostility with which he used to be received in intellectual and artistic circles:

During the 'Seventies I withdrew from circulation. I had got to know the habits of contemporary rank and riches. Some of those belonging to our affluent society would argue that they had dropped me for being a traitor to my class. I made no secret of my political allegiance. I spoke out in public. In any case I have always seen the artist as classless. (152–153)

The idea of a classless artist, in his and many other cases, is just theoretical and has nothing to do with praxis, particularly in case of Marxism of which he was an avid proponent. On the other hand, in his fiction there is no indication that he served the working class since his literary interests concentrated on the middle class – the only social class he may claim to know – and the result of his scrutiny was an explicit and well articulated criticism, particularly in terms of elevating money to the position of the highest and unquestionable value and accumulating material

goods. And he is not free from criticising his own family since they did not have history as middle class – they are just new rich:

If what I have said about the Australian so-called Better Class sounds priggish and hypocritical, I should add that my own family belonged in the category of new-rich when they came to Australia from Somerset as yeomen-farmers generations earlier and were granted great tracts of land which they proceeded to farm, professionally and profitably. As a result of their success they began building Edwardian mansions to replace their simple, early homesteads. Their imported motor-cars were the equivalent of today's Mercedes, Jaguars, Porsches, and Ferraris. Austere in many ways, my forebears were also flash in what has become established as the Australian new-rich tradition. (153)

But there are differences between his Australian ancestors and others of the same new-rich class: they had honour and principles not to be compromised under any circumstances and conditions – the things not to be observed too frequently in his times:

The distinction lies in the fact that my father and his brothers were honourable men who would not be divorced from their principles. My dowdy aunts had a moral core which could not be faulted. Even more pretentious, more elegant mother would never have had her principles. We were brought up never to blow our trumpets, talk about money, live beyond our means, but to give quietly. (153)

White witnessed himself the collapse of these puritan principles he cherished so much (he often spoke of the puritan in him), particularly in the sphere of material goods, flashy outfits and double moral standards:

So, for all I know, the creatures squirming in today's social pool, ladies with their lip pencils and exposed nipples, shady knights and captains of self-advertisement may indulge in quiet giving between jetting to and fro, their variations on adultery, and appearances in the courts of law. It is possible. Double values abound amongst those I used to respect; and as for myself, I have never disguised a belief that, as an artist, my face is my many-faceted, my body protean, according to time, climate, and the demands of fiction. (153)

Exposed nipples in women ("ladies," to use his idiom, now rare or obsolete) go far beyond the limits his morality set for his times, which, understandably, sounds bizarre in the context of his homosexuality, but, as may be surmised, he would never have exposed his sexuality in pub-

lic and with its official declaration (“coming-out” – the phrase probably unknown to him) he waited till the publication of his autobiography in 1981 when he was 69. He believed that sexuality should be practised, not discussed or least exposed, and that is why all these people, men and women alike, who self-advertise either themselves or their bodies are not worthy of his respect.

### Sex, Sex, Sex

As has been reiterated before, the main reason behind the publication of *Flaws in the Glass* was Patrick White’s official admittance of his homosexuality. In its final paragraphs, he returns to the issue and speculates:

I sometimes wonder how I would have turned out had I been born a so-called normal heterosexual male. If an artist, probably a pompous one, preening myself [sic!] in the psychic mirror for being a success, as did the intolerable Goethe, inferior to his self-abnegating disciple Eckermann. My unequivocal male genes would have allowed me to exploit sexuality to the full. As a father I would have been intolerant of my children, who would have hated and despised me, seeing through the great man I wasn’t. I would have accepted titles, orders, and expected a state funeral in accordance with a deep-seated hypocrisy I had refused to let myself recognise. (154)

White treats homosexuality as an inborn orientation, which from a contemporary perspective is certainly erroneous. Far more interesting are his speculations had he been born a woman, a heterosexual woman, that is:

As a woman, I might have been an earth-mother, churning out the children I wanted of my husband, passionate, jealous, resentful of the cause and result, always swallowing the bile of some insoluble frustration. Or I might have chosen a whore’s life for its greater range in role-playing, greater than that offered an actress, deluding my male audience of one into thinking I was at his service, than flinging back at him the shreds of his self-importance as he buttoned up. Or else a nun, of milky complexion and sliced-bread smile, dedicated to her quasi-spiritual marriage with the most demanding spouse of all. (154)

Characteristically, his hierarchy here is the mythical (an earth-mother), the sexual (a whore) and the religious (a nun), which probably best illus-



trates his system of values, his cosmology. He argues that instead of being a heterosexual man or a heterosexual woman he possesses, as he calls it, sexual "ambivalence" which has this positive side that it allows him an insight into human nature denied to those who are unequivocally male or female. And, again, he believes that the best option is a sexual hybrid: a mix of the masculine in a woman and the feminine in a man:

In fact sexuality refreshes and strengthens through its ambivalence, if unconsciously – even in Australia – and defines a nation's temperament. As I see it, the little that is subtle in the Australian character comes from the masculine principle in its women, the feminine in men. Hence the reason Australian women generally appear stronger than their men. Alas, the feminine element in the men is not strong enough to make them more interesting. (155)

And finally about women types in his novels in the context of flaws: "One English critic finds it a serious flaw in my novels that my women are stronger than men. I see nothing anomalous in this imbalance; it arises from a lifetime of observing my fellow Australians, in closest detail my own parents when I was young," which proves our earlier thesis of a fundamental importance the psychological portraits of his parents played in shaping up the characters in Patrick White's fiction.

### **Autobiography: Truth or Fiction?**

White felt intuitively that the critics of his fiction and his autobiography might question the accuracy of details, descriptions, situations and events from the past. His reply was that what had remained in his memory must have happened in reality: "Sceptics may argue that these are fictitious memories, that the moment of arrested time and moonlit sculpture in a desert somewhere between Khartoum and Alexandria is too good to be true. I don't believe so. Anything that has remained so distinct can only have happened" (90).

White hated realist writing, therefore, he read little or no Australian literature at all. In his time, the most popular kind of fiction came from *The Bulletin*, the literary journal which shaped the literary taste of Australians with a plethora of short stories about bushrangers and the pioneering spirit of white man's conquest of "no one's land," the stories

White found of no interest for himself. His Australian peers' stories of cattle, sheep or at best of horse races and sport in general were not more exciting. From the very start he was poles apart from his contemporaries in his numerous transgressions.

David Marr, probably Patrick White's best biographer, published his oeuvre entitled *Patrick White: A Life* in 1991, precisely ten years after the publication of White's most important autobiographical text, *Flaws in the Glass* (1981). One of the most significant and, at the same time, ground-breaking issue that he presented in it was his handling of White's homosexuality in the context of Australian homophobia in the post-war period and how Australians' attitude changed in this respect:

Masculinity has been one of the central obsessions of Australianness, and homophobia its base note. Although White was unaware of the haunts and lifestyles of homosexual Sydney in his youth, his biographer is not; Marr takes the opportunity to establish the importance, longevity and vivacity of this subculture. Later generations of Australian intellectuals, such as Marr, David Malouf and Robert Dessaix among others, are free to write about manliness and to imagine themselves as Australian men in ways not available to White and earlier generations. As Marr remarks, homosexuality was lived and not debated by White. In telling the life, Marr likewise refuses the polemics and debates about sexuality in favour of presenting the long marriage of White and Lascaris as an important emblem of stability and happiness for homosexual men. (Whitlock 235)

Whitlock also talks about the interconnection between fiction and life, seeing in it a direct link, not only in a sense of fiction copying life but in taking from it all details including patterns of behaviour, attitudes, features of speech or specific syntax, as well:

The fiction permeates the biography, with Marr locating not only the origins of characters in the life but also of phrases, accents and grammar. The contact between the life and the art suffuses Marr's vision of Patrick White, they are integral one to the other, so the shift from the life to the fiction is embedded. (235)

From the point of view of contemporary literary theory, the vision of literature Marr offers is, of course, unacceptable and marks a step backwards to the nineteenth-century Romantic Humanist approach, which saw the text's meaning in the author's biography but, notwithstanding

White's affirmed Modernism, we have to bear in mind his reverence for (Romantic) spirituality and metaphysicality, which, at least to some extent, gives good reason for such an interpretation.



## CHAPTER THREE

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### Patrick White's Autobiography: "The Prodigal Son" as a Private Voice in a Public Debate

In 1958, White wrote "The Prodigal Son" for the journal *Australian Letters*. The journal introduced him as "perhaps Australia's greatest living novelist." Other than an occasional letter to a newspaper, it was White's first venture into public debate. White started by explaining the reasons of writing this letter (in *Patrick White Speaks* 13–17):

This is by way of being an answer to Alister Kershaw's recent article *The Last Expatriate*, but I cannot hope to equal the slash and dash of Kershaw's journalistic weapons, I shall not attempt to answer him point by point. In any case, the reasons why anybody is an expatriate, or why another chooses to return home, are such personal ones that the question can only be answered in a personal way. (PWS 13)

White's very private voice in a public debate of why he returned to Australia, and who is and who is not a good Australian was the first of that kind after ten years of silence after repatriation. White was 46 at that time, living with Manoly Lascaris in their seclusion at Castle Hill, Sydney. He fends off the accusations of being a Pom at heart by arguing that

[b]rought up to believe in the maxim: Only the British can be right, I did accept this during the earlier part of my life. Ironed out in an English public school and finished off at King's, Cambridge, it was not until 1939, after wandering by myself through the most of Western Europe, and finally most of the United States, that I began to grow up and think my own thoughts. The War did the rest. What had seemed a brilliant, intellectual, highly desirable existence, became distressingly parasitic and pointless. There is nothing like a rain of bombs to start one trying to assess one's own achievement. Sitting at night in his London bed-sitting room during the first months of the Blitz, this chromium-plated Australian with two fairly successful novels to his credit

came to a conclusion that his achievement was practically nil. Perhaps significantly, he was reading at that time *Eyre's Journal*. Perhaps also he had the wind up; certainly he reached rather often for the bottle of Calvados in the wardrobe. (13–14)

His life in England as an English person disappointed him greatly, and it was not largely due to the war going on around him, but because of the feeling of mediocrity and pointlessness of his, first, acting and, then, writing career, even though he had two books published. Interestingly enough, to distance himself from the object of his scrutiny and trying to sound objective in his letter, he chooses to speak of himself as it were not him, but a “chromium-plated Australian” with a liking of alcohol in the hope probably to authenticate himself as a “dinky-die Aussie.” He flatly rejects the journalist’s allegation of benefitting materially from his parents’ country:

Any way, he experienced those first sensations of rootlessness which Alister Kershaw has deplored and explained as the ‘desire to nuzzle once more at the benevolent teats of the mother country.’ All through the War in the Middle East there persisted a longing to return to the scenes of childhood, which is, after all, the purest well from which the creative artist draws. Aggravated further by the terrible nostalgia of the desert landscapes, this desire was almost quenched by the year I spent stationed in Greece, where perfection presents itself on every hand, not only the perfection of antiquity, but that of nature, and the warmth of human relationships expressed in daily living. (14)

White attributes his Australian come back to two organisations of space: the childhood scenes and desert landscapes, the former directly confirming the significance of childhood in his writing (indirectly Freud’s findings), and the latter – the singularity of Australian landscape and its inspirational power. The phrase “a longing to return to the scenes of childhood, which is, after all, the purest well from which the creative artist draws” became one of the most frequently quoted phrases from this letter and generally the one indicating directly not only White’s source of artistic inspirations.

Why didn’t I stay in Greece? I was tempted to. Perhaps it was the realisation that even the most genuine resident Hellenophile accepts automatically the vaguely comic role of Levantine beachcomer. He does not belong, the natives

seem to say, not without affection; it is sad for him, but he is nothing. While the Hellenophile continues humbly to hope.

So I did not stay in my elective Greece. Demobilisation in England left me with the alternative of remaining in what I then felt to be an actual and spiritual graveyard, with the prospect of ceasing to be an artist and turning instead into the most sterile of beings, a London intellectual, or of returning home, to the stimulus of time remembered. Quite honestly, the thought of a full belly influenced me as well, after toying with the soft, sweet awfulness of horsemeat stew in the London restaurants that I could afford. So I came home. I bought a farm at Castle Hill and with a Greek friend and partner, Manoly Lascaris, started to grow flowers and vegetables, and to breed Schnauzers and Saanen goats. (14)

Australia, in the first decade after his repatriation, was a safe haven for him and for his male partner, Manoly Lascaris. In this personal letter of 1958, White did not dare disclose his very private and intimate details of the links between him and Manoly: it was probably too early for the coming-out, even though Sydney artistic and intellectual circles were speculating about his homosexual love affair at that time, which had its reflection in his 1966 novel *The Solid Mandala*, where the elderly twin brothers living together, Waldo and Arthur, are called by Sydney suburban people “a pair of poofteroos” (SM 18).

The real alternative to Australia was England, not Greece, as White would have wished, and it was largely because of Manoly's family who disapproved their relationship and of the xenophobic natives (“you don't belong here”). Additionally, Manoly dreamt of seeing Australia of which he had, justifiably, unrealistic expectations that only later he understood.

The farm life was good but only for a time being. The real life was writing:

The first years I was content with these activities, and to soak myself in the landscape. If anybody mentioned Writing, I would reply: ‘Oh, one day, perhaps.’ But I had no real intentions of giving the matter sufficient thought. *The Aunt's Story*, written immediately after the War, before returning to Australia, had succeeded with overseas critics, failed as usual with the local ones, remained half-read, it was obvious from the state of the pages in the lending libraries. Nothing seemed important, beyond living and eating, with a roof of one's own over one's head. (14–15)

*The Aunt's Story* received severe criticism not only from professional critics but also – and that was probably the most painful experience –

from his very own mother, Ruth, who disapproved of it due to its not being really *the* aunt's story, that is, its lacking realism and matter-of-factness. The novel's status was confirmed by little readership it had and little attention it got from the reading public among Sydney intellectual spheres.

## The Great Australian Emptiness

White coined a phrase that really made a career both at home and overseas: The Great Australian Emptiness to denote with what he was fundamentally unhappy – the Australian cult of the average:

Then, suddenly, I began to grow discontented. Perhaps, in spite of Australian critics, writing novels was the only thing I could do with any degree of success; even my half-failures were some justification of an otherwise meaningless life. Returning sentimentally to a country I had left in my youth, what had I really found? Was there anything to prevent me packing my bag and leaving like Alister Kershaw and so many other artists? Bitterly, I had to admit, no. *In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes, in which human teeth fall like autumn leaves, the buttocks of cars grow hourly glassier, food means cake and steak, muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves* [emphasis added]. (15)

The Great Australian Emptiness encompasses all and is all Australian even though, from a contemporary perspective, may be applicable as a term to most capitalist, Western consumer societies. The cult of the average that he despised so strongly has been for the post-war decades a defining feature of the generation baby-boomers who was supposed to replace the old one, the one who fought in Hitler's war (as White used to say). That generation grew in the shadow of their fathers', and sometimes also mothers', heroic deeds, devotion to the great cause, love of the motherland, and who, eventually and not infrequently, put their lives on the altar of sacrifice for the Others. There were no such expectations of the new, post-war generation, and that is why they turn average, mediocre, "normal":



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It was the exaltation of the 'average' that made me panic most, and in this frame of mind, in spite of myself, I began to conceive another novel. Because the void I had to fill was so immense, I wanted to try to suggest in this book every possible aspect of life, through the lives of an ordinary man and woman. But at the same time I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people, and incidentally, my own life since my return. (15)

The exaltation of the average led White to consider a possibility of seeing the extraordinary behind the ordinary, even though the two are not exactly synonymous. *The Tree of Man* was such a novel in which the ordinary Australian farmers revealed their own lives their extraordinariness as well as the extraordinariness of their natural environment, the bushland. And, again, the phrase "to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry" became another one of White's most frequently quoted aims in writing.

So I began to write *The Tree of Man*. How it was received by the more important Australian critics is now ancient history. Afterwards I wrote *Voss*, possibly conceived during the early days of the Blitz, when I sat reading *Eyre's Journal* in a London bed-sitting room. Nourished by months spent trapesing backwards and forwards across the Egyptian and Cyrenaican deserts, influenced by the arch-megalomaniac of the day, the idea finally matured after reading contemporary accounts of Leichhardt's expeditions and A. H. Chisholm's *Strange New World* on returning to Australia. (15)

With the publication of *Voss* in 1957, shortly before writing "The Prodigal Son," White realised his long-cherished dream of indulging himself with the desert landscapes of Australia, inspired by reading the accounts of, among others, Leichhardt's expedition, on the figure of whom he modelled his hero, the German Ulrich Voss. Although it was controversial again, this novel marked his first real Australian success maybe also because of the setting:

It would be irrelevant to discuss here the literary aspects of the novel. More important are those intentions of the author which have pleased some readers without their knowing exactly why, and helped to increase the rage of those who have found the book meaningless. Always something of a frustrated painter, and a composer *manqué*, I wanted to give my books the texture of music, the sensuousness of paint, to convey through the theme and characters of *Voss* what Delacroix and Blake might have seen, what Mahler and Liszt

might have heard. Above all I was determined to prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism. On the whole, the world has been convinced, only here, at the present moment, the dingoes are howling unmercifully. (16)

In the art of writing, White wanted to fulfil his ideal of combining it with music and painting so that it gets two extra dimensions. With all his complexes as the failed composer, painter, actor and, finally, a writer *manqué* – as he called himself on numerous occasions, he made a name for himself for making the Australian novel “not necessarily the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism” (another famous quote) as it used to be before him. He was also happy because, as one Australian journalist prophesied to him in London, using a painter metaphor, the colours came “flooding back onto his palette” (another renowned phrase):

What, then, have been the rewards of this returned expatriate? I remember when, in the flush of success after my first novel, an old and wise Australian journalist called Guy Innes came to interview me in my London flat. He asked me whether I wanted to go back. I had just ‘arrived’; who was I to want to go back? ‘Ah, but when you do,’ he persisted, ‘the colours will come flooding back onto your palette.’ This gentle criticism of my first novel only occurred to me as such in recent years. But I think perhaps Guy Innes has been right. (16)

So, the decision was made: he will stay in Australia and take up writing seriously since there is an audience, there are readers, there are some expectations: he must write to open up somebody else’s eyes, to provoke thoughts, to stimulate discussions. His ambition was to construct something anew, to create “completely fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words”:

Stripped of almost everything that I had considered desirable and necessary, I began to write. Writing, which had meant the practice of an art by a polished mind in civilised surroundings, became a struggle to create completely fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words. I began to see things for the first time. Even the boredom and frustration presented avenues for endless exploration; even the ugliness, the bags and iron of Australian life, acquired a meaning. As for the cat’s cradle of human intercourse, this was necessarily simplified, often bungled, sometimes touching. Its very tentativeness can be reward. There is always the possibility that the book lent, the record played,

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may lead to communication between human beings. There is the possibility that one may be helping to people a barely inhabited country with a race possessed of understanding. (16–17)

After this momentous decision to stay on and write, all of the sudden, Australian ugliness acquired a meaning, so majority of his characters, mostly females – Australia after all is also a female, turned ugly, red-haired, long-nosed: ugliness – in a Modernist fashion – became an emblem of his times, of Australia, the Other of middle-class beauty, so overvalued, so abused.

These, then, are some of the reasons why an expatriate has stayed, in the face of those disappointments which follow inevitably upon his return. Abstract and unconvincing, the Alister Kershaws will probably answer, but such reasons, as I have already suggested, are a personal matter. More concrete, and most rewarding of all, are the many letters I have received from unknown Australians, for whom my writing seems to have opened a window. To me, the letters alone are reason enough for staying. (17)

From hindsight, if it had not been for Alister Kershaw and his attack on the writer we would not have known many things and ideas White had in the time of writing, we would not have had a chance to get to know and learn the very wording of them. Patrick White remained for generations of Australian writers after him a model to follow and, practically, majority of them claim affinity with his philosophy and style.

In his Introduction to *Critical Essays on Patrick White* (1990), Peter Wolfe, commenting on White's criticism of the Australian middle-class values, attributes it largely to the loss of cultural continuity in Australia:

White's highly developed and refined art does sneer at Australian middle-class values. But it also records the restiveness and upheaval caused by the loss of cultural continuity. Here is no abdication of social conscience. Though he deplores his countrymen's struggles for goods, land, and cash, his commitment to their souls reveals a sensibility finely tuned to the inner realities structuring their lives. He has tallied the cost of middle-class prosperity. We have already seen how *Voss* describes myth biting into the Australian psyche. *The Tree of Man* also explores the continuities linking people both to each other and to their shared environment. The book's portrayal of an age simpler than ours shows what we have come out of and what we have come through. *Tree* gains legendary grandeur from its common background. The struggles it depicts with flood, fire, and drought could take place almost anywhere.

The unconscious unity that the locals display in these crises helps evoke the infancy of our urban culture. (5–6)

In *Patrick White: A Tribute* (1991), Dorothy Green reiterates White's continuous struggle with Australian middle-class obsession with material goods and their lack of spirituality:

The 1970s ended with White's most savage attack on Western consumer society, *The Twyborn Affair* (1979), his finest novel, but oddly enough, one of his most compassionate. Parts of it recall the rich comedy of the early novels, but figures he had lampooned mercilessly in the intervening books were treated with sympathy as well as irony. Unlike his contemporary Barry Humphries, White had humility and a native capacity for self-criticism; he discovered as he grew older that purity of heart and integrity were to be found in unexpected places, even if most often among the powerless. (1–2)

The critique of shallow materialism of middle class was not only the domain of Modernist writers like White but, interestingly enough, also shared by postcolonial writers: Edward Brathwaite's justification for his self-imposed exile in Britain was "the stifling atmosphere of middle-class materialism and philistinism at home" (Patke 2006: 174).

Australian middle-class materialism stands in sharp contrast to Australian Aboriginals' lack of concept of material wealth. As Rickard (1999) points out,

Aborigines had no concept of material wealth. Objects and implants had to be made all the time, to satisfy not only the requirements of daily life and ritual, but also to meet kinship obligations. There was no point in seeking to amass a surplus, for it would have been more a physical impediment than an instrument for power over others. Hence competition for wealth though not necessarily power was notably absent from Aboriginal culture. It was partly for this reason that society did not have the sorts of institutions of government usually needed to regulate such competition. (15–16)

Thus, it seems quite likely that White shared this Aboriginal dislike of material goods in excess, of this rat race to amass things, this poisoned cornucopia that haunts contemporary capitalist societies of both the West and East and which he experienced at his affluent home, pitying his parents never having to work, throwing parties instead.

Wolfe argues that White degrades party-goers in the story "Dancing with both Feet on the Ground" by showing them stuffing their pimpled, greasy faces with rich food, wearing gaudy garb, and blundering socially while believing themselves tasteful and elegant, adding that:

White scorns Australian consumerism, vulgarity, and superficiality. The smooth, practical suburbanite who covets earthly trophies ignores life's depth and complexity. Those intent on nothing but success and pleasure, White reasons, have perverted what is most human in themselves. But, as his disparagement of the party guests in "Dancing" shows, nowhere does he lash out more angrily at his countrymen as when they aspire to culture and refinement. (1990: 7)

Death emerges as a function of closeness in *The Vivisector*, where Hurtle Duffield drives two lovers to suicide (Doll Quigley's mercy killing of her retarded brother due to her fear that he will not be able to look after himself after she dies in *Tree*). Trying to explain life's underlying mysteries depicted in White's characters, Wolfe speculates that:

Perhaps the no-win process operates like this: the spiritually gifted person perceives reality more keenly than the rest of us. But his intensity of vision also sets him so far apart from us that he can not come back. Committing oneself to the ineffable causes madness; Sophocles' sphinx, Shakespeare's Fool, and Melville's Pip in *Moby-Dick* all spoke in riddles because they dared not express their visions directly. White's Doll Quigley and Arthur Brown [whose denial of his feminine side leads to his death in *Mandala*, RW] come to grief, having neglected the split between the human and the divine. One must stand close enough to the divine fire to be warmed, but not so close as to be burned. On the other hand, the hearts of those who shrink from the flames stay frozen; the shallow and the complacent can never perceive the truth. (1990: 9)

White explores the darkest corners of human experience by using spiritual insights into man's psyche. The harsh world White depicts with such accuracy holds, sustains and inspires him. He finds the ideas of the uncanny very inspiring. It is the world of destruction, personal tragedy and the macabre detail (a woman's hair is burned off in *Tree* and hacked off in *Fringe*). In *The Vivisector*, we read:

So you didn't bother. They [family deeds] were less interesting than the hair of dead people. There was the locket with the hair of Pa's sister Clara, who

died on the voyage out, and was buried at sea. There were the photographs. There was the photograph of Grannie Duffield in a cap: her hands spread out against her skirt showed off the rings she was wearing. Her hollow eyes had never known you. (Vi 10)

Another instance of the uncanny refers to the family secrets and also comes from *The Vivisector*:

All these mysteries were contained in the box. And the ring. The ring had a sort of bird on it, sticking out its tongue. The bird was cut off short, below the neck. What was left, looked as though it was resting on a dish.  
 ‘That was your grandfather’s ring. The police sergeant gave it to me when I went to Ashfield to identify the body.’  
 ‘After Grandpa fell off the mule.’  
 ‘Yairs. He died of a seizure on the Parramatta Road.’  
 ‘What’s a seizure?’  
 Pa didn’t answer at first. ‘Yer blood gets seized.’  
 Grandpa Duffield looked more awful than before, with his arranged hair and watery eyes. You couldn’t look long enough.  
 ‘What was he doing on the mule?’  
 ‘Cor, Hurt, I told yer often enough! ‘E *borrowed* the mule ter *ride* to the *centre of Australia*. It was ‘is dream.’ After that Pa’s pipe didn’t stop spitting.  
 ‘What happened to the mule?’  
 ‘I told yer! It *disappeared*. An’ I never stopped payin’ it off to the owner for a long time after.’” (Vi 11)

Family mysteries and the uncanny elements are mixed with the hilarious and the serious such as was the dream of reaching the centre of Australia by, among others, Voss. It seems highly unlikely that White wanted to ridicule such dreams but they are mainly dreamt by weirdoes, freaks, and social outcasts, foreigners.

White has always insisted that **ultimate truth** is out of reach, just like a perfect relationship or the ideal work of art; nonetheless, not infrequently has he insisted, particularly through his female characters in his novels, that we know instinctively what the truth is: “The truth will always out,” [Mrs Flack] said. “It depends,” Mrs Jolley dared. “What depends?” returned Mrs Flack, sucking in her breath. “It depends on what you believe the truth to be.” Mrs Flack was awful. “The truth,” she said, “is what a decent person knows by instinct” (RC 537). Admittedly, this exchange between the two women proves one more thing: truth – no matter how we define it – is also negotiable, not given or revealed, and

as such is no longer one of the most fundamental centring principles of Western metaphysics.

There is an insistence that rational discourse will miss this hidden, vital truth and White bemoans the inadequacies of language. "The truth stops where the words begin" (*Four Plays*, 35), says a character in Act I of *The Ham Funeral* (1947). When asked if a certain conversation told her anything important, a woman in *Voss* replies, "Not in words" (104). "Oh, words, words ... I do not understand what they mean," (162) complains Mary Hare of *Riders*, or Elizabeth Hunter's statement: "You can never convey in words the utmost of experience" (ES 414). In *The Solid Mandala*, the last movement in Arthur Brown's dance of the mandala ends with "his mouth ... a silent hole, because no sound was needed to explain (257).

White also discusses the theme of writing as painting, the feature we have already noticed as one of his most characteristic ones:

I'm really more interested in things urban than things country, in the more sophisticated aspects of Australian life ... though I come from the country, it's in my blood. The novel I am working on now is set mainly in Sydney. It's about the life of a painter. I've known many painters myself. One of the first I knew was Roy de Maistre: I feel he taught me to write by teaching me to look at paintings and get beneath the surface. I've seen a lot of Nolan on and off, he's a friend of mine; and Lawrence Daws, Rapotec. I like some of Fred Williams's paintings very much; I think he gets closer to the essence of the Australian landscape than most. Why can't a writer use writing as a painter uses paint? I try to. (Wolfe, ed. 1990: 25)

He speaks about his characters and the plots of his novels:

I think my novels usually begin with characters; you have them floating in your head and it may be years before they get together in a situation. Characters interest me more than situations. I don't think any of my books have what you call plots. I used to take notes, once upon a time; and sometimes I begin with a very slight skeleton. But I always think of my novels as being the lives of the characters. They are largely something that rises up out of my unconscious; I draw very little on actual people, though one does put a bow or a frill on from here or there. I find the actual bits, if you do use them, are most unconvincing compared to the fictitious bits. Sometimes characters do enlarge as you write, but within the rough framework of what you had intended. (Wolfe, ed. 1990: 26)

White gives some pieces of advice about the process of writing and shows how he himself writes:

It's fatal to hurry into a book; the book I like least, *The Living and the Dead*, I had to hurry because of the war. *The Tree of Man* took me four years. I re-write endlessly, sentence by sentence; it's more like oxywelding than writing. Once I used to write at night, from midnight to four o'clock in the morning; but as I got older I decided that was a strain, so now I get up at five and write through the morning and then perhaps from five to seven in the evening. The afternoon is death for anything; I sleep. I have the same idea with all my books: an attempt to come close to the core of reality, the structure of reality, as opposed to the merely superficial. (Wolfe, ed. 1990: 26)

The writer formulates a thesis that realist novel is not really a work of art:

The realistic novel is remote from art. A novel should heighten life, should give one an illuminating experience; it shouldn't set out what you know already. I just muddle away at it. One gets flashes here and there, which help. I am not a philosopher or an intellectual. Practically anything I have done of any worth I feel I have done through my intuition, not my mind – which the intellectuals disapprove of. And that is why I am anathema to certain kinds of Australian intellectual. It irritates me when I think of some of those academic turds, and the great Panjandrum of Canberra who described my writing as pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge. (26)

Patrick White, controversially, compares the writing process to defecation and speaks of his attitude towards people:

I am not writing for an audience; I am writing, and if I have an audience I am very glad. I shocked some people the other night by saying writing is really like shitting; and then, reading the letters of Pushkin a little later, I found he said exactly the same thing! It's something you have to get out of you. I didn't write for a long time at one stage, and built up such an accumulation of shit that I wrote *The Tree of Man*. I wouldn't call myself a humanist; I am indifferent to people in general. But I have always been gregarious. This myth that I'm not has been put about by bitches that I wouldn't have in my house. I like people, but I like to choose my people. I'm not isolated; I know quite a lot of people in the theatre, in the art world. When we first came to Australia we lived at Castle Hill because we wanted in the bush, and yet be close to the city. Then it became just another suburb; we were surrounded by little boxes. So we moved closer in. It makes it easier to have people to dinner, go to the theatre, films. Harry Miller took an option on *Voss* to make it into a film, but we could never agree on a director. (Wolfe, ed. 1990: 27)



Music, poetry and defecation are all mixed in *The Solid Mandala*, when, in a lavatory, Waldo thinks of conceiving a poem:

And now the music was flowing from unseen hands – they could only have been Dulcie Feinstein's – though under Arthur's influence, he feared. Waldo wished he could have conceived a poem. He had not yet, but would – it was something he had kept even from himself. If it only come shooting out with the urgency of shit and music [he had the diarrhoea, RW]. He rocked with the spasm of his physical distress, and the strange drunkenness which the unbridled music, muffled by perhaps several doors, provoked in him. (SM 110)

That poems do not “shoot out” with the urgency of human organic waste seems to be obvious enough; nonetheless, the fact that he contemplates a possibility of treating the body as a machine, factory to produce poems proves him Modernist not only in the sense of all-powerful slogan of the poet as a producer but also as the artist who believes in both the power of the spirit and the body – the body as physiology, the living organism that takes in and gives out: hence, his aesthetic transgressions – bordering on Baudelaire and Swinburne – which are clearly visible in many of his later novels. Oddly, he never admitted any affinity with them; instead, he emphasised the role of the acclaimed early twentieth-century English (or English-language) novelists, James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence:

Which writers have influenced me? Joyce and Lawrence, certainly. Lawrence I liked so much in my youth I'd be afraid to read him now. The nineteenth century Russians, too. Then at Cambridge I did a degree in French and German literature, so I got to know something about that. Proust influenced everybody. I seem to do less and less reading, especially fiction, though I reread *Madame Bovary* not so long when I was having a pause from reading – it really knocked me right over, it was so wonderful. When I was in Dublin I reread Joyce's *Dubliners* and realised I'd missed out on half of it before. Of the American novelists the people I like are Bellow and Updike, who are fairly detached. They owe their quality to their detachment. (Wolfe, ed. 1990: 27–28)

And, finally, in the concluding paragraph of the essay, White touches upon the importance of detail in his work:

I am interested in detail. I enjoy decoration. By accumulating this mass of detail you throw light on things in a longer sense: in the long run it all adds up. It creates a texture – how shall I put it – a background, a period, which

makes everything you write that [much] more convincing. Of course, all artists are terrible egoists. Unconsciously you are largely writing about yourself. I could never write anything factual; I only have confidence in myself when I am another character. All the characters in my books are myself, but they are a kind of disguise. (Wolfe, ed. 1990: 28)

This closing remark is a convincing proof that White treats his fiction as an extended autobiographical narrative in which a range of his unconscious cravings and conscious manifestation of the will take the shape in a variety of characters. Thomas Watling's passage from his *Letters from an Exile at Botany Bay* ([1794], Review, 1979) is so much different than White's autobiography:

The Poet may there descry numberless beauties; nor can there be fitter haunts for his imagination. The elysian scenery of a Telemachus; – the secret recesses for a Thomson's musidora; – arcadian shades, or classic bowers, present themselves at every winding to the ravished eye . . . In short, were the benefits in the least equal to the specious external, this country need hardly give place to any other on earth. (12)

To recapitulate, Patrick White's autobiographies, both *Flaws in the Glass* and "The Prodigal Son" should be regarded as artist's confessions even though the latter is evidently written in a reaction to a personal attack by an Australian journalist and, as such, is a private response to a public matter. However, apart from obvious biographical narrations, both offer the reader a plethora of in-depth comments in regards to, first of all, writing, artistic inspirations, influences, his attitude to religion, God, spirituality. Also, particularly in "The Prodigal Son," the reader was able to get to know White's opinion on the then Australia, Australian youth, the middle-class cult of materialism and the reasons behind his decision to repatriate to Australia. Of value are his opinions on these and other issues collected in the volume introduced and edited by Peter Wolfe, *Critical Essays on Patrick White* (1990), which, to a considerable extent, continue this autobiographical strand in his literary output, trying, as if it were, to enhance the reader's ability to construct his/her meaning of Patrick White's books through solving the riddle of his life.

## PART 2

PATRICK WHITE  
AND THE LANDSCAPE  
OF AUSTRALIAN IMAGINATION:  
FROM THE IMPURE  
TO PERFECTED SOUL

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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### “The Landscape of the Australian Imagination”: Myth and Religion

Homi Bhabha famously stated in his essay “DissemiNation” that one aspect of place consciousness – landscape representation – has always been a focus of critical readings of national literature. Indeed, Australia is typical in this regard, even if the fixation on landscape meanings as ‘the inscape of national identity’ has its individual forms (in Bhabha, ed., 1990: 295). European-imagined Australia, for example, has a long prehistory in the operations of European vision in the South Pacific<sup>1</sup>.

This prehistory includes heterodox elements of what Murray Bail has called European austromancy – thought experiments in social theory that repeatedly imagined utopias and dystopias, like Jonathan Swift’s Lilliput and Blefuscu, in what became Australian colonial space<sup>2</sup>.

The task of much 20th-century national historiography, as well as literary history, was to assimilate these grand narratives of northern-hemisphere discovery and imperialism – their maritime heroism, iconic representations of man and nature, as well as their eccentric social imaginings – to the less grand one of penal settlement and colonisation. *The Landscape of Australian Poetry* (1967) by the South Australian literary critic and historian Brian Elliott exemplifies this tradition in the literary-critical field. Elliott’s study is concerned with how the actual topography of Australia “appeared at first to impose obstacles to poetic

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<sup>1</sup> See Bernard Smith, *European Vision in the South Pacific*, OUP, 1960. See also, for example, Ross Gibson’s reading of Edgar Allan Poe’s story, “A MS. Found in a Bottle”, in *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia*, Indiana University Press, 1992, Ch. 5, pp. 93–110, for a perspicacious analysis of Australia in the northern hemisphere literary imagination.

<sup>2</sup> See Murray Bail, “Imagining Australia.” *Times Literary Supplement*, 4,417 (27 Nov.–3 Dec. 1987), p. 1330.

expression in Australia, then to liberate it; and finally, as the colonial period came to its close, to choke and inhibit it" (...) (Elliott 1967: xi.).

The theme of the mid-20th-century focus of his history is on the "emancipation ... from the shackles of the colonial topographical obsession and a return to the free vision of nature, a natural reevaluation of the environmental image" (xi-xii). In this connection, D. H. Lawrence's descriptions in *Kangaroo* (1995 [1923]) of the writer Richard Somers' experience of the Australian bush – "the landscape is so unimpressive ... aboriginal, out of our ken" (87) – have been a repeatedly contentious site of debate about the rhetoric and politics of settler nativism in the history of Australian landscape.

The publication of Brian Elliot's *The Landscape of Australian Poetry* in 1967 inaugurated the whole new trend in Australian criticism in regards to perception of Australian landscape in literature. Till then, landscape was understood in physical sense, in the sense of exteriority – the features that dominate over others. Yet, there has always been the mental landscape – the landscape of the Australian imagination that indicated "the typical or predominating contents of some hypothesised national imagination, a formulation that would, presumably, bear the same sort of relation to langue and parole" (Eaden 2-3).

In contemporary criticism, it seems evident that what should be taken into consideration is the European (Judeo-Christian and pre-Christian, classical) imagination alongside Aboriginal (native Australian) one. Thus, in a discourse of the landscape of Australian imagination, we are dealing with the fusion of at least two major perspectives rather than with a single dominant one: on the one hand, we have the whole tradition of Indo-European languages manifested largely by the English and other Germanic languages but also by Greek and Latin, and, on the other, with mostly unrecorded heritage of Aboriginal oral literature. Thus, in terms of imagination, Australian literature is an articulation of many voices that are the product, from Jungian perspective, of Indo-European collective unconscious and Aboriginal Dreaming. In topographical terms, this may take a form of a map in which distant lands seem disconnected on the surface, separated by vast seas, but, in the deep, they are, in the main, homogeneous, of the same origin. The research problem is, therefore, to find and identify the common grounds and territories of what may be

termed Australian imagination that finds its issue in myths, religions, literatures it has been producing incessantly.

In his *Australia: A Cultural History* (1999), John Rickard argues that “For the Aborigines the earth had always been there. It required no explanation. Myth interpreted the shape and appearance of the world the Aborigines knew and inhabited. Rocks, trees, waterholes, animals, birds: such objects, intimately experienced, were integrated through myth and ritual into a spiritual universe of extraordinary richness” (3). But then a question arises what exactly a myth is and how we should interpret it?

As J. A. Cuddon has it in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1999), a myth in general is “a story which is not ‘true’ and which involves (as a rule) supernatural beings – or at any rate supra-human beings. Myth is always concerned with creation. Myth explains how something came to being. Myth embodies feeling and concept” (526).

In literary theory, myths are treated as narrative forms, fiction that conveys psychological truths, hence another definition which comes from Chris Baldick (2004 [1990]), who classifies a myth as

[a] kind of story or rudimentary **narrative sequence**, normally traditional and anonymous, through which a given culture ratifies its social custom or accounts for the origins of human and natural phenomena, usually in supernatural or bodily imaginative terms. The term has a wide range of meanings, which can be divided roughly into ‘rationalist’ and ‘romantic’ versions: in the first, a myth is a false or unreliable story or belief (adj. **mythical**), while in the second, myth is a superior intuitive mode of cosmic understanding (adj. **mythic**). In most literary contexts, the second kind of usage prevails, and myths are regarded as fictional stories containing deeper truths, expressing collective attitudes to fundamental matters of life, death, divinity and existence (sometimes deemed ‘universal’). (163)

Contrary to myth, as Baldick further argues, legend is a story or group of stories handed down through popular tradition, usually consisting of an exaggerated or unreliable account of some actually or possibly historical person – often a saint, monarch or popular hero. Legends are sometimes distinguished from myths in that they concern human beings rather than gods and sometimes in that they have some sort of historical basis whereas myths do not (164).

For Australian Aborigines, myths about spirit beings, travelling across the land and making trees and waterholes and then giving birth

to children, were the source of all knowledge and were called the Dreaming. And what is significant, their myths have nothing to do with stories that happened in the past since Aborigines do not have the same sense of time as Europeans do:

The myths are not fables of 'long ago', for the Aborigines have, in the European sense, no concept of history. The past does not so much precede the present, as lie contained within it. The Dreaming paths mapped out by the spirit beings continue to determine the pattern of Aboriginal life, for the Dreaming is a relationship between people and land which forms the basis of traditional society. The myths serve to unite the creativity of the source with the continuing reality of life. (Rickard 1999: 4)

The role of the Dreaming is, then, to explain in simplest possible terms the relationship between humans and the land inhabited by spiritual beings, the human ancestors, which results in a holistic vision of the world, the unity between the spiritual and material worlds.

In *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (1948), Malinowski and Redfield assert that the function of myth is to "strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events" (122). Therefore, it may be argued that one of the most essential features of myths is repetition that makes them move in circles, or cycles, rather than progress in a line, that is why this cyclical recurrence results in an absolute rejection of its temporal dimension and time as such. In general terms, it seems that human knowledge is the outcome of endless cycles of creation and destruction.

Also in Aboriginal mythology, the idea that there is death as destruction of life had to be accepted and a certain form of renewal was to be awaited and the role of myths was not to explain things but basically to get the message across to people: that is the way it is. In Rickard's words,

[m]ythology simply defined the alternatives as they existed, and nominated the fate which Aborigines had to accept. It is not surprising, therefore, that Aboriginal culture was not noted for proverbs or saws, for they would have had little point. Behaviour was not governed by moral precepts, argued out at theoretical level. Ideas about 'right' and 'wrong', or appropriate or inappropriate behaviour, derived from a complex interaction of social structure anchored in the land itself. (8)



Aboriginal mythology did not answer the question “why” but rather “how” and was more practical than of an exegesis type and points out to land and the beginning and end of all things, material and spiritual, thus, in this and other respects, showing difference from majority of European ancient myths.

White was the writer who, like many others, created his own mythologies that often took the shape of exploration of the vastness of the continent, which in fact was the exploration of the inner-self as was the case of Voss, the German explorer of Australian interior, in the novel under the same name (1957).

Huggan (2007) argues that the source of White’s mythologizing in *Voss* is his conviction of the racial superiority of Europeans in Australia, which he calls “pure whiteness” (what a coincidence):

Colonialism/imperialism and Nazism coalesce in the absolute figure of pure whiteness. For Voss, ‘standing in the glare of his own brilliant desert’ (White 1968: 96), whiteness is an emanation of pure will, a confirmation of the greatness of his own European philosophical inheritance, even if that inheritance later becomes the altar on which he sacrifices himself to ensure that his story passes into self-glorifying myth (White 1968: 182). (475)

White mythology, which the writer constructs in his novels, testifies unequivocally to the fact that his fiction has been strongly anchored in colonial ideology based on a universal paradigm of white supremacy. As Selden et al. (2005 [1985]) explain:

Jacques Derrida has described Western metaphysics as ‘the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own *logos*, that is, the *mythos* of this idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason’, and the methods of deconstruction have proved a major inspiration for postcolonial critics. (222)

We may refer to Hegel’s justification of colonization of Africa and his assessment of African history, which indicates that nothing can be known about a territory existing outside Western system of knowledge and understanding. As such, Australia in the nineteenth century was largely inaccessible to the Western mind since it had nothing to exhibit in the Western sense: it lacked history since for over forty

thousand years it existed as *Terra nullius* (no man's land), the territory outside the limits of Western forms of representation, knowledge and, of course, law:

European settlement of Australia commenced in 1788. Prior to this, Indigenous Australians inhabited the continent and had unwritten legal codes, as documented in the case of the Yirrkala community. However, the Australians did not have any form of political organization that Europeans could understand as being analogous to their own institutions, and the British could not find recognised leaders with the authority to sign treaties, so treaties were not signed (in contrast to British colonial practices in many areas of North America, Africa, New Zealand, etc.). (on-line)

In the Aboriginal sense, history existed only as a form of narration, largely an oral transmission from generation to generation, less frequently as pictorial stories on rocks, commemorating routine activities as hunting, fighting, procreation, etc. Thus, Patrick White's writings may be understood as an attempt to construct a representation of Australians' own sense of cultural identity that take into consideration both white and black mythologies with all their intricacies and complications.

However, hardly can we speak in case of White of postcolonial re-writing of history in the sense of Edward Said's project to deconstruct the "history" that Europeans brought with them to colonised territory as formulated in, among others, *Orientalism* (1978). White dismantles the myth of nature's supremacy over civilisation, as European thought since Rousseau would claim, and civilisation over nature, as his Australian contemporaries would argue.

### **Religions: Aboriginal beliefs**

Australian Aboriginal people believe in spiritual beings, the unity between the spiritual and material world but they have never established or worked out a system of belief or a formal religion. Their faith largely belongs to the sphere of myth and myth making transmitted orally from generation to generation. In their communities, they have never had any persons who would function as priests, wizards or sorcerers and, most importantly from a perspective of world major religions; they never believe in an after-life even though death has always been a fact of everyday

life and still remains an unexplainable mystery. As Rickard has it in his *Australia: A Cultural History* (1999):

Aboriginal religion was life-oriented. It contained no sense of sin or personal salvation, and death, while it did not destroy the spirit, offered no promise of a heavenly after-life. Death was, therefore, something of a puzzle. At one level there was a tendency, particularly if a person died short of old age, to blame the exercise of malevolent power – the sorcery of another people, for example. At another level myth sought to explain how death had come to the world. (13)

If there is no sense of sin – either as an individual prick of conscience or as an organised and institutionalised punishment – there is no need for functionaries who would execute penalties for committing sins against supreme being(s) or/and institutions who would represent them. Evil, in a metaphysical sense, exists only as harm caused by other people’s magic or wizardry, but not as a concept or reality in a sense of theft or any wrongdoing. Even in terms of warfare, Aboriginal people did not work out any doctrines of attack or defence against other people, which may, to some extent, account for them becoming an easy prey and target of invading British in the 18th century and later. Death, no matter how it used to be looked at, has been a mystery and while life is natural – death is certainly not:

Aboriginal beliefs did not altogether discount the prospect of renewal, but there was little sense of the human personality surviving death intact. The spirit was, in effect, dispersed. Part of it lingered in the land, always having the potential to haunt the living; but the main energy of the spirit travelled to the land of the dead, losing its individual identity, and awaiting some later rebirth. Death, in the personal sense, remained an austere reality. (13)

## Religion and God

Patrick White’s ambition was to create his own version of God and religion. Although in large part it was founded upon the Bible and Judeo-Christianity, he introduced elements that were certainly unorthodox.

In *In the Making* (ed. Craig McGregor, Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1969: 218–221), in an essay entitled just “Patrick White,” Patrick White reveals his views of a variety of issues, including religion and God:

Religion. Yes, that's behind all my books. What I am interested in is the relationship between the blundering human being and God. I belong to no church, but I have a religious faith; it's an attempt to express that, among other things, that I try to do. Whether he confesses to being religious or not, everyone has a religious faith of a kind. I myself am a blundering human being with a belief in God who made us and we got out of hand, a kind of Frankenstein monster. Everyone can make mistakes, including God. I believe God does intervene; I think there is a Divine Power, a Creator, who has an influence on human beings if they are willing to be open to him. Yes, I pray. I was brought up an Anglican. Oh, then I gave that away completely. After the war I tried to belong to the Church of England, but I found that so completely unsatisfactory. I wouldn't say I am a Christian; I can't aspire so high. I am a very low form of human being; in my next incarnation I shall probably turn up a dog or a stone. *I can't divorce Christianity from other religions* [emphasis added]. The Jewish, for instance, is a wonderful religion – I had to investigate it very thoroughly for *Riders in the Chariot*. In my books I have lifted bits from various religions in trying to come to a better understanding; I've made use of religious themes and symbols. Now, as the world becomes more pagan, one has to lead people in the same direction in a different way. (qtd in Peter Wolfe, ed. 1990: 24–28)

Wolfe (1990) argues that White accepted God as *Other*:

He recognizes that, if God exists outside of human formulas and equations, no human path can lead to Him. The Divine Absence proves that the Divinity is not submissive or passive; He would have left a clearer trail to Himself had He wanted it to be discovered. White accepts God as *Other*. He rejects, in turn, any insolent natural theology that tries to pin Him down. Voss's horrifying ordeals in the desert show him abandoning the path of tradition and subordination in favor of new trackless courses. These courses disclose the complexity of the ordinary world while also intimating its uncanny, nightmarish aspects. What this entails is facing the enduring concerns of humanity – the persistence of the past, including the grip of family, the fight for freedom and self-definition, and the quest for truth in the shadow of death. While White knows no direct route into the heart of the cosmic mystery, he feels a magnetic attraction. His soul awakens. Pondering the groundwork of existence has helped him sense strange, new, acausal ties. (16–17)

Like many great thinkers before him, White tried to find or construct his own path to solving the problem of cosmic mystery learning from other. As he admitted in *Flaws in the Glass*, one of his grandest inspirations was Carl Gustav Jung, the Swiss psychoanalyst and alchemist. As it may generally be asserted, Jung was a Gnostic and, indirectly, White –

like many other Modernists such as Joseph Conrad, W. B. Yeats or Martin Heidegger – also followed this worldview, which basically is

the belief in an antithetical dualism of immateriality, which is good, and matter, which is evil. Gnosticism espouses radical dualism in human beings, the cosmos and divinity; the primordial unity of all immateriality; the yearning to restore that unity; the present entrapment of a portion of immateriality in human bodies; the need of knowledge to reveal to humans that entrapment; and the dependence of humans on a savior to reveal that knowledge to them. (Segal, Introduction to *The Gnostic Jung*, 1992: 3)

Gnosticism is both a pre-Christian, non-Christian as well as Christian phenomenon which makes it more universal and, to use a Jungian word, archetypal than any religious denomination in the history of humankind.

Nonetheless, majority of the characters White constructed accept God rather conventionally as does, for instance, Mrs Hare of *Riders in the Chariot* who believes that God is “the creator of a moral and a social system”:

Paddling in her own delicious shallows, it never occurred to Mrs Hare to raise her eyes to God to call Him as a formal witness. She accepted Him – who would have been so audacious not to? – but as the creator of a moral and a social system. At that level, she could always be relied on to put her hand in the purse, to help repair vestments, or support fallen girls, and her name was published for everyone to read, on a visiting card, inserted in a brass frame, on the end of her regular pew. (RC 26)

In the 20th-century middle-class Australian society it is a daring thing not to accept God dogmatically and doctrinally. Mrs Hare seems to be a self-victim of the system that was fundamentally built on silent, passive and unquestionable acceptance in the name of social order and centuries-long tradition imported from Home. *The Tree of Man* (1955) is, among other things, a study in God as seen through the eyes of the young man who, having no personal experience of God, had to rely on his parents’ visions:

In the drowsy bosom of the fire that he had made the young man remembered his parents and his mother’s God, who was a pale-blue gentleness. He had tried to see her God, in actual feature, but he had not. Now, Lord, he had said, lying with his eyes open in the dark. Sometimes he would hear his father, swearing and belching, the other side of the door. (TM 11)

Stereotypically, and very much in line with the mid-20th-century system of patriarchy, the female version of God – “his mother’s God” – is a representation of feebleness, frailty and, perhaps, also weakness under the guise of gentleness painted in pale-blue reserved for nobility to distinguish the mother teacher from the brute father, the blacksmith, whose God must have been so much different:

The God of Parker the father, the boy saw, was essentially a fiery God, a gusty God, who appeared between belches, accusing with a horny finger. He was a God of the Prophets. And, if anything, this was the God that the boy himself suspected and feared rather than his mother’s gentleness. Anyway, at the beginning. (TM 11)

The patriarchal God of the father is, naturally, powerful, adamant and revengeful: the masculine type to be feared, not to be admired. This was the God of the strong, who wanted to make it his way in the microcosm of their bushland: he was the primordial cause of all that had happened and probably of all that will happen:

At Willow Creek, God bent the trees till they streamed in the wind like beards, He rained upon the tin roofs till even elders grew thoughtful, and smaller, and yellower, by the light of smoking lamps, and He cut the throat of old Joe Skinner, who was nothing to deserve it, not that anyone knew of, he was a decent old cuss, who like to feed birds with crusts of bread. (TM 11–12).

The vision of almighty and revengeful God dominated the landscape over Willow Creek; certainly, it was not “a pale-blue gentleness” of the mother’s God, but rather the father’s punishing hand of God. It is worthwhile to note that the world – or microcosm – Patrick White is painting in *The Tree of Man* is simple and very basic: he most definitely wants to construct his landscape of Australian imagination from the elements that are fundamental and, at the same time, indispensable to make the picture complete. In narrating the story of the nation in a truly epic style, he narrates the story of a single Australian bushman, who shares his heroism with the landscape, natural environment, the setting or, shall we say, he is just part of it, not even the most important one. He is just one of the elements in the process of signification of the microcosm White calls “that part of bush” (9), which, on the other hand, presupposes a certain knowledge of it from the reader. What White does is he opens it to the

wider world, the world that has never had any experience or knowledge of it. White begins his narration in an epic, almost biblical, style with an exception for the main protagonists of his story: it is a cart, the trees and the horse:

A cart drove between the two big stringybarks<sup>3</sup> and stopped. These were the dominant trees in that part of the bush, rising above the involved scrub with the simplicity of true grandeur. So the cart stopped, grazing the hairy side of a tree, and the horse, shaggy and stolid as the tree, sighed and took root. (TM 9)

The opening is truly grand and puzzling, perhaps, not only because of the figurative language (the cart grazed the hairy side of a tree and the horse sighed and took root) but because of a scenery, the setting: the two native Australian trees – eucalypts – playing the role of, as if it were, an arc of triumph towering over others, and the cart as a chariot (as it seems, White’s favourite vehicle, later utilised in *Riders in the Chariot*), calling to mind memorable ingressions to a variety of ancient cities by triumphant conquerors or prophets (Jesus’ ingression to Jerusalem springs to mind among scores of others); yet, it is not the rider or, at least, the carter who focuses the attention in the paragraph. Simply, it is the cart that is animate or even animalistic, and the horse that is plant-like (stolid, impassive, concealing emotions and, like a tree, it takes root). With an eye on a hyperbole, it may be argued that the world has been created or, more precisely since there is no indication of the primeval cause or the maker, the world has come to be, has arrived to its final destination and stopped in order to be, to last, to endure. The world is one, as it seems, and lives in harmony, exchanging roles and functions. No sign of civilisation, no sign of human or divine interference.

If we compare this with the opening of a traditional (white) Australian bush narrative, the classic, *The Drover’s Wife*, by Henry Lawson (1867–1922), published in *Bulletin* on 23 July, 1892, we shall undoubtedly be able to tell the difference between the two ways of constructing an image of Australian native landscape:

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<sup>3</sup> stringybark Austral. (a) (the bark or wood of) any of various eucalypts, e.g. *Eucalyptus obliqua* and *E. muellerana*, having bark which splits into long tough fibres; (b) colloq. an inhabitant of the outback, an uncouth backwoodsman (SOED, CD-ROM).

The two-roomed house is built of round timber, slabs, and stingy-bark, and floored with split slabs. A big bark kitchen standing at one end is larger than the house itself, veranda included.

The bush all around – bush with no horizons, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten, native apple-trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few she-oaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilization – a shanty on the main road. (1)

The difference is striking even though there are lots of similarities in terms of individual items, such as stingy-bark or bush, but the whole concept of the landscape is poles apart. Firstly, the emphasis is on a man-made construction, that is, a house: “two-roomed” and “floored,” suggestive of a higher level of white Australian civilisation, not just a cottage, hut or chalet. The fact that the kitchen is, paradoxically, larger than a house itself is a proof that it is a family house since, with no sitting rooms, the life of families with children is normally led in the kitchen. Secondly, “[t]he bush all around – bush with no horizons” indicates a state of certain helplessness on the part of the narrator in the face of nature, the nature which seems to be endless, unlimited, unconquerable. The apple-trees of which the bush apparently consists in Lawson’s description are modified by negative adjectives such as “stunted” (diminutive, undersized, underdeveloped), “rotten” (decayed, putrid, decomposed) but also by “native,” the word that in this description acquires, as a result of its context, a negative connotation. The narrator’s eye longs for white civilisation, being tired of the bush’s monotony and the landscape’s flatness, and again, for him, a shanty is a sign of civilisation.

Patrick White’s imagination works diversely: his narration of the land is dynamic, with a plethora of active verbs (“drove,” “stopped,” “grazing,” “sighed,” “took”), and the vision of the trees is full of appreciation for them (“rising above the involved scrub with the simplicity of true grandeur”). He is able to create an unusual atmosphere in his epic novel:

The man who sat in the cart got down. He rubbed his hands together because already it was cold, a curdle of cloud in a pale sky, and copper in the west. On the air you could smell the frost. As the man rubbed his hands, the friction of cold skin intensified the coldness of the air and the solitude of that place. Birds looked from twigs and the eyes of animals were drawn to what was happening. The man lifting a bundle from the cart. A dog lifting his leg on an anthill. The lip drooping on the sweaty horse.



Then the man took an axe and struck at the side of a hairy tree, more to hear the sound than for any other reason. And the sound was cold and loud. The man struck at the tree, and struck until several white chips had fallen. He looked at the scar in the side of the tree. The silence was immense. It was the first time anything like this had happened in that part of the bush. (9)

White’s concept of the genre, as he presented in *The Tree of Man* in particular, was a far cry from what was practised in Australia in his day:

As an avowed opponent of what he called ‘duncoloured journalistic realism’, White, in *The Tree of Man*, was departing consciously and categorically from the kind of fiction Lawson and especially his inferior acolytes wrote. All the stereotypes of Australian bush fiction can be found in *The Tree of Man* – drought, floods, bushfire, isolation, and pioneering, uncommunicative and seemingly taciturn people – but these exist in the narrative not as quasi-historical emblems, ways of seeing ‘what it was like in those days’, but as opportunities for the exploration of the ‘extraordinary’, which White sought to find behind the dun-coloured familiar scenes, faces and standard trials, failures and survivals. This exploration had been prompted by reactions he had experienced in the years following his return to Australia from Europe. (Matthews in Pierce 2009, ed. 355)

Like in his next novels, White explores what is, as if it were, beyond the ordinariness of the characters presented, trying to find, as closely as possible, the essence of their existence, beliefs, behaviours that would allow them to be viewed as extraordinary, as being above what he countless of times criticised as mediocre, average – the Australian emptiness. He writes about serious matters, such as God and alcoholism, with irony, reservedness, sometimes even with sarcasm: “‘Stan,’ said his mother once, ‘you must promise to love God, and never to touch a drop.’ ‘Yes,’ said the boy, for he had had experience of neither, and the sun was in his eyes” (TM 11).

Brian Matthews offers a conclusive statement about the landscape of Australian imagination, alongside the more general concept of the nature of location White outlined in *The Tree of Man*:

Such was the breadth and power of *The Tree of Man*, however, that it seemed to accomplish what no other Australian fiction before it had done. The force of imagination, intuition and symbolism are combined with a subtle use of natural change – the pace and detail of the action are governed by the changing seasons, beginning with the growth and promise of spring. This

suggests not just the life and times of Stan and Amy Parker but gives a sense of Australia's growth from, for better or worse, a kind of remote and unchallenged innocence to the complexities and deceptions of the modern world. (in Pierce 2009, ed. 355)

White expertly represented a transition of Australian imagination and individual destiny and, as Carolyn Bliss observes in her *Patrick White's Fiction* (1986), "[he] uses the landscape of the Australian interior as a metaphor for the quest towards an understanding of human limitation and the greater reality which transcends them" (4). This limitation is certainly noticeable in *The Tree of Man*, but is even more dramatically presented in *Voss* or *A Fringe of Leaves* where landscape stands as a symbol of discovery and Australia as man's powerful opponent.

## Christianity

It seems obvious that the most dominant of all contemporary religions present in Patrick White's writing is Christianity, though not orthodox or dogmatic and most certainly closer to what we understand as Gnosticism, encompassing also pre-Christian and clearly non-Christian beliefs, such as Judaism or Buddhism. In Introduction to *The Eye in the Mandala. Patrick White: A Vision of Man and God* (1976), Peter Beatson declares that his

approach is more intimately related to Christianity than to any other single creed as White appears to have closer affinities with this than other religions. But if White is a Christian (and this is by no means certain) his Christianity is not orthodox, and readers must be prepared for departures from accepted Christian dogmas. White has clothed his religious sensibility in garments borrowed from many cultures, chosen according to the needs of his art and message. (2)

White's critique of Christianity consists basically in the construction of his Christian characters who are in no circumstances good advocates of their creed; on the contrary, they rather make a laughing stock of themselves and the religion to which they apparently adhere. With some exceptions like *Voss* or *Himmelfarb*, the majority of the characters in his novels are Christian but the group is not homogenous: the good

Christians are visionaries but they are weak and vulnerable unlike the wicked ones who are dominant and lack genuine spirituality. In *Riders in the Chariot*, frictions can be noticed with the appearance of Mrs Jolley, the housekeeper, at Xanadu. Herself being an arrogant and matronly woman, she attacked Miss Hare whom she regarded as a bad girl:

“Are you a Christian?”

“Ah,” sighed Miss Hare. “It would not be for me to say even if I understand exactly what that means.”

“I am,” said Mrs Jolley. “I attended the C. of E. ever since I was a kiddy.” [...] You do believe in *something*, don’t you?”

Miss Hare hesitated. Then she said, very slowly, “I believe. I cannot tell you what I believe in, any more than what I am. It is too much. I have no proper gift. Of words, I mean. Oh, yes, I believe! I believe in what I see, and what I cannot see. I believe in a thunderstorm, and wet grass, and patches of light, and stillness. There is such a variety of good. On earth. And everywhere.” (74)

Mrs. Jolly’s declaration may and should be interpreted as the author’s openly hostile rejection of a formalised religion expressed in a contemptuous abbreviation “the C. of E.” (the Church of England), which acquires an additional dimension in the mouth of a decidedly negative character as Mrs Jolly is. It stands in contrast with Miss Hare’s naïve spirituality, a kind of post-romantic pronouncement of faith in nature and its forces, in primeval goodness existing on earth before any formal religions were established. Her credo, nonetheless, is strongly based on the biblical account of the world, the organic unity of the things visible and invisible. And again, as it is frequently observable in White, the weak female character, as Mary is, expresses her disbelief in words’ power to convey the truth of the world and individual identity; his idea is rather to concentrate on intuitive mode of perception of the world, as if he were trying to postulate the come back to the (Romantic) idea of child’s innocence as a proper way in which the world should be legislated.

White was certainly not rigid in the sense of religious truths and commandments: his most likely aim as demonstrated in his numerous writings was to refresh the formula of belief and make it more human- and landscape-oriented and that is why he searched incessantly to find some other solutions to existential problems other than offered by established Christian churches. He even looked to the East, to Buddhism and,

following Jung, to Hindu philosophy which was an important element in his understanding of the role of symbolism and the unconscious.

### **Freud's influence**

Jung saw Freudian theory of unconscious as incomplete, he agreed with Freud's model of the unconscious – personal unconscious – however added to it, the underlying, collective unconscious. The main difference between the two is that Freudian unconscious is mischievous in a sense that it stores repressed emotions, feelings and desires that may come to fore in least expected moments, whereas Jung considered the collective unconscious as a fairly positive phenomenon. In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1990 [1976]), he argues, “A more or less superficial layer of the unconscious is undoubtedly personal. I call it the *personal unconscious*. But this personal unconscious rests upon a deeper layer, which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn. This deeper layer I call the *collective unconscious*” (3). In White's fiction – principally his novels – the unconscious functions on these two levels: personal and collective and/or the blend of both. A general thesis that may be formulated is that even though most of his major characters exhibit the features of collective unconscious, they are characteristically individual as well, especially the characters based on the author himself, that is Waldo and Arthur of *The Solid Mandala*.

### **Jung's History of the Psyche**

Jung divides the psychological history of humanity into four stages: primitive, ancient, modern and contemporary. Contrary to Freud, he believes that unconsciousness is original and natural in humans since we are born unconscious, therefore, consciousness – the starting point for Freud – arises out of unconsciousness. Consciousness, as awareness of oneself as a subject, develops slowly in humans and that is why the ego – the centre of consciousness – was weak in primitive peoples, the result of which was the projection of their unconscious onto the world and the creation of the religious world in the process. Primitive man was not able

to trace down cause and effect sequences of what had happened in their world but rather believed that events were willed by gods. As Jung has it in “Archaic Man,”:

Thanks to our one-sided emphasis on so-called natural causes, we have learned to differentiate what is subjective and psychic and what is objective and “natural.” For primitive man, on the contrary, the psychic and the objective coalesce in the external world. In the face of something extraordinary it is not he who is astonished, but rather the thing which is astonishing. ... What we would call the powers of imagination and suggestion seem to him invisible forces which act on him from without. ... Primitive man is unpsychological. Psychic happenings take place outside him in an objective way. Even the things he dreams about are real to him; that is his only reason for paying attention to dreams. ... The simple truth is that primitive man is somewhat more given to projection than we because of the undifferentiated state of his mind and his constant inability to criticize himself. (63–65)

The archaic man’s invisible, external forces are now just the power of imagination that act out the roles assigned in the past to divinities, replacing thus gods or – as it has been in the Western civilisation since more or less the later nineteenth century – God, the Platonic Supreme Being. White’s beliefs in dreams, as reflected in the characters like *Himmelfarb* of *Riders* or *Le Mesurier* of *Voss*, are his attempts to revive the pre-Modernist faith in the unity of man and God, the visible and invisible, where imagination assumes the role of the latter. Himself being largely a man of paradox, he, on the one hand, he accepted the painful Modernist fragmentation of human mind alongside man’s total disintegration and the collapse of traditional (Victorian) values like family, marriage, children, but, on the other hand, he was an avid believer in the things from the remote past that were supposed to bring back the long lost bond between the visible and invisible, the real and imaginary.

## The Collective Unconscious and the Shadow

Jung has invented the notion of collective unconscious to include all primordial desires and impressions common to mankind, and it is the collective unconscious where the archetypes – the fundamental motifs and images – reside. These central images constantly appear and re-appear in

myths and legends worldwide. From the **impure**, from the Freudian id, to the **perfected**, to the superego: Jung creatively developed the Freudian notion of the id into which all rejected ideas – impurities – are removed, repressed. The social, religious and moral norms worked out by societies in a given period of time operate as stabilizers of what is right, true and acceptable, which at the same moment demarcates the territory of what is wrong, untrue and unacceptable. The id, the unconscious is, therefore, this part of human mind – we are forced to believe – of which we should be ashamed: our evil, immoral, disgraceful and ugly part. Jung strongly objected such a view:

Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it embodies in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is. If an inferiority is conscious, one always has a chance to correct it. Furthermore, it is constantly in contact with other interests, so that is continually subjected to modifications. But if it is repressed and isolated from consciousness, it never gets corrected, and is liable to burst forth suddenly in a moment of unawareness. At all counts, it forms an unconscious snag, thwarting our most well-meant intentions. (in Samuels et al. 138)

As a strong advocate of human fundamental unity, White never rejected ugliness, even though he might have never liked or appreciated it; on the contrary, his characters that were supposed to change – if not save – the world have notoriously been presented as ugly, mad or morally or religiously reprehensive. Thinking in terms of binary oppositions – or Derridian violent hierarchies – evil seems, therefore, an indispensable compliment to good, ugliness to beauty, madness to reason, the problem being what preceded what: evil goodness or goodness evil. White would rather say, after Jung among others, that first we, as humans or souls, are evil so that we may become good. The genuine path of human progress leading to perfection, therefore, takes as a point of departure the impure soul and finishes off as perfected soul, thus travelling – in Freudian terms – from the id to the superego, overcoming the ego on its way (the Nietzschean feeling of happiness – to overcome oneself, cf. his *The Will to Power*).

## Collective unconscious and archetypes

Collective unconscious means that there is some *universal datum*, that is, every human being has been endowed with this psychic archetype-layer since birth. One cannot acquire this stratum by education or other conscious effort because it is an innate and universal library of human knowledge, or archive, to use a term from Michel Foucault's glossary; the very *transcendental wisdom* that guides mankind. One does not individually develop collective unconscious, rather inherits it. It consists of pre-established forms, i.e. archetypes, which are constituted by the contents of the collective unconscious and are psychic innate dispositions to experience and represent basic human behaviour and situations. They do not have well defined shapes and are nothing else but a pre-shaping possibility or an innate tendency of shaping and transforming things, including the individual consciousness, the ideas and concepts on the ethical, moral, religious and cultural levels. Jung argues that archetypes existed in early Christianity as the *Imago Dei* – God-image in man and, in dealing with them, “we are dealing with archaic or – I would say – primordial types, that is, with universal images that have existed since the remotest times” (1990: 5).

Archetypes resemble instincts in that they cannot be recognized as such until they are manifested by intention or action; for example, the mother-child relationship is governed by the mother archetype and the father-child – by the father archetype. Birth, death, power and failure are controlled by archetypes, as are religious and mystical experiences. In all cultures and religions, archetypes manifest themselves through archetypal images in dreams and visions. Therefore, even though myth and fairy tale are expressions of the archetype, they possess the evolved historical formula but lack psychological depth, which archetypes do: “The archetype is essentially an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived, and it takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear” (1990: 5) – a very much Patrick White's case whose behaviour was governed by archetypes being basically the contents of collective unconscious (his relations with parents), modified, transformed or “coloured” by his individual consciousness. Jung reminds us in this place that we have to be capable of consciousness in order to recognise the contents of the

unconscious, which – viewed personally – are mainly “the *feeling-toned complexes* [emphasis original]” (4). White’s personal unconscious, as we have been striving to demonstrate, was principally constituted by – to borrow a phrase from Jung – his feeling-toned complexes: shame, resentment, envy, hatred, to name just a few, in relation, in the first place, with the mother (the “titular mother”), then the father, the sister, the nanny (the “real mother”) and other members of his extended family.

Thus, in order to achieve the wholeness of his disintegrated personality, White discovers and then uses the most important of all archetypes, that is, the Self (Mandala), which is the archetype of the Centre of the psychic person, his/her totality or wholeness. The Centre in Jung’s psychology is made of the unity of conscious and unconscious to be reached through the individuation process (another important term – more on Mandala in Chapter Six).

Animus, in turn, is the archetype of reason and spirit in women and forms the male aspect of the female psyche, as the anima is the female aspect of male psyche (for instance, as in Voss–Laura relationship). When identified with the animus (animus-inflated, Jung’s term), women develop an excessive rational drive, which may end up in excessive criticism and stubbornness. In animus-inflated women with strong interest in intellectual matters, however, we find the need to impose and maintain a rigorous and schematic list of values judged the most important, which they want to impose on others (Laura as Voss’s anima, alongside other related issues, will be discussed in subsequent chapters in the context of the Whitean characters).

Apart from Jungian psychology, White – following Jung’s path – also started to be interested in Buddhism, which is the word of Sanskrit origin, meaning the state of being enlightened [awake, know, perceive, SOED, CD-ROM] and now denotes the religious and philosophical system founded by the Buddha Gautama, teaching that all human sorrows arise from desire and can be eradicated by following the disciplines of his eightfold path. Interestingly, we may notice an unexpected affinity between the Sanskrit “Buddha” and the Australian Aboriginal “budda” noun. Austral. Also -ah. [ORIGIN Wiradhuri and Yuwaalaraay (an Australian Aboriginal language of New South Wales) budaa], which stands for an E. Australian tree, *Eremophila mitchelli*, with aromatic timber resembling sandalwood (SOED, CD-ROM).



Another idea that may be attributed to Buddhism is **samsara**, that is, the cycle of birth and death. Sentient beings crave pleasure and are averse to pain from birth to death. In being controlled by these attitudes, they perpetuate the cycle of conditioned existence and suffering (saṃsāra), and produce the causes and conditions of the next rebirth after death. Each rebirth repeats this process in an involuntary cycle, which Buddhists strive to end by eradicating these causes and conditions, applying the methods laid out by the Buddha and subsequent Buddhists.

Apart from some of the elements of the concept of samsara such as pain and constant suffering experienced throughout most of the lives of his characters, White also used the Sanskrit word from Hindu mythology, **avatar**, denoting the descent of a god to earth in incarnate form, in which he believed. He also believed that an avatar of those from whom the land had been taken invested him: “Years later I persuaded myself that I hadn’t been acting merely as a selfish child, but that an avatar of those from whom the land had been taken had invested one of the unwanted whites” (FG 16). He wished to reconcile the ghosts of the prehistoric Aboriginal Australia with those of the newcomers who, though unwanted, took over the land alongside the spirits of the place. Yet, he was aware that the process of reconciliation would be long and painful, demanding human sacrifice, suffering and blood since the spirits of the interior, like the Old Testament God, were bloodthirsty and required sacrifice of man’s best, the most daring, the most powerful, the most courageous people like Voss.



## CHAPTER FIVE

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### Patrick White's Australia: Desert, Vision and Sacrifice in the Heart of *Terra Nullius*

He was sitting in the middle of nowhere. Which, naturally, was of too fantastical  
a nature, too expressive of his nothingness.  
Patrick White, *Voss* 215

Patrick White continued his religious, symbolic and metaphysical exploration in his first truly successful novel, *Voss* (1957), in which he attempted to dismantle the myths associated with the national identity of Australia as a “lucky country,” the country of success, sandy beaches and affluence of material goods. In effect, what he did was to show that Australia is a desert country of suffering, sacrifice and death. In the transcendental process of self-knowledge, which positions an individual as the spiritual centre of the world, White endeavoured to demonstrate that man can only understand the universe if he is close to nature, the land, the dust – the original elements from which he descends. Therefore, there is this Jungian insistence on lakes, rivers or other bodies of water that represent in mythology archetypes residing in the collective unconscious.

#### **Mapping the Emptiness**

One of the most popular myths circulating in Australia in the nineteenth century was a conviction that there must be a huge lake in the middle of a largely unexplored wilderness. At that time, most of Australia was *terra nullius* and *tabula rasa*, nobody's land that had a clean card – was not mapped and up for grabs. Early colonists created an illusion that there

was an inland lake in the Australian wilderness, but E. J. Eyre, one of the early explorers of central Australia, who crossed overland from Adelaide to King George's Sound in the years 1840–1841, personally did not believe in it. White maintained that E. J. Eyre was one of several sources of inspiration for him to write *Voss*:

Afterwards [that is, after writing *The Tree of Man*, RW] I wrote *Voss*, possibly conceived during the early days of the Blitz, when I sat reading Eyre's *Journal* in a London bed-sitting room. Nourished by months spent trapesing backwards and forwards across the Egyptian and Cyrenaican deserts, influenced by the arch-megalomaniac of the day, the idea finally matured after reading contemporary accounts of Leichhardt's expeditions and A. H. Chisholm's *Strange New World* on returning to Australia. (PWS 15)

Interestingly enough, the actions of the novel's main protagonist, Voss, are governed by apparently incompatible and contrasting principles: rationality, logic and calculation on the one hand, and fantasy, imagination and fiction on the other, which, to a certain extent, can be attributed to the Jungian concept of confrontation of the conscious with the unconscious, also in the sphere of visions that Voss and his companions had in the wilderness. All this presupposed an active imagination on the part of the characters in their attempt to create mystical reality, that is, the one that transcends human understanding, goes beyond the rational, the material. This, of course, gives another dimension to the novel: a transcendental, mystical, spiritual and mythopoeic one that relies fundamentally on the belief that spiritual experience is essential to human well-being, to its wholeness, completeness, integrity. Life – and in this respect White follows Jung closely – has a spiritual purpose: material goals are not enough to make human life purposeful, thus, our essential and the most fundamental task is to utilise our innate potential, to make most of it, to ascend the ladder of perfection, to transform the impure soul to perfected soul, to make lead into gold (cf. Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*, 1944).

A voyage through various mapped and unmapped places, as the plot unfolds, eventually leads the expedition into the murderous heart of physical and existential emptiness. Apparently, there is a clash between these two spaces, the mapped, civilised one, embodied by white people's homesteads, and the unmapped, barbaric one, represented by the rest of the Australian land, that is, the indigenous people's land: bush and

desert, treated by the colonisers as *Terra Nullius*, the land to be conquered. In this symbolism of human fate and crucifixion, in Voss's symbolic journey of exploration through desert, the hero dies from the wounds inflicted by one of his favourite disciples, an Aborigine, who cuts his head off with the knife he had given him, which gives the narration a specifically Christian, messianic character.

It is quite remarkable to note that for his main hero White has chosen a German explorer, modelling him on the figure of Ludwig Leichhardt who had perished mysteriously in the Australian desert in 1848, travelling from Moreton Bay (Queensland) to Perth (Western Australia), that is, from East to West Coast of Australia, in the company of seven other men, including two Aborigines. There were at least three theories, which tried to explain his disappearance: one, saying that he and his party were killed by Aborigines, the other that they drowned in a sudden flood, or that they all died of thirst or starved to death. White utilised them all in Voss. Ulrich Voss, therefore, seems to be the Other of an average man, an average Australian: a stranger, a newcomer, a person who does not want to make profits from exploration of Australia, but wants to discover her and, at the same time, to discover himself.

### **Human mental emptiness**

Apart from the intellectual and artistic Australian emptiness of which White spoke in "The Prodigal Son," there stretched millions of square miles of Australian vast, unexplored, uncivilised territory, and his vast Australian desert possessed a symbolic meaning, too. As a location outside of colony, it became the other of civilisation, symbolising unbound freedom, unlimited possibilities, mystery and poetry – things Patrick White sought in his life. Voss enters the wilderness in order to be only with himself and, like Nietzsche, to overcome himself, which is supposed to give him the feeling of happiness and the time for self-reflection. Desert, then, becomes a symbol of purification, Aristotelian *catharsis*. Characteristically, when approached by Bonner, the Sydney sponsor of his expedition and asked whether he had studied the map of the Colony, Voss unflinchingly answers: "The map? ... I will first make it" (V 20). His arrogance seems to be a proof of his power, the power over Australia and

himself since it is evident that the continent, read metaphorically, is as vast as his ego.

Generally, Voss looks as if he were a typical character in White's novels which frequently present a vast range of misfits or eccentrics, people somehow separated from the mainstream society. Voss has no roots, faith in neither God nor any other traditional values. He is uncertain of his place in the world and of his own nature; he is an egoist in search of his own self. This, alongside his insistence upon self-knowledge, isolation and egocentric individuality, makes him truly transcendental in the conviction that self-knowledge leads to all knowledge since man's mental and intellectual structure duplicates the structure of the world. This neo-Platonic duality had its reflection in the constructs like Freud's id and superego, Jung's shadow and persona and Hindu Atman and Brahma, all of them leading from the knowledge of an individual to a cosmic understanding and found their issue in the literary output of the American transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. Their contrastive operational tendencies – closely followed by Voss – were basically twofold: one, the expansive and self-transcending tendency – the drive towards embracing the whole world and be one with the world, and the other – the contracting and self-asserting tendency, which Voss originally showed in his initial actions – the wish to remain isolated, separate and unique – the feature of great individuals, whose aim is to change the world and yet to stay unseen. His journey of exploration, his tour de force, takes him from the seclusion of the self, from self-imposed internal exile, through the gradual extension of self-knowledge to the point where he is able to embrace the whole world, be with the world and become the world. This brings us to one of the most baffling paradoxes in White's fiction, which refers not only to Voss but to most of his other main characters who he duplicates in other novels: one has to deny oneself in order to reclaim oneself. As Bliss (1986) has it,

the self must be sought and found only to be relinquished, that the individuality so powerfully expressed by his major characters paradoxically enables them to seek a state of understanding in which selfhood is finally subsumed. In a further permutation of the paradox, the surrender of self which this understanding demands somehow functions to permit the character's fullest realization of the essential self; that is, he becomes most himself when he least seeks to be. In the terms of the related Christian paradox, he finds his life by

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losing it, or as Emerson put it, "The man who renounces himself, comes to himself."<sup>1</sup>

Voss had to relinquish his self and his life to gain something far more important – to gain the world, to transform his impure soul into the soul of gold in his long march into the "Dead Heart" of golden Australia. In the process, he realises that he is not the Messiah, that he cannot claim a divine status and then he is really humbled. In his humbleness, however, he is able to, he is nearest to becoming one.

William Walsh (1976) sees – correctly – the will as the dynamics of his actions and, on the whole, the novel itself:

The impulse of Voss's actions, and the inaugurating concept of the novel, is not any general belief or idea but the pure shape of the will, a force that has no content but only direction. The compulsion which Voss feels to cross the continent comes from the desire to fulfil his own nature or, more correctly and more narrowly, from the force of his own will. The conquering of the desert may seem natural to others for reasons of economics or geography or knowledge, or it may seem simply appropriate as it does, for example, to Mr Bonner, supplied thereby with the pleasures of patronage. Voss is willing to make any outward accommodation to such ideas if it helps him in his primary purpose. For him the expedition is a personal wrestling with the continent, and the continent is the only opponent his pride acknowledges as worthy of his will. 'Deserts prefer to resist history and develop along their own lines.' They have an intrinsic hostility to submission and they are therefore the proper target of Voss's will. (13)

It is evident that there is a Schopenhauerian/Nietzschean trait in seeing life as (pure) will. "This expedition, Mr Voss," said Laura Trevelyan suddenly, 'this expedition of yours is pure will'" (V 69). However, in a letter of 1973, White denies any affinity with Nietzsche: "I've read very little Nietzsche – some of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* when I was at Cambridge. He doesn't appeal to me" (Björkstén 1976: 59). Notwithstanding what the author's arguments may be, *Voss* as the novel of imagination, undoubtedly offers "[t]he delight of entering the vastly distant foreign pre-historic land, accessible [so far] only through books, and finding the whole horizon painted with new colors and possibilities –," as Nietzsche put it in his *The Will to Power* (829).

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen E. Whicher (Ed.). *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1957: 102.

The basic metaphor of the novel is, though, a voyage of discovery as exploration of human nature, of man's true identity and his relation to the world. But it is also a voyage of discovery of the identity of Australia as a country in a more psychological than physical sense. As Judith Wright famously noticed, "Australia is still, for us, not a country but a state – or states of mind. We do not yet speak from within her, but from outside"<sup>2</sup>. The point to prove this statement is the fact that the European arrivals – both early and contemporary – have in a prevailing majority of cases decided to settle down along the coastline; therefore, the vision of Australia they had got has always been from the outside.

In his essay, "Landscape and the Australian Imagination," Bruce Clunies Ross presents a similar vision: "After about two hundred years of settlement, white Australians have created an urban (and suburban) civilisation around less than half the coastline of the country. Most of the population lives there and has done for three generations or more, for within the confines of the coastal strip, Australia was a rapidly urbanised country. This littoral civilisation is predominantly outward-looking"<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, in D. H. Lawrence's highly acclaimed novel, *Kangaroo*, the Englishman, Richard Lovatt Somers, typically describes Australia by saying that "Colonies make for *Outwardness* ... They all merge to the outside, away from the centre" (146–147).

And even though explorers like Leichhardt or Burke and Wills kept pushing into the centre of the continent, majority of the Australians lingered, both in topographical and mental sense, on Australia's outskirts. To resolve this impasse one has to get rid of the European way of thinking, and, radically, what is required is, in Wright's words, "the death of the European mind, its absorption into the soil it has struggled against" (Wright 335). Assuming that by "the death of the European mind" we understand a certain radical cutting off the ties with Europe, with the rational mind, therefore, there must arise a question of what we shall have instead, what sort of mental space we are going to have, or maybe it will just be an emptiness?

<sup>2</sup> Judith Wright, "The Upside-Down Hut" in: *The Writer in Australia: A Collection of Literary Documents 1856–1964*, ed. John Barnes, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1969: 331–336.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Clunies Ross, "Landscape and the Australian Imagination" in: *Mapped but Not Known. The Australian Landscape of Imagination. Essays and Poems Presented to Brian Elliott*. Ed P. R. Eaden and F. H. Mares. Netley: Wakefield Press, 1986: 224.



Michio Ochi is probably right when he argues that one has to have a great void inside oneself – what White calls being one's own desert – so that it could, later, reflect the country of the mind: "It seems one needs to get isolated among others before one is blessed with the vantage to look into the heart of one's own country; one must have a great void inside oneself that will be a mirror on which in time 'the country of the mind' will reflect itself"<sup>4</sup>.

### Landscape/spaces/places

The uniqueness of the Australian landscape is one of the predominant themes of the novel. As Walsh has it:

[t]here is in White an almost Wordsworthian sense both of the physical quality of a landscape and its spiritual suggestiveness. It is one of the unifying elements in the novel. At first the country through which the expedition goes has been comforting and easy or exciting and exhilarating. At the Sandersons and Rhine Towers there was a river valley with brown fish snoozing upon the stones, to get to which they had made their way through 'a gentle, healing landscape'. Now at Jildra it is beautiful in a wilder way: 'the wind bent the grass into tawny waves, on the crests of which floated the last survivors of flowers, and shrivelled and were sucked under by the swell' (165). (1976: 27–28)

Further into the bush land, the expedition starts to realise that the thirst begins to dry both them and the countryside. In Walsh's words:

As the day grows, they see the river dry and greenish brown pot-holes, and the vastness of the dun country. Voss becomes aware of the infinite Australian distance and, in balance with it, of the immensity of his presumption, and also of that other distance, the one between 'aspiration and human nature'. The expedition advances into this new country, where exquisite black spiders cling to their hair and the air is beginning to smell of dust, and where the most personal hopes and fears are reduced until they are of little accord, and the men look back in amazement at their actual lives. (1976: 28)

Life for the men becomes the more extreme the farther they march into the heart of the unknown land. "The ground contains hardly a suggestion

<sup>4</sup> Michio Ochi, *Patrick White's "Voss"*, published in Japan, available at ADFA Library, Canberra, Australia, 1974: 646.

of leaf or grass or dew” (Walsh 28). In the “heartless” desert, as Laura describes it in a letter, Voss uses his memories, dreams and letters to maintain a link with her, civilisation and sanity. This sharpens the reader’s sense of isolation, distance and danger of the expedition. He is “reserved for further struggles, to wrestle with rocks, to bleed if necessary, to ascend” (in Walsh 217).

### **Mental void: becoming one’s own desert**

White constructs his novel on the principle that Voss and Laura are counterparts, the Jungian masculine and feminine parts of a human in their wholeness. Voss believes that others are unnecessary and Laura shows haughty self-reliance and they decide to maintain a mystic communion with each other until Voss’s death by decapitation. Two individuals, the shadow and the persona, a mask for the “collective psyche” that pretends individuality, get together in order to form one mystic person in the process of individuation, the Jungian process of integrating the opposites.

After initial coldness between them, “Voss sees that Laura is not only his friend and ally but the only person present capable of grasping the splendour of, as well as the particular flaw in, his undertaking, its inhuman grandeur and its human meanness” (1976: 18). “Voss could have been the Devil,” she seemed to remember, “if at the same time he had not resembled a most unfortunate human being” (414).

Brought up in a prosperous, mercantile Sydney family, Laura shows some clear signs of isolation and alienation when she declares that “[Australia] is not my country, although I have lived in it” (V 29). Ochi observes that “[s]uch an emptiness craves to be filled. For long, she has been secretly expecting ‘some similar mind’ to turn up – not a fellow sufferer to share pity with, but a replenisher of the hollow Colony into the entity that deserves to be her own country. And she finds Voss at last” (1974: 645). The stranger, foreigner, outsider, by creating his own mental desert, he manifests his indestructibility and thus, unintentionally, becomes a role model for an Australian middle-class woman:

It was clear. She saw him standing in the glare of his own brilliant desert. Of course, He was Himself indestructible.

And she did then begin to pity him. She no longer pitied herself, as she had for many weeks [...]. Love seemed to return to her with humility. Her weakness was delectable. (V 90)

As argued before, Laura refocuses herself from her own ego onto Voss's: she relinquishes herself now in order to gain the fullest realization of the essential self in the future. In love, no matter how it is understood here, she humiliates herself by sacrificing her own personality and her weakness, her vulnerability makes her "delectable," luscious, mouth-watering, that is to say, truly feminine and complacent. Elsewhere, Laura makes an unexpected confession to Voss in a really transcendental language with a substantial dose of a typically Whitean style and imagery:

'You are so vast and ugly,' Laura Trevelyan was repeating the words: 'I can imagine some desert, with rocks, rocks of prejudice, and, yes, even hatred. You are so isolated. This is why you are fascinated by the prospect of desert places, in which you will find your own situation taken for granted, or more than that, exalted. You sometimes scatter kind words or bits of poetry to people, who soon realize the extent of their illusion. Everything is for yourself. Human emotions, when you have them, are quite flattering to you. If those emotions strike sparks from others, that also is flattering. But most flattering I think, when you experience it, is the hatred, or even the mere irritation of weaker characters.'

'Do you hate me, perhaps?' asked Voss, in darkness.

'I am fascinated by you,' laughed Laura Trevelyan, with such candour that her admission did not seem immodest. '*You are my desert!*' (V 87-88)

Laura notices in Voss his isolation as a result of his egocentrism, individualism and the fascination of desert places, which makes him look and perform genuinely transcendental.

## Transcendental Communication

In seeking an original relation between man and the universe, Transcendentalism advocated solitude and nature. Voss complied with the requirements: he was all alone in the middle of nowhere and the only contact with human civilisation and his other feminine half, Laura, was through thoughts. Is such a way of communication possible? In his *Patrick White: A General Introduction* (1976), Ingmar Björkstén ponders

upon such a possibility, asserting that White's novels present a visionary outlook since

[p]erspectives are shifted; paradoxes, appearance and reality become difficult to tell apart. On one level the novels are allegories – for an age which no longer is accustomed to interpret parables. This results in their being regarded as abstract; *Voss* in particular has been the object of such criticism. But in the matter of the chief critical objection – namely, the telepathic communication between Laura and Voss – events have caught up with Patrick White. Today such communication is not hard to accept. White explains it as follows with reference to *Voss* in the *Southerly* interview: ESP research in recent years has surely proved that telepathic communication does exist. I'm continually receiving evidence of it myself. I'm convinced that life is built on co-incidence and strange happenings. (65)

Transcendental or telepathic communication, as contemporary science claims, is possible in specific conditions as free energy particles travelling in vacuum at the speed greater than light. Quantum theory, for instance, has shown that twin particles, separated by distance too large for any physical signals to pass between them, somehow seem to be able to communicate with each other. Another theory, the universal magnetism theory, argues that energy produced in a vacuum (Australian desert, to speak metaphorically in the context of the novel) becomes the electromagnetic wave. This subtler medium is composed of formative dust (the original element creative of the human), which constitutes the ultimate energy particles.

Voss created at least two spaces for such a kind of communication to be possible: the vacuum of an Australian desert and the other – the vacuum of his own mind and, thus, his journey into the desert was in fact a journey into his mental desert, his psychological emptiness, the void he desperately wanted to fill with a motivation to live.

It does not mean, however, that his attempt to conquer the external, physical space and the internal, psychological void was suicidal; on the contrary, the main goal of his doomed expedition was to get to know himself, to re-direct the outwardness of the look into inwardness, and to transfer/reflect the immensity of outer space into a compactness of human mind to uncover divinity residing within man, the spiritual side a Westerner tends to forget in modern times.

## Human Divinity: Man is King

It is important to recognise the transitions and stages that White considers fundamental for human divinity / divine humanity, that is, the transition from God to man, being man and man returning to God, all of which are presented in *Voss*. For instance, in Le Mesurier's notebook, *Voss* read:

Man is King. They hung a robe upon him, of blue sky. His crown was molten. He rode across his kingdom of dust, which paid homage to him for a season, with jasmine, and lilies, and visions of water. They had painted his mysteries upon the rock, but, afraid of his presence, they had run away. So he accepted it. He continued to eat distance, and to raise up the sun in the morning, and the moon was his slave at night. Fevers turned him from Man into God. (V 296)

The Christ symbolism is evident here: a robe of blue sky and the crown, all mingled with White's favourite imagery of jasmine and lilies and the Jungian archetype of water as a symbol of life. That it is *Voss* who is an Australian version of Christ is testified by apparently Aboriginal way of recording their narrative as paintings on the rocks. Being King of day and night, master of distance and marked by divine fevers, he turns from Man into God, from a material being into a Supreme Being, from a thing into an idea. Yet, man, like God, has got a dual, antagonistic nature. In the Prefatory Note to his *Answer to Job* (1991 [1958]), Carl Gustav Jung writes:

The most immediate cause of my writing the book is perhaps to be found in certain problems discussed in my book *Aion*, especially the problem of Christ as a symbolic figure and of the antagonism Christ–Antichrist, represented in the traditional zodiacal symbolism of the two fishes. In connection with the discussion of these problems and of the doctrine of Redemption, I criticized the idea of the *privatio boni* as not agreeing with the psychological findings. Psychological experience shows that whatever we call “good” is balanced by an equally substantial “bad” or “evil.” If “evil” is non-existent, then whatever there is must needs be “good.” Dogmatically, neither “good” nor “evil” can be derived from Man, since the “Evil One” existed before Man as one of the “Sons of God.” The idea of the *privatio boni* began to play a role in the Church only after Mani. Before this heresy, Clement of Rome taught that God rules the world with a right and a left hand, the right being Christ, the left Satan. Clement's view is clearly *monotheistic*, as it unites the opposites in one God.

Later Christianity, however, is dualistic, inasmuch as it splits off one half of the opposites, personified in Satan, and he is *eternal* in his state of damnation. This crucial question ... (whence evil?) forms the point of departure for the Christian theory of Redemption. It is therefore of prime importance. If Christianity claims to be a monotheism, it becomes unavoidable to assume the opposites as being contained in God. But we are confronted with major religious problem: the problem of Job. ...

Moreover, the study of medieval natural philosophy – of the greatest importance to psychology – made me try to find an answer to the question: what image of God did these old philosophers have? Or rather: how should the symbols which supplement their image of God be understood? All this pointed to a *complexio oppositorum* and thus recalled again the story of Job to my mind: Job who expected help from God against God. This most peculiar fact presupposes a similar conception of the opposites in God. (ix-x)

In *Riders in the Chariot*, we read a declaration of a unitary vision of good and evil: “The evil is also good, Miss Hare understood” (101), which negates The Catechism of Christian faith. In the second passage, Le Mesurier tries to prove to himself that he is like Voss:

I am looking at the map of my hand, on which the rivers rise to the North-east. I am looking at my heart, which is the centre. My blood will water the earth and make it green. Winds will carry legends of smoke; birds that have picked the eyes for visions will drop their secrets in the crevices of rock; and trees will spring up, to celebrate the godhead with their blue leaves. (V 296)

His hand is a real map – the map not drawn by human hand but naturally predestined to show the way. We see his transformation – or metamorphosis – from an anonymous explorer who, unlike Voss, will not make maps since he naturally possesses one, to an Australian Messiah whose hand is a map of new territories with so much desired rivers. Yet, most importantly, Le Mesurier, like Christ and Voss later on, is ready to pay the price of his life to make the land fertile with his blood, the wish articulated in D. H. Lawrence’s *Kangaroo* by Somers, an Englishman, who stated that “somebody will have to water Australia with their blood before it’s a real man’s country. The soil, the very plants seem to be waiting for it” (88).

Then, to make a complete cycle of transformation, Le Mesurier comes back to his material, bodily shape (“Until the sun delivered me from my body, the wind fretted my wretched ribs, my skull was split open by the green lightning.” V 297), and he is Man again:

Then I am not God, but Man. I am God with a spear in his side. So they take me, when the fires are lit, and the smell of smoke and the ash rises above the smell of dust. The spears of failure are eating my liver, as the ant-men wait to perform their little rites. O God, my God, if suffering is measured on the soul, then I am damned for ever. (V 297)

His return to a Christ-like figure (“God with a spear in his side”) is magnified by an allusion to the mythical figure of Prometheus, the creator of mankind, who was punished by Zeus for letting people have fire and, being chained to a mountain, a griffon-vulture ate at his liver all day long (“The spears of failure are eating my liver”). His vicarious suffering – the measure of his humanity – makes him both desperate and hopeless in the face of torture and death awaiting him, but these were just the sick vision of an insane man, as judged by Voss himself:

When Voss had finished the poem, he clapped the book together. ‘*Irrsinn!*’ said his mouth. He was protesting very gutturally, from the back of his throat, from the deepest part of him, from the beginning of his life. If a sick man likes to occupy himself in this fashion, he decided. But the sane man could not assert himself enough in the close cave. (V 297)

The German’s decapitation was prophesied by another of his white companions, Palfreyman, in a nightly vision of Voss’s sleep-walking. First, White builds an uncanny atmosphere in an unusual setting:

The sound of the strong feathers, heard again above the squeak of mice and groans of sleep in Boyle’s squalid shack, had almost freed the wakeful Palfreyman, when Voss rose. There he was, striped by moonlight and darkness, the stale air moving round him, very softly. Voss himself did not move. Rather was moved by a dream, Palfreyman sensed. Through some trick of moonlight or uncertainty of behaviour, the head became detached for a second and appeared to have been fixed upon a beam of the wooden wall. The mouth and the eyes were visible. Palfreyman shivered. Ah, Christ is an evil dream, he feared, and all my life I have been deceived. After the bones of the naked Christ had been drawn through the foetid room, by sheets of moonlight, and out of the doorway, the fully conscious witness continued to lie on his blanket, face to face with his own shortcomings and his greatest error. (V 177)

Voss’s detached head appearing on the beam to recall Jesus’s thorn-crowned head on the cross is convincing enough of divine character of

Voss and his future vicarious suffering and sacrifice for the white race. But, on the other hand, Palfreyman's declaration that Christ is an evil dream is an explicit declaration of doubt in regard to Christ's divinity and his manhood, looks like an attack aimed at his devout – almost scientific – Christianity. In a psychoanalytical way, White is trying to separate the unconscious from the conscious, saying that Palfreyman was fully conscious of what he saw; in other words, the split of the mind occurs *within* the character, not *without* him, that is to say, there is no fundamental opposition between the imaginary and the real, and the narration is itself realistic to the level of details such as smell (“the foetid room”), which makes it life-like.

In his attempts at drawing various mythic landscapes of the soul, White makes practical use of the Aboriginal myth of the diffusion and dispersion of souls after death in the process that can be referred to as dissolution of the self/soul, which runs counter to what he previously said about the perfected self in the context of the relationship between Voss and Laura:

This paradoxically perfected and surrendered self achieves both states through a process White depicts again and again as ‘dissolution’– that is, a process by which the self seems to melt and dissolve, abandoning, as White puts it, the condition of sculpture for that of music and thereby expanding until its limits approach those of the unifying all. This motion is enlarging and acquisitive, permitting the self somehow to appropriate its own uniqueness as it also absorbs the infinite further selves it must become. (Bliss 9)

Most probably, what is at stake is the difference between selves in terms of their potential, which, in the case of the shadow and the persona, Voss and Laura, is much higher than in case of single individuals like, for instance, Mrs Theodora Goodman of *The Aunt's Story* or Le Mesurier of *Voss*, who significantly notes in his book that

[t]owards evening they tear off a leg, my sweet, disgusting flesh of marzipan. They knead my heart with skinny hands. O God, my God, let them make from it a vessel that endures. Flesh is for hacking, after it has stood the test of time. The poor, frayed flesh. They chase the kangaroo, and when they have cut off his pride and gnawed his charred bones, they honour him in ochre on a wall. Where is his spirit? They say: it has gone out, it has gone away, it is everywhere. (V 297)



The reworking of an old Aboriginal myth, alongside the elements of the uncanny, so much favoured by White in his stylistic Gothicism, make the whole narration even more terrifying and serious, which is reminiscent of ancient tragedy and classical epic, strengthened by frequent invocations of God ("O God, my God"). There is this allusion to Jung's alchemy – a transformation from one substance into another by remoulding, reshaping, reforming – so Voss's heart turns into a vessel "that endures." And, finally, there is a spiritual dimension to his Christ-like prayer with a later twist of insanity:

O God, my God, I pray that you will take my spirit out of this my body's remains, and after you have scattered it, grant that it shall be everywhere, and in the rocks, and in the empty waterholes, and in the true love of all men, and in you, O God, at last. (V 297)

The scattering of the soul, though fundamentally unChristianlike, suggests a tempting possibility of eternal life in other form. It seems to assume, apart from its obvious spiritual dimension, some sort of existential form not only because of him realising that death is approaching one way or another, but also because of his fundamental disagreement with shallowness and flatness of life, its physicality and banality, which only love – "true love" – can change by giving to it a spiritual facet. And love here has got at least two meanings: "love of all men" – the divine, Christ-like love of all mankind, and Voss's love of Laura – transcendental, Neo-Platonic and sublime. The poet declares: "Now that I am nothing, I am, and love is the simplest of all tongues" (V 297), which is indicative of his being lower than God's (discontinuous versus Supreme Being), but, thanks to this, he is able to communicate with people using the language of love.

In line with Hinduism and Neoplatonism, White subscribes to the concept of spiritual progress that informs most of his protagonists also in *Voss*. On the one hand, we have Le Mesurier's emptying-out of the soul and Voss's amplification of the self in the direction of perfection and eternity. Transcendentalism helps his characters in their drive towards self-discovery and self-knowledge that is formative of their selves.

The concept of a mystery of unity of the world that came to fruition in *Voss* and was later elaborated in White's subsequent novel was born in his earlier novel, *Happy Valley*, but the context and the atmosphere

presented there is much gloomier, situated between cleavage and pain, "There is a mystery of unity about the world, that ignores itself, finding expression in cleavage and pain, the not-world that demands I [Oliver, one of the protagonists] shall run away from myself, that I too shall be a creature of cleavage and pain walking with my eyes closed" (HV 162). As it seems, this is an expression of an existential despair of the self that has to experience split and division from the rest of the world, which it is itself.

Ian Turner, one of the first Australian critics to ever comment on it, sees *Voss* as a parable ("The Parable of Voss" is the title of his article) and the title hero as an allegory of the historical Jesus, arguing that "Voss has his disciples, his persecutors and his betrayer; his agony and his reconciliation; his stigmata, and his crucifixion. He is the divinity who humbles himself before the least of his servants. And he troubles the minds of men, and they record his legend" (in Murray-Smith, ed., 1965: 71). Interestingly enough, he is very critical of the novel itself since it is, in his opinion, very un-Australian not only on the account of its apparent Gothicism but, primarily, because it is "exploring, in an Australian environment, a mind, a way of thinking, that is foreign territory to most Australians" (74). He argues that a rational realism would be much more characteristic of the Australian ways, where "human skill, hard grafting and a fair measure of luck" were the qualities that conquered the Australian continent. This is exactly the reverse of what White most likely wanted to convey in the novel. As he wrote in *Australian Letters*, he attempted to give to *Voss* "the textures of music, the sensuousness of paint" and "to convey through the theme and characters of *Voss* what Delacroix and Blake might have seen, what Mahler and Liszt might have heard" (PWS 16), and these are not the Australian names at all.

As a country and territory of experience and a metaphor of Voss's self, Australia assumes a role of the second most important character in the novel, and becomes an opponent of Voss. Walsh argues that

Voss, and a central truth about, or experience of, Australia itself have become one. Australia is almost another character in the novel, certainly an impressive and influential force, the complex presence of which affects the organization and the feeling of the novel at many different points. Australia is the sole opponent worthy of Voss's will. The will to know Australia is the initiating impulse of the novel. It is Australia which appears in Laura's letters to Voss

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as the necessary and mysterious context and passion of Voss himself; and to know him requires her to experience the land. To experience here means not only, or not just, external or physical acquaintance. (1976: 38)

Walsh gives here examples of the mode of knowledge possessed by Jackie, the Aboriginal who, by decapitating Voss, became a legend among the tribes, and of Laura who, at the end of the novel, says that:

I am uncomfortably aware of the very little I have seen and experience of things in general, and of our country in particular, ... but the little I have seen is less, I like to feel, than what I know. Knowledge was never a matter of geography. Quite the reverse, it overflows maps that exist. Perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind.' (V 446)

Walsh (1976) concludes his argument by asking a series of complex questions but also suggests convincing answers:

If the novel communicates the human significance of the Australian continent, if the expedition is an apt metaphor for the stresses of human life, if Voss himself becomes a lucent symbol of man and his struggle, this is because the country and the landscape are evoked with precision and solidity, and because Voss's complex, flawed and stricken humanity is rendered with marvellous actuality and fullness. (38)

In his Introduction to *Critical Essays on Patrick White*, Peter Wolfe (1990) shares the opinion that Voss, as the character in the novel, opened up the doors for others to step in and shape Australia's future that is neither exclusively European nor white:

Vain and self-acting, Voss wanted no one's approval; he acted to impress nobody. He needed no reason to cross Australia in White's 1957 novel, only a purpose, which, coming from within, ignored outside justifications. Yet his desert trek teaches him that ordeals take on new meanings when shared by others. In weakness lies strength. Here is a truth that defies both reason and vanity. It also helps join him to the human family. Rather than positing an elite of suffering, Voss puts self-transcendence within everybody's reach. By failing to cross Australia's dry heart, Voss has created goals for others. Colonel Hugo Hebdan, the explorer who twice searches for him after his disappearance, is the first of these others; Voss has inspired him to test his mettle in fresh ways. By such steps, personal development channels into the growth of a national self-awareness. But the Australian future that Voss has helped shape is not exclusively white or European. The aboriginal Jackie, his killer,

to whom he is eternally linked, becomes a legend and a prophet. White hints that one of Jackie's dark-skinned hearers will feel vexed enough by his words to discover Voss's place in the aboriginal consciousness. (3)

Elsewhere in his Introduction, Wolfe ponders upon Voss's unfinished mission for Australia and her people to bring them closer together:

After great anguish, Voss dies. But his soul is reborn in others as he expends into a legend. And where does Voss fit in the process? Yes, he enriched the sense of Australianness in those who have responded physically and imaginatively to his struggle. In so doing, he has won a place in both white and aboriginal hearts. But setting aside the question of whether he would have rather renounced this higher purpose in favor of marrying Laura Trevelyan, we must point out that the novel ends before his vision bears fruit. And *will* it bear fruit? Though Colonel Hebden will search for Voss's remains in the desert, he stands no better chance of success than he did when he came back empty-handed from a similar expedition eighteen years before. Yet Hebden does stand *a* chance. As slim as it is, it surpasses any hopes that might have awaited Theodora, Stan Parker, and Hurtle, all of whose epiphanies vanish before they induce a new way of being. (1990: 10)

White's critics, George Core among others, stressed the central role of landscape in *Voss* and compared his handling of it to great European and American masters:

The author not only incorporates the thickness of detail in common life ... but he can also render the feeling that the vast landscape of Australia inevitably makes on the most casual observer. It is the same dimension of vastness that one encounters in nineteenth-century Russian and American fiction – in Tolstoy, Turgenev, Lermontov; in Cooper, Melville, Norris. This sense of spaciousness and desolation is central to *Voss*. (in Walsh 45)

White's novel seems, as had been suggested, to set spaces in conflict, too: the outer, coastal space of the city of Sydney and its suburbs and the inner space of Australian outback, the bush, the desert, the space of savagery. This space of savagery is also the mystic space of desert, of suffering, sacrifice, visions and transcendence. When they get to it, white people – Voss in particular – are able to discover in themselves spiritual elements of which they, as Westerners and rationalists, were initially sceptical or simply distrustful.

Yet, Australia has almost always turned her ugly face on the invaders, the colonisers, the explorers. Her spirit of the place, her *genius loci*, has almost always been hostile to the Europeans. In *A Discovery of Australia* (1976), Clark notices that

[t]he climate of the environment gradually made us accept the values of the Aborigines – become fatalists, acceptors, and sceptics about the fruits of human endeavour. The spirit of the place had contributed to the Australian understanding of failure – to our conviction that no matter how hard a man might try he was bound to fail – that in Australia the spirit of the place makes a man aware of his insignificance, of his impotence in the presence of such a harsh environment... Australians knew from of old that the only glory men know on earth is how they respond to defeat and failure. (20, 29)

In time, Australia has become a symbol of failure and defeat for the Europeans and it will stay so unless European Australians cut their ties with Europe and its ways and accept truce on Australia's terms and conditions: Australia is, after all, a mighty opponent.

### **Into the murderous (black) heart of the land: the blacks issue**

Moving into the heart of “nobody's land,” the men are more and more aware of the presence of the “invisible” people, the ghosts of the dark heart of Australia's interior. Walsh (1976) repeats traditional views on Aboriginal people, depriving them of a possession of will, which governs Voss's actions, and locating them firmly within the realm of physicality being driven, like in animals, by their instinct for survival:

These are the one form of human life beyond the control of the human will. The blacks appear and disappear like birds or beasts. Their existence is purely a passage from moment to moment, answering some profound instinct for survival, and hardly directed at all by the conscious will. They drift across the landscape like smoke and are as responsive to the play of the physical life about them. (29)

Artificially, Walsh constructs two opposing worlds: the world of the white man and the world of black people which is a negation of active will as a result of its being a projection of the barren land, hostile to the white man. He seems to completely forget what Voss says to Jackie when

he states that black people cannot live with the whites (“Blackfeller no good along white men,” V 364): “Tell your people we are necessary to one another. Blackfellow white man friend together” (V 364–365):

What White renders so accurately and profoundly in these passages about the blacks is the other-wordliness of their existence. They do, strictly, live in another world, one which is the negation of active will, a projection of the appalling land, turning this way and that by some inarticulate sympathy with it. They survive by becoming part of the earth. (Walsh 29–30)

Indeed, in *Voss*, Boyle, a Jildra merchant, repeats this stereotypical image of Aborigines as distrustful and unpredictable, with either no or little knowledge of English, which, significantly enough, Voss turns into a virtue:

‘I cannot recommend these blacks as infallible guides and reliable companions,’ Mr Boyle was saying. ‘Like all aborigines they will blow with the wind, or turn into lizards when they are bored with their existing shapes. But these two fellers do know the tribes and the country for a considerable distance to the west. Or so they tell a man. Standards of truth, of course vary.’ Then, realizing, he added: ‘But you do not know their lingo. Dugald – that is the elder feller – has a little English. But you will not be able to make much of an exchange.’

‘In general,’ Voss replied, ‘it is necessary to communicate without knowledge of the language.’

Then the two men were looking and laughing at each other insolently, their faces screwed up, their eyes splintering. Each would consider he had gained the point. (V 169)

In spite of numerous warnings, Voss made a decision to get two Aboriginal guides involved in the daring expedition in the conviction that communication with the black men is possible without words and their help in the unknown bush land cannot be overestimated. In order to recruit them for the expedition, Voss offered Jackie and Dugald a clasp knife and a brass button:

‘This is for Dugald.’

It was a brass button... The old man was very still, holding the token with the tips of his fingers, as if dimly aware in himself of an answer to the white man’s mysticism. Voss again put his hand in his pocket and offered Jackie a clasp-knife that he was carrying.

'*Na, Junge*,' he said, with a friendliness that could not avoid solemnity. Jackie, however, would not receive, except by the hand of his mentor [Mr Boyle], and he was shivering with awful joy as he stood staring at the knife on his own palm. (V 179–180)

Before Voss was decapitated, there happened another symbolic occurrence, that is the act of almost ritual destruction of Voss's letters to Laura which Dugald, the elder of the two Aboriginal guides, was supposed to take back to Jildra to be safely delivered to her hands. Yet, on the way, after a long and murderous journey, he came across a tribe of the Aboriginals whom he thought were his people and decided to join them. The last thing that reminded him of the white colonisers and which he wanted to exonerate were Voss's letters, also containing maps he had drawn as the first man ever:

With some dignity and some sadness, Dugald broke the remaining seals, and shook out the papers until the black writing was exposed. There were some who were disappointed to see but the pictures of fern roots. A warrior hit the paper with his spear. People were growing impatient and annoyed, as they waited for the old man to tell.

These papers contained the thoughts of which the whites wished to be rid, explained the traveller, by inspiration: the sad thoughts, the bad, the thoughts that were too heavy, or in any way hurtful. These came out through the white's man writing-stick, down upon paper, and were sent away.

Away, away, the crowd began to menace and call. (V 219–220)

All this looks like a mockery of Jesus' trial by the crowd of Aboriginal people, but instead of Jesus, in the defendant's box there is Western writing, the writing stick and bad, harmful thoughts of which white people, in the public prosecutor's words, want to relieve themselves. Western writing, black signs on white flatness of paper, is foreign and dangerous since the message is encoded, not immediately available to the onlooker, and thus it denies indigenous iconic narration, which – always being unequivocal – is either temporary, drawn with a stick on sand, or permanent, painted on rocks. In this spectacle, the elderly Aborigine stars Pilate who infers a verdict from the gathered crowd whose "away, away" sounds and functions like "crucify him." The decision has been reached:

The old man folded the papers. With the solemnity of one who has interpreted a mystery, he tore them into little pieces.

How they fluttered.

The women were screaming, and escaping from the white man's bad thoughts. Some of the men were laughing.

Only old Dugald was sad and still, as the pieces of paper fluttered round him and settled on the grass, like a mob of cockatoos. (V 220)

These little pieces of paper fluttering around had been prophesised by Voss to have been Laura's prayer for him when he had planned to cross the continent. He had then declared to her:

'You are an Apostle of Love masquerading as an atheist for some inquisitional purpose of your own. My poor Miss Trevelyan! I shall be followed through the continent of Australia by your prayers, like little pieces of white paper. I can see them, torn-up paper, fluttering, now that I know for certain you are one of those who pray. (V 90)

Dugald's act of betrayal has definitely got a mystical dimension like Voss's act of offering the knife to his future killer. The mystic atmosphere is further reinforced by Voss's fascination with the black boy's "heavenly perfection" of his body:

Of the three souls that were dedicated to him, Voss most loved that of the black boy. Such unimpaired innocence could only be most devoted. Whereas, the simplicity of Harry Robarts was not entirely confident – it did at times expect doom – and the sophistications of Frank Le Mesurier could have been startling echoes of the master's own mind. So that Voss was staring with inordinate affection at the black-gold body of the aboriginal.

'He will be my footstool,' he said, and fell asleep, exalted by the humility of the black's perfect devotion and the contrast of heavenly perfection. (V 361)

Voss's enthrallment with the (black) male body seems to be, to some extent, an indicative of the narrator's own homosexual cravings and desires – reminiscent of his later tale of confession in *Flaws in the Glass* about his first fascination with the muscular, sweated body of White's physical education teacher – leading to suffering and death since, as the plot unfolds, the boy betrays him in virtually a biblical style, like Judas betrayed Jesus:

He was still terribly supple and young. His left cheek bore the imprint of a bone-handled clasp-knife given him by Mr Voss, and upon which he had



been lying. It was perhaps this sad possession, certainly his most precious, which had begun to fill him with sullenness. He was ready, however, to expiate his innocence.

All moved quickly towards the twig shelter, an ominous humpy<sup>5</sup> in that light. Jackie went in, crowded upon by several members of his adoptive tribe still doubtful of his honesty. But the spirits of the place were kind to Jackie: they held him up by the armpits as he knelt at the side of Mr Voss. (V 394)

Jackie as a convert had to demonstrate that his intentions were honest: he was a genuine Aborigine and white people's enemy and he had to prove that by hacking his white friend's head off and offering it to the elders of his new tribe as a token of fidelity. The rite of passage for him from innocence to adulthood demanded human sacrifice like in the Old Testament times, when God demanded the sacrifice of the eldest son from his people or like in the New Testament when God received the sacrifice of his son, Jesus. White celebrates a primitive mystery mass for his audiences by, firstly, preparing the temple – an Aboriginal hut, the congregation – a mob of Aboriginal people, the *genius loci* – the spirits of the place that were in favour of the killer and aided him, the sacrificial lamb – the white explorer, and finally – the highest celebrant – the Aboriginal executioner:

He could just see that the pale eyes of the white man were looking, whether at him or through him, he did not attempt to discover, but quickly stabbed with his knife and his breath between the windpipe and the muscular part of the throat.

His audience was hissing.

The boy was stabbing, and sawing, and cutting, and breaking, with all of his increasing, but confused manhood, breaking. He must break the terrible magic that bound him remorselessly, endlessly, to the white men. (V 394)

The act of killing was, at the same time, an act of liberation from the bounds of spell of the white idol, as some black people represented by Jackie probably understood Voss. He was an embodiment of the reversed otherness, barbarism, false idolatry and an enemy who should be mercilessly, unpardonably punished for all atrocities committed by his race

<sup>5</sup> [ORIGIN Yagara (an Australian Aboriginal language of SE Queensland) ngumbi, infl. by hump noun.]

A hut; esp. an Aboriginal hut.

(“white man kill black”). In this way, White seems to suggest, a European will pay the highest price for, first, the British and, then, Australians’ crimes. For the Aboriginal boy, it was more than just a revenge, betrayal or liberation – he was to prove to the elders of the tribe that he really, truly, genuinely was their man, not the traitor or the white man’s servant. So, he “was stabbing, and sawing, and cutting, and breaking,” as if the rhythm of the language were to help him to get over with it as quickly as possible since the victim, the sacrificial animal, was meek, painless and voiceless [vo(i)ss-less] and only the audience – the congregation – was hissing [hi-ss-ing and his-sing].

When Jackie had got the head off, he ran outside followed by the witnesses, and flung the thing at the feet of the elders, who had been clever enough to see to it that they should not do the deed themselves.

The boy stood for a moment beneath the morning star. The whole air was trembling on his skin. As for the head-thing, it knocked against a few stones, and lay like any melon. How much was it left of the man it no longer represented? His dreams fled into the air, his blood ran out upon the dry earth, which it drank up immediately. Whether dreams breed, or the earth responds to a pint of blood, the instant of death does not tell. (V 394)

The Aboriginal elders behaved like Pilate during Jesus’ trial – they washed their hands so that Voss’s blood was not on them but on the youth. And there is another symbolic happening there: the hacked off head, rolling on the ground, hitting a few stones on the way and coming to a rest, became an object (“the head-thing”) like any other (“any melon”), which leaves White some breathing space to ponder upon human feebleness: this head no longer represents the man, so is it still human? Or is it part of inanimate matter yet? Dreams and blood, two constitutive elements of a human, departed him to be united with the primitive elements of the air and earth in a move to close the circle of existence – “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” But the dreams? Will his dreams return? Will the earth respond to Voss’s sacrifice of life and his blood? Will it change itself? These are the mysteries not even death is able to tell.

Apparently, it seems that the murder Jackie committed was Voss’s sacrifice for the white civilisation, was the price he willingly paid for trying to get to know the unknowable, which, inevitably, touches upon the other dimension of the act – Voss’s prophetic, Jesus-like sacrifice for the

mankind in general. Yet, there is this extra dimension to this sacrifice, which has been mentioned before: it is Australia that demanded the sacrifice, to drink human blood in order for her to become a truly man's land and Voss, the German, did it for her since, as may be surmised, Australians were not able or unwilling to do that.

## Words and Life

*Voss* brings forward the problem of communication, not necessarily reduced to the problem of transcendental communication between Voss and Laura but, rather, the problem of words' inadequacy of rendering the mystery of existence or expressing the inexpressible. In a truly modernist way, echoing Oscar Wilde's famous *bon mot* to the effect that life imitates art, White argues that, contrary to what most people would wish to believe, it is life that is words' servant, not the other way round:

Judd was soon hidden by the blessed scrub. He who could squeeze the meaning of a line by pressing on it with his finger-nail, always hastened to remove himself from the presence of true initiates when they were at their books. All the scraps of knowledge with which he was filled, all those raw hunks of life that, for choice, or by force, he had swallowed down, were reduced by a great mystery of words to the most shameful matter. Words were not the servants of life, but life, rather, was the slave of words. So the thick print of other people's books became a swarm of victorious ants that carried off a man's self-respect. So he wandered through the bush on that morning, and was only soothed at last by leaves and silence. (V 203)

The mystery of words, so characteristic of Western metaphysics, are not – if at all – easily and straightforwardly explainable, particularly the written words, and this is exactly what White is trying to achieve in this novel: to communicate the incommunicable in the scenes like the one above, where the meaning is deliberately open-ended, the signifieds are not caught up with their signifiers and there is a space for their free play. The simplest possible meaning and most telling, according to White in the context of the above passage, is the one always reduced to “the most shameful matter,” that is to say, the effect of uncontrollable defecation – the faeces – which is one of “the true colours of hell.” Elsewhere in the novel, he writes:

Very soon Voss understood from the terrible stench that his companion had lost control of his bowels, and that, in the circumstances, he must turn to and clean the man. So he set about it, woodenly. Prospective saints, he decided, would have fought over such an opportunity, for green and brown, of mud and slime, and uncontrollable faeces, and the bottomless stomach of nausea, are the true colours of hell. (V 270)

In Judd's case, the scraps of knowledge he had acquired or rather swallowed and digested alongside some pieces of unprocessed life had their effect in his bowels' discharge. This metaphor, as it usually happens with metaphors, has got a very practical connotation, indicating the result of basically all human actions, humans whose life very much depends on biological processes and is lived under the tyranny of words. "So the thick print of other people's books became a swarm of victorious ants that carried off a man's self-respect" is yet another metaphor indicating the triumph of somebody else's written words over the processed effects of your own knowledge and life, and this is one – it may be presumed – of the great mysteries of words of which life is the slave.

Speaking of an apparently unimportant episode early in the novel, Voss who, when confronted with the stench of green water and rotting fruit, he would "often experience fits of humiliating helplessness in the face of practical obstacles" (V 35), Edgecombe (1989) argues:

The images of putrefaction that cluster round this discovery of human impotence are far from accidental. They remind us of the frailty and corruptibility of the flesh as forcibly as do the camellias which Laura tears apart. This self-aggrandizing effort of the will founders on the intractability of experience both here and later on, on a much grander scale, in the desert. (10)

White's apparent enthrallment with ugliness, putrefaction, defecation is indicative of his belief in the bodily aspect of human existence as fundamentally corruptible, fragile, flimsy probably due to his own experiences with his own feeble body and chronic problems with ill health, predominately bronchitis that haunted him practically throughout all his life. And these are the only tangible and meaningful signs a human can produce since words, as may be concluded, are carriers of absence and inherent emptiness. A practical way out was for him to speak in parables, archetypes, symbols and metaphors (cf. Nietzsche's renowned statement

to the effect that truth is a mobile army of metaphors and metonyms), colours and numbers, for numbers are used to connect the material with the spiritual:

The number four – a divine number in the view of the followers of Pythagoras – and the Christian Trinity are combinations that often form a pattern beneath the outer surface of the narrative. Similarly the four metaphysical colours: the green of hope and life; the red of blood and death; the yellow or gold of heaven, the Deity or of the divine; the blue of timelessness and of eternity, of the mother of God, of the feminine being. Variations within this pattern of four basic colours provide Patrick White with opportunities for descriptions without having recourse to well-worn adjectives. By such variations he can appeal directly to the feelings or experiences of the reader. (Björkstén 21)

Therefore, White spoke using symbols since symbols, like any other signs or compound ideas, which, apart from representing themselves, also represent something other than themselves, often abstractions. Thus, to revive the common, abused and worn-out language, he frequently and consistently used symbols, which he derived – as a rule – from antiquity to make his novels more challenging, complex and more meaningful, but, at the same time, also more equivocal and notoriously obscure largely due to readers' plain ignorance and general symbol-lessness of contemporary post-Protestant, religiously indifferent, neo-pagan Australia, where centuries-old religious symbols have been replaced by international corporations' signs.

In, for instance, *Riders in the Chariot*, we have a famous juxtaposition of symbols: the riders – there are four of them (again, the number four, like four seasons of the year, four sides of the world): two men and two women, who, as may be surmised, were supposed to form a kind of unity along a symmetrical axis: two non-Anglo-Celtics (males) and two Anglo-Celtics (females), riding the chariot that had two wheels (two genders, two nationalities that were supposed to form one).

The chariot's wheels, moreover, acquire an extra meaning in the context of their circular shape and the visions in which they had been seen since visions often cause mental confusion and disintegration, as was in the case of Miss Hare, and the circle performs, then, a protective function and becomes a mandala. As Jung famously avowed, "The protective circle, the mandala, is the traditional antidote for chaotic state of mind"

(1990: 10). The circle in White has got, therefore, more than just one function – not only does it symbolise the Universe, but also forms the construction of some of his novels, *Happy Valley* (1939), for instance:

The form of the book is of a broken circle, beginning with the arrival of the new doctor, Oliver Halliday, and his wife, and ending with the failed departure of Halliday and his mistress, Alys Browne. Inside this circle, and the cause of its breaking, are the families and solitaires of the town and the nearby station, with another arrival and departure traced by the movements of Hagan, new overseer at the Furlow's station. (Dutton 1963: 11)

The circle returns also in *The Living and the Dead* (1941) as a composition pattern: “The pattern of the book is again a circle, but in this case a completely closed one inside which the characters are trapped, except for two who escape by making a total break with their own environment” (Dutton 1963: 15), and, from hindsight, we realise that White, even in his early novels, started to be interested in circularity as a basic outline for both his books and the vital symbol of the human cycle of life and death and other apparently irreconcilable opposites like love and hatred, misery and happiness, pain and pleasure. He studied a lot in order to work out his concept of the eternal circle which will recur in *Riders in the Chariot* and, then, as the mandala in *The Solid Mandala* to prove the point of his relentless practice of cyclic repetitions and recurrences he applied in his novels.

Of *Voss*, Dorothy Green wrote in *Patrick White: A Tribute* (1991) that “White was both visionary and rationalist. He knew that, without vision, the people perish; but he also knew, as his novel *Voss* (1959) demonstrates, that visions based on self-aggrandisement lead to destruction. Voss exploded the empty rhetoric extolling Australia as ‘the country of the future’, by insisting that the future is what is done *now*” (1). This *nowness*, however, is the moment that encompasses both the future and the past in the eternal cycle of recurrences of which *Voss* was just an element, but the element that will return, in one form or another (NB. originally, Mr Ludlow, a character in *Voss*, declares Australia “a country with a future,” 448):

‘How – *now*?’ asked Mr Ludlow.

‘Every moment that we live and breathe, and love, and suffer, and die.’

‘That reminds me, I had intended asking you about this – what shall

we call him? – this familiar spirit, whose name is upon everybody's lips, the German fellow who died.'

'Voss did not die,' Miss Trevelyan replied. 'He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be. His legend will be written down, eventually, by those who have been troubled by it.'

'Come, come. If we are not certain of the facts, how is it possible to give answers?'

'The air will tell us,' Miss Trevelyan said. (V 448)

It is evident, then, that Voss had been inscribed into the cycle of life and death before he was born and, as Laura wisely observed, he just died a physical death – not a spiritual one – and death does not designate the end; on the contrary, death is a new beginning, a life in a different form, Heideggerian Being-there-no-longer-in-the-world (cf. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*). In the case of Voss, he returns in the form of a legend that will be written down, which signifies the importance White attached to the written word, a peculiar mixture of Platonic, metaphysical logocentrism and Derridian *écriture*. It is important to notice here that Voss is referred to as "this familiar spirit," not as that uncanny ghoul, a horrific phantom or a bloodcurdling apparition. He became, as if it were, the *genius loci* of Australian desert and, symbolically, while attempting to find the centre of Australia, Voss – we are convinced now – tried to find the centre of himself, his mandala, as well, and he found it in the cycle of existence and mortality, abhorrence and affection, agony and ecstasy – all things enclosed in a circle.





## CHAPTER SIX

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### Patrick White's Australia: Mysticism and Symbolism

“This gate,” Waldo said, “will outlast us both.”  
“I hope so.” Arthur laughed. “It would be dreadful if it didn’t”  
*The Solid Mandala 27*

In the previous chapter, some attention was devoted to the idea of symbolism – particularly Christian and Jungian symbolism – as frequently utilised by Patrick White in his novels. It seems obvious that this practice of representing things by symbols, or of investing things with a symbolic meaning or character has practically always been used by generations of mystics, visionaries, poets and novelists to make their meaning richer and more complex, and Patrick White was not an exception.

#### **From the Impure to Perfected Soul**

Patrick White was one of those rare people who believed that only eccentric individuals could save the world, and that is probably why he was regarded with suspicion among realist writers of his time. The most severe criticism came from A. D. Hope, the then one of the most acknowledged poets and critics, who, in his review of White's epic novel *The Tree of Man*, labelled his writing “pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge” (in Marr 310). Kerryn Goldsworthy argues that “[n]ot only his style but also subject matter was regarded as suspect by realist writers and rationalist critics who found White's mysticism unpalatable or worse” (in Webby, ed. 126). And he adds,

*Happy Valley* is set in an Australian valley where nobody is happy; *The Living and the Dead*, set entirely in England, shows some of the themes, motifs and stylistic devices of White's later work. In his third novel, *The Aunt's Story*, White began to demonstrate the complexity of his vision, give play to his originality, and extend his range. The novel explores two kinds of disintegration, with the fragmentation of Theodora's consciousness into madness paralleled by the destruction of Europe during World War II. (in Webby, ed. 126)

John Barnes, the pioneer of Australian studies in Australia and the greatest authority on Australian literature at home, however, once remarked that

White's fiction is far removed from a simple interest in narrative and "life-like" characters. The central situations with which the novels deal, the strong designs, the pointed use of symbolic detail, the allusions to literature and to religious beliefs, the very language in which interpretations of human experiences are expressed – all invite the reader to see the novels as symbolic structures, dealing with the profoundest levels of meaning. (in Shepherd & Singh, eds. 1978: 2)

Symbolism of Patrick White's novels seems to have been constructed, among other things, on the idea of God, but

"[h]e does not attempt, like Swedenborg, Boehme, or even Blake, to pierce the veil and reveal the hidden processes of the Deity. ...He shows his characters struggling within the limitations of their existence to understand the destiny that God has imposed upon them. Through their emotional responses and the assumptions of their cultures they try to comprehend the nature of the Hidden God. But no emotion is intense or pure enough, no myth large enough to encompass Him. The speculations and approximations of White's characters, like those of Job and his comforters, always fall short of the truth" (Beatson 9).

The theme of human disintegration into madness and the fragmentation of the mind as the result of the military atrocities is, of course, nothing new in world literature. But what is novel and refreshing in his writing are the mythopoeic impulses visible in his later publications that established his international reputation and made the name for him among the intellectuals, but not the local critics. The top of his mystic and myth-making writing came with the symbolic *Riders in the Chariot*, and "[w]ith the publication of *Riders in the Chariot* in 1961, White began

to be seen as one of the country's great artists, constructing a nation and its social history in his writing, and suggesting possibilities for a spiritual dimension to life in a relentlessly secular country" (in Webby, ed. 127). *Riders in the Chariot* seems to be even more unusual and more visionary than any other novel written by an Australian author on Australia. Edgecombe (1989) argues that

[t]he four visionaries, Miss Hare, Himmelfarb, Mrs Godbold, and, in a different way, Dubbo, while they are linked by their common sense of a transcendental significance illuminating and transfiguring reality, are also related physically in the tableau which Dubbo converts into his masterpiece, a *Deposition*. And the biblical narrative of the crucifixion helps fix and point the functions of the various characters, looping them together and providing a "pictorial" structure into which they fit. (33)

This "pictorial structure" – and again a reference is made to White's painting techniques – is a novelistic representation of what is, in White's opinion, most valuable in the post-war Australian society in terms of its social structure. He, as it seems, was one of the first Australians to advocate a vision of Australia as a multicultural society, which was particularly courageous in the era of White Australia policy and racial discrimination. The visionaries of his choosing were – in retrospect – predictable (today we would have included an Asian migrant, preferably a political refugee): an heiress to the then colonial family ruined mansion, ostentatiously called Xanadu, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, a washerwoman and an Aborigine – all of them, to a larger or smaller extent, being outcasts of society. What really unites them is their ability to have visions (Himmelfarb is even mock-crucified by his workmates), which only strengthens their alienation in their communities and make them "unreal" to others.

*Riders* – and we have reiterate this again – is the only novel by White to deal with contemporary Australia, which at his time witnessed an unprecedented wave of European migration and post-war industrial boom but, simultaneously, lacked spirituality – the problem that was to haunt the Western world for decades to follow and has never been remedied. His project in the novel was, as may be surmised, to revive Australia spiritually, very much in the Christian spirit of compassion, mutual understanding, equality, material poverty and spiritual wealth and for this he consciously chose outsiders to show that only multicultural and multi-

-class Australia is likely to carry on in a new post-war political, economic and moral environment. This does not mean, however, that the novel is Christian in character or religious in any particular sense; rather, as it seems, it utilises various Judeo-Christian symbols and motifs, alongside its imagery and through its narration, to lead in the same direction towards the Absolute, towards the Mystery but in a different way. This different way is very much unorthodox in a sense that it explicitly rejects an institutionalised church to the advantage of the visionaries, the human redeemers of the Earth. And this is at what White is constantly driving in his novel: without mysticism, imagination and spirituality, no matter what their religious origin might be, there is no escape for consumer-oriented, urban-bound, middle-class Australian society: it has to take the challenge and change itself; otherwise, the whole material project, the project of an independent, postcolonial nation called Australia will collapse.

Therefore, the importance of *Riders* for Australia does not lie merely in its artistic and cultural merits but in its nation-building attempt. He has always expressed his hope that “the migrants ... will bring something of their own cultures with them” (in Marr 1991: 369), which nowadays does not seem to be original at all, but in the 1950s and 1960s was considered an act of civil courage. White’s fiction at that time added this particular metaphysical dimension to a nation-in-the-making that lacked spirituality so much, itself being preoccupied primarily with accumulating wealth. This element of social criticism mingled with spirituality gave *Riders* a particular force.

In Introduction to NYRB edition of *Riders in the Chariot*, a fellow-writer, probably the most famous contemporary Australian novelist, David Malouf, writes that it

is set at Castle Hill (Sarsaparilla, White calls it) on the outskirts of Sydney and chronicles the lives of four characters who, like most Australians, find themselves by an accident of fate in unlikely contact with one another: Mordecai Himmelfarb, a scholar of the Jewish mystics and an Auschwitz survivor; “the blackfellow, or half-caste” painter, Alf Dubbo; that “angel of solid light,” the English migrant and evangelical washerwoman, Ruth Godbold; and the owner of Xanadu, and the last offshoot of a ruined colonial family, the mad Miss Hare. What these characters have in common is that they have all known “ecstasy” and are members of that small band of the just who in each generation are the redeemers of the earth. (vi)

These four main characters are set against, as White calls them, "the upholders of the 'average' at Sarsaparilla," in an attempt to bring out what he calls "mystery and poetry." The "averageness" of the populace at this imaginary suburb of Sydney, as exemplified by, for instance, Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack, largely consists in the fact of adhering to the cult of the mediocre, of material goods, like houses, furniture, clothes, etc. treated like sexual fetishes, and a complete disregard of the artistic things, sophistication, etc.

All his major novels seek to achieve the condition of interdisciplinary artistic productions, particularly in regard to composition, construction of characters or the themes. Like in music, *Riders'* four protagonists will gradually be introduced and exposed like motifs in a symphony, their paths will cross and they will be counter pointed and led to a final cadenza. Simultaneously, they will function symbolically, each of them having an important part to play in a national Australian drama of existence; each of them will represent a particular part of the nation in the making, a peculiar type of characters, races and attitudes. As Malouf argues, "[o]f all his novels, *Riders* is the one that most aspires to the condition of music; its interweaving voices and visions barely connect at the level of the actual. But it also aspires to the condition of theatre. In the eighteen months after its completion, White produced three plays, two of them set in and around Sarsaparilla" (vii).

### **The (unborn) soul**

Mr Hare, one of the characters in *Riders in the Chariot*, is convinced of human inherent degeneration and corruption from the moment of birth. In a conversation between him and his daughter, Miss Hare, he declares decisively, "All human beings are decadent [...]. The moment we are born, we start to degenerate. Only the unborn soul is whole, pure" (45). Wishing to get her involved into a conversation, he asks her whether she considers herself one of the unborn. Characteristically of herself, Miss Hare panics at such a metaphysical question, treating it as a form of mental torment, and simply answers that she does not understand such things – "not yet," proclaiming instantaneously that "the truth is what I understand. Not in words. I have not the gift for words. But know" (46).

The statement to the effect that the truth is a self-conceived and self-formulated concept inexpressible in words seems momentous here for numerous reasons. A very fundamental one is the inability of truth to express itself in (meaningful) words, which consequently removes truth from the sphere of discourse into what we may term “beyondwordedness,” intuition, imagination, vision. The prophets of words become, therefore, the prophets of silence, of a certain kind of muteness; the truth reveals itself only to these who have “ears behind the ears,” whose “doors of perception” are cleansed, and is closed to those who listen without hearing, who look without seeing. This Romantic, or Neo-Romantic, visionary perception of the world makes us think of it in terms of childish innocence, naïve and unreasonable faith, and fatherly experience: the experience that cannot allow for any visionary revelations, but only for the knowledge understood as an endless accumulation of facts – reasonable, explainable facts:

She did not remember what he said, not all of it, for that, too, was silly and confused, only at one point he had shaken his head, as if to dash the sunlight out of his eyes, both drowning and smiling, and spoke in a harsh voice, which, though addressing her, did not seem designed for her attention.

Her father said:

“Who are the riders in the Chariot, eh, Mary? Who is ever going to know?”

Who indeed? Certainly *she* would not be expected to understand. Nor did she think she wanted just then. But they continued there, the sunset backed up against the sky, as they stood beneath the great swingeing trace-chains of its light. Perhaps she should have been made afraid by some awfulness of the situation, but she was not. She had translated: she was herself a fearful beam of the ruddy, champing light, reflected back at her own silly, uncertain father. (29)

In this crucial moment of the vision, Mr Hare is not ready to take it since it cannot be worded properly, cannot be explained and the truth of it seems to him unknowable (“Who is ever going to know?”). On the contrary, the daughter keeps her calm; strangely, she is not agitated, she is not afraid of the mysterious vision, she is not asking questions, she is not trying to formulate answers or hypotheses since nothing – by definition – is expected of her: at least nothing that refers to aptitude or intellect. Yet, she *knows*. She knows that mysteries cannot be converted into words, mysteries cannot be unveiled, uncovered and exposed; other-

wise, they will stop being mysteries. Mysteries, therefore, can only be felt intuitively, White seems to be saying, and are only accessible to those who are not excessively proud, who are not completely and madly governed by too much of reason. As Edgecombe (1989) argues,

It is not the rational comprehension of "understanding" that she desires, but rather submission to the full sensuousness of the revelation, a "standing under" – as when we learn that "they stood beneath the great swingeing trace-chains of its light." No clear eidetic image emerges, only some vaguely shadowed, interflowing metaphor of a team's being harnessed. (34)

White's anti-intellectualism is evidently reflected in the construction of the character of Mr Hare who is presented as a man of reason but whose intellect, in the face of the vision, seems to be 'silly' and completely 'uncertain' contrary to Miss Hare who herself "becomes the inspirer of fear ('fearful'), lifted out of her body in a beatific ecstasy that exalts her far above her father. From this perspective, his superior intellect comes to seem 'silly,' and he remains both literally and metaphorically earth-bound while Mary is transposed into the light reflected back at him" (35). The point that White, himself the poet of the 'ordinary,' is possibly making here is that no-one in Australia is yet prepared to comprehend the mysterious, the extraordinary, the visionary, not least intellectuals, men of reason. The closest to the truth which, as one of his other characters claims elsewhere, "took many forms" (RC 473) are people like Mary Hare, not quite reasonable, reliant on intuition, yet nonetheless requiring the tangible to stabilise themselves in the face of the vacuum of existence: "[t]he abstractions made her shiver. If she could have touched something – moss, for instance – or smell of burning wood" (46). The transformation of reality into imagination and back is done with a precision that is required of a skilful craftsman like White: the border between what is visible and invisible is blurred or smudged like in a painting, where you have to use the forces of your imagination to construct the meaning of the whole landscape reflected there – if you look at it just with your eyes and not with the eyes-behind-the eyes, the meaning is gone.

In the mysterious drama of existence, even death should be rehearsed to make the exit more tragic. And it needs a witness since, as Mary soberly remarked, "[i]t is probably less fun when nobody is looking" (44), so her father tried it out on her:

He was looking at her, trying to engulf her in a tragedy he was preparing. Looking, and looking. It might have been terrible, if less protracted.

As it was, and perhaps realizing his error of judgment, he took the pistol she had failed to notice he was still carrying, and shot it off at his own head. And missed. A piece of plaster thumped down from a moulding on the ceiling.

The sound could have completed his exhaustion, for he tumbled immediately into a big, strait wing chair, which stood at hand. All of it he did rather clumsily and ridiculously, because it had not been thought out, or else he had lost interest in the sequence of events. (46)

Norbert Hare's attempt to finally free himself from the burden of life has failed like he failed in life. The spectacle he prepared for Mary to view did not come off not because it was not properly prepared but rather because he was not able to make his will take over or, perhaps, he did not really mean to. He vainly believed he was the master of his fate, declaring elsewhere, "If you think we cannot put an end to it! But I am the one to choose!" (71). The final scene of his life was pathetic, and the voice not Jesus-like at all:

Till his great voice began to call through a megaphone of stone.

She went back then, and realizing that it came from the cistern, looked in to see him treading water. The hair hung above his eyes in a straight, black, wet fringe. His eyes were awful – very pale, and far-seeing as his voice, under the influence of cold and fear continued to reproduce a desperate glug-glug of water. How cold the water was she could remember from once dipping her hand, in time of drought, into a bucketful a gardener had drawn up.

And now her father.

"Get some-thing, Mar-y!" Her dream seemed to be giving tongue. "Some-one!"

At the same time it sounded silly. He was like some spaniel thrown in against its will, and whose genuine dog tragedy appeared to be drowning in comical acts.

[...]

By the time Mary Hare fetched William Hadkin and a boy, it was plain her father's folly had caught up with him; regret was of no assistance. He was gone by then. A frog plopped. A leaf fluttered, floated. When they finally dredged him up from under the black water, his pale eyes looked fearfully at those who had failed to rescue him, and for the first time the daughter realized how very similar his expression was to one of her own. (72–73)

Patrick White seems to possess this special dramatic talent to mix, intertwine, juxtapose the tragic and the comic elements to paint a picture



of human gradual downfall from the heightened position of authority to a drowning man begging for mercy and help. In the drama of his dying his eyes, at the long last, showed the signs of human reaction, that is, fear, so common in his “ugly,” “stupid,” and “mad” daughter who dreamt of a revenge (“Her dream seemed to be giving tongue”). Death proved a phenomenon not to be chosen by the arrogant: it came for him at the least expected moment; it took him off guard, proved him defenceless like a drowning dog. There was nothing grandiose in his drowning: just human – all too human – helplessness and fear and then silence, only interrupted by the presence of nature the forces of which seem invincible (“A frog plopped. A leaf fluttered, floated”):

Long after her father was dead, and disposed of under the paspalum of *Sarsaparilla*, and the stone split by sun and fire, with lizards running in and out of the cracks, Miss Hare acquired something of the wisdom she had denied possessing the night of false suicide. [...] If tears ever fell then from her saurian eyes, and ran down over the armature of her skin, she was no longer ludicrous. She was quite mad, quite contemptible, of course, by standards of human reason, but what have those proved to be? Reason finally holds a gun at its head – and does not always miss. (46–47)

Reason had ultimately to give in and succumb to the laws of Nature where reason has no place, and what counts is just the matter: the matter that outlasts life with all its biology. What remained of Norbert Hare became part of Nature in a (post)Romantic belief of Nature's organic unity with humans. That his body turned into pasture for grass and the most powerful elements in Nature are sun and fire, which even stone cannot resist – not mentioning human body, became his daughter's newly acquired wisdom, particularly astringent in the context of the father's sophistication and his feeling of superiority. With the body's complete inactivity only the operation of the soul remains to complete the cycle of existence: “The mystic's discarding of the body is here imagined as a passivity so complete as to suggest her petrifying, while at the same time the activity of the soul emerges in symbols of fertility and growth and evokes a spiritual flexibility at odds with the clumsiness of the physique” (Edgecombe 36). The real optimism can only be derived from the operation of the soul, which is represented, by Nature's growth and fertility – the things that cannot be achieved by the operation of reason.

As Mary experienced herself, the genuine “loving kindness” exists at the roots of trees and plants. As Edgecombe has it:

Here gaucherie and ugliness (viewed from another perspective) gave Mary access to vatic truths, to the sense of redemptive purpose in nature that human beings in their sophistication choose to ignore [...]. The child is clearly the mother of the woman, for Miss Hare does in adulthood achieve the simplicity of being a stick. Her responses to Nature, moreover, are not so much selective and sentimental as all-inclusive. So the interdependence of violence and life in the complex of ecology, while it might provoke tears of compassion, also provokes a consciousness of its totality and perfect balance. The undramatic reference to her weeping during her meditation is phrased with a protasis to suggest that the tears might not have flowed at all. (37)

Mary has changed. Miss Hare’s visions worsened the moment she became ill. She asked Mrs Godbold, another visionary character in the novel, whether she had seen the horses because she had not, but at times, as she said, “the wheels crush me unbearably”:

Mrs Godbold remained a seated statue. The massive rumps of her horses waited, swishing their tails through eternity. The wheels of her chariot were solid gold, well-axled, as might have been expected. Or so it seemed to the sick woman, whose own vision never formed, remaining a confusion of light, at most an outline of vague and fiery pain. (84–85)

Both women were scared to reveal their visionary abilities even to each other. They preferred to keep them confidential. Therefore, after her recovery, Miss Hare decided to approach Mrs Godbold and ask her about the revelations:

“I believe we exchanged some confidences while I was so ill.”

Mrs Godbold did not wish to answer, but felt compelled to.

“What confidences?” she asked, turning away.

“About the Chariot.”

Mrs Godbold blushed.

“Some people,” she said, “get funny ideas when they are sick.”

Miss Hare was not deceived, however, and remained convinced they would continue to share a secret, after her friend had returned to carry out her life sentence of love and labour in the shed below the post-office. (85)

Not only were visionaries unreal, but also their parents. Edgecombe (1989) describes Mrs Hare, Mary's mother, as a person who

was completely unreal, and would impart temporarily to those of her equals with whom she came to contact something of her unreality. Yet she was not ineffective against the peacock colours of the stage at Xanadu, and provided the perfect, flat foil to her husband's fustian. The one cataclysmic reality to challenge her playing of the part was the presence of her daughter, but that was a fact she had failed from the beginning to embrace, an event the significance of which she had recoiled from relating to the play of life (25–26).

The mother archetype that White utilises here is a weird mother, the mother who does not really fulfil the protective and educational role she is supposed to provide for the child, thus, falling into the category of the misfits and failures his own "titular" mother belonged from the very start.

## **Reality and imagination**

One of White's favourite writing techniques was to juxtapose imaginary things upon real ones, to combine the visible with the invisible, the tangible with the intuitive:

Although there was no more mention of Mrs Flack, she was always there at Xanadu. Miss Hare could feel her presence. In certain rather metallic light, behind clumps of ragged, droughty laurels, in corners of rooms where dry rot had encouraged the castors to burst through the boards, on landings where wall-paper hung in drunken, brown festoons, or departed from the wall in one long, limp sheet Mrs Flack obtruded worst, until Miss Hare began to fear, not only for the companion and housekeeper, at the best of times a doubtful asset, but, what was far more serious, for the safety of her property. So far had Mrs Flack, through the medium of Mrs Jolley, insinuated herself into the cracks in the actual stone. Sometimes the owner of Xanadu would wake in her lumpy bed, and listen for the crash. Or would there be a mere dull, tremendous flump, as quantities of passive dust subsided? (RC 99)

Mrs Flack's metaphorical, imagined intrusion not only into the social, human structure of Miss Hare's house but, literally, into its stone structure, "into the cracks in the actual stone," into the living and unliving, into the organic and inorganic substance of what is referred to as

“home” is an expression which magnifies the strength of intrusion and a threat to the owner personally. The felt presence of Mrs Flack creates unreality “[f]or, although Mrs Flack pervaded, she was nothing tangible” (100).

And there is always will – the foundation of human existence, the idea White shares not only with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, but also with his mad visionary characters:

Soon there were a few planks of moonlight, in which she continued to rock longer after Mrs Jolley had withdrawn. For much longer than she anticipated, the wanderer kept afloat, and by extraordinary management of the will always just avoided bumping against the shores of darkness. Other shapes threatened, though, some of them dissolving at the last moment into good, some she was able to identify unhesitatingly as evil. In the misty silence, the two women, her tormentors-in-chief, let down their hair and covered their faces with veils of it. Their words were hidden from her. On the whole, she realized, she was unable to distinguish motives unless allowed to read faces. (101)

White creates reality and transforms it by visionary imagination into various kinds of mystic constructs, which inevitably leads us to a conclusion that Patrick White’s aim in his art, as we may gather from his various other writings, was to break through the limitations of the genre, the novel, which he enriched with theatrical dialogues, unusual syntax and the descriptive colours as if taken from the painter’s palette, but also in terms of enlivening the realist convention predominant in Australian literature. His “post-metaphysicality” or late “Romanticism,” where imagination was a core element, violated, very controllably though, the surface of things as they were commonly perceived. Instead of depicting true to life Australian characters, he painstakingly portrayed mythical lands that largely existed only in imagination of the characters most critics found unAustralian. The dreams, the visions, the prophecies – not infrequently in case of Miss Hare – come true in real life, as it was in Herbert Hare’s drowning scene: “Her dream seemed to be giving tongue” (RC 72). Reality sometimes is reduced to basics, to primal elements, like Mary “when she herself was practically reduced to light and shadow. Then, at least, she was truly in her element” (78), discovering, among other things, the simplicity of being a stick and seeing a redemptive purpose in nature.

In search of permanence, intransience, White discovers that “only memories are indestructible” (53), but they may also torment and oppress like, or worse than, everyday reality, the painful awareness of being. That is probably why his visionaries are often mad, certainly not normal, not average, since they do not see the limitations of their brains’ operations, they do not immediately dismiss visions as fancy, as freaks of mind, as signs of their weakness.

White’s fiction, as it seems, is a bridge between the modernist anxiety to fill the gap left by rationalism and advance of science to uncover the mystery of the human existence, stimulated by the growth and popularity of psychoanalysis both in Europe and the U.S. and the approaching postmodernity which postulates the words’ inability to express anything beyond themselves. The words – modernity discovered this long time ago – are worn out and basically empty, their meaning is always postponed, deferred, inaccessible, thus making the truth unknowable and metaphoric.

### Against utilitarianism

Traditionally, Australians – also female Australians – consider themselves an independent and practical nation, which makes them believe in usefulness and practicality of what they do and are able to be doing:

“We could hardly call ourselves Australians – could we? – if we was not independent. There is none of my girls as is not able, at a pinch, to mend a fuse, paint the home, or tackle jobs of carpentry.” Mrs Jolley had assumed that monumental stance of somebody with whom it is impossible to argue.

“Perhaps,” Miss Hare answered. (90–91)

Therefore, in discussing the most characteristic features of Patrick White’s discourse we have to admit that in its premises it is *un*Australian in the sense that it is the discourse of excess, of something that is more than necessary, more than useful, utilitarian, practical. If Norbert Hare of *Riders in the Chariot* could speak for him, they would both agree that

the word *useful* sounded to him [Norbert Hare, RW] less modest than humiliating. It was so intolerably grey and Australian. *Brilliant* and *elegant* were the epithets applicable to Norbert’s aspirations, certainly to his most ambitious,

his Pleasure Dome at Xanadu. ...[It] was Norbert's contribution to the sum of truth, *brilliant* and *elegant* though the house was, created in the first place for its owner's *pleasure*. More would have admired it openly, if they could have felt the principles of their admiration to be sound. As it was, other monied gentlemen voiced more loudly than ever their enthusiasm for the *practical* qualities of brick, and were persuaded that if the turrets of their purple mansions conformed to the pattern then condoned, nobody was going to accuse simple, down-to-earth sheepkeepers of acting in any way *flash*. (23)

What majority of Australians would have lacked at that time was the moral principle that it was good to have more than necessary, to have something *unpractical*. The mediocre cult of the practical, the useful, the necessary – so characteristic of the mainstream Australian middle class and its mentality – ran counter to the romantic vision Mr Hare cherished for most of his life the realisation of which was his project to build the house that would materialise beauty and pleasure – the ideas so *unAustralian*. Xanadu – the allusion so obvious – was such a project:

Most of those landowners who wished to show how rich they were had already gone on to build in brick at the time when Norbert Hare decided to cut his dash in stone. To Mr Hare, brick was plain ugly; it did not please him a little bit, and what was Xanadu to suggest, if not the materialization of beauty, and climax of his pleasure? *Pleasure* is a shocking word in societies where the most luxurious aspirations are disguised as humble, moral ones. It is doubtful whether any rich, landowning gentleman of the period would have admitted to the house's being more than *necessary* or *practical*. Material object were valued for their *usefulness*; if they were also intended to *please*, not to say *glorify*, it was commonly kept a secret. (23)

Australian ugliness, practicality, usefulness as opposed to European/classical beauty, pleasure and impracticality – the brick vs. stone controversy – seems to be this dichotomy on which White's argument was based in *Riders in the Chariot* and in many other novels he penned. His purpose, as can be conjured, lies in the margin, in this something extra, in the surplus of what is necessary, in Nietzschean *Über*. White thus becomes an aristocrat of life and art, a real prophet of pleasure and uselessness, a very *unAustralian* writer of Australianness. The awareness of Australia of his time as the country hating pleasure in the belief it is immoral left a vacuum in him not to be filled till the end of his days, and the characters he created in a vain attempt to show and explain where the

problem with Australia lay reflected the ways in which he reconstructed the physical reality around him and the mental and spiritual one in him and them.

As a post-colonial and post-Victorian society, Australia, with its practical philosophy of life, its simplicity and plainness, bluntly refused to accept any ideas to the contrary, forcing the admirers of pleasure and beauty to hide behind the theatrical masks and curtains, keeping their ideological convictions and artistic passions secret. Since Norbert Hare's project of Xanadu was absolutely impractical, meant to please rather than to satisfy basic needs – a clear sign of his individuality and *un*Australian eccentricity – his friends and relatives never believed it was a *real* property; rather, a place of the wasteful indulgences of its owner:

The beauty of it antagonized some of those whom the Hares were in the habit of regarding as friends, to say nothing of the practical relatives, Ted Urquhart Smith, for instance, one of the cousins from Banjo Downs.

“What becomes of all this flummery when Bert has blown the cash?” asked Ted on one occasion, indicating with calloused hand the drawing-room at Xanadu, in which it was almost impossible to tell where glass ended and light began.

Addie, his sister, permitted herself a titter.

His Cousin Eleanor hesitated. Grave even as a girl, life with her husband had made her graver still.

“But I think Norbert's fortune is very prudently invested,” she replied at last. “And then, a house is said to be an investment in itself.”

The wife of Norbert Hare seldom committed herself to positive opinions. Two positives in that relationship would have been intolerable. (24–25)

Illumination is here almost synonymous with blinding (30), but in most cases is equalled with knowledge: “[i]t seemed to Miss Hare that the light illuminated. She herself was exuberant with knowledge. She radiated discoveries” (102). And this discovery was that the project Xanadu was evil and in this conclusion she showed the paradox of Australia – you both love her and hate her: “For all I know, Xanadu, which I still can't help love, is evil itself” to add, “Like certain things made of plastic ... Plastic is bad, bad!” (103). As, to some degree, Australia has been an artificial project, it cannot be good, but you cannot stop loving her.

## The Visions of the Chariot

Only the chosen are able to see what others are not allowed to see and, characteristically of White, they are not intellectuals, not the people of learning since, as his other prophet, Himmelfarb – a professor of literature – will later admit, the intellect has failed us, so only those who are governed by intuition and are essentially good – the statement which presupposes the existence of an essence in a human like the soul – are permitted to have vision of the invisible, which is far from usefulness and practicality:

Mrs Godbold remained a seated statue. The massive rumps of her horses waited, swishing their tails through eternity. The wheels of her chariot were solid gold, well-axled, as might have been expected. Or so it seemed to the sick woman, whose own vision never formed, remaining a confusion of light, at most an outline of vague and fiery pain. (84–85)

One of the chosen, a simple woman, the “sick” one, is not able to put her vision into words because words are not enough to cover the meaning of a vision, but it is certain that her simplicity, her unspoiled character enables her to see what others cannot: so a confusion of light is synonymous with the confusion of the Enlightenment (another metaphor) in the learnt, where the reason (the intellect) opposes, negates and rejects the spirit, the immaterial. Mrs Godbold’s enlightenment is painful since through pain we are reminded of our humanity, our beginning and our end.

An end for Xanadu also came as a result of White’s pessimistic vision of not only humanity but also of Australia as a nation and land. In a fiery vision that turns out to be a real fire, the project of Xanadu is transformed into ruin:

Himmelfarb took his leave of the mistress of Xanadu. He was not in a position to dismiss her as a madwoman, as other people did, because of his involvement in the same madness. For now that the tops of the trees had caught fire, the bells of the ambulances were again ringing for him, those of the fire-engines clanging, and he shuddered to realize there could never be an end to the rescue of men from the rubble of their own ideas. (RC 399)

The fire, as an element of the *Unheimlich*, plays – we notice it immediately – a role of a metaphor or an extended metaphor, which reminds us



of English great classics like the sixteenth-century poet, Edmund Spenser and his grand epic, *The Fairie Queene*, but unlike it, *Riders* mixes reality with imagination in an indisputably modernist fashion. The collapse of a multicultural, materialist nation that despises and rejects the Other in no matter what form provokes a deep reconsideration:

So the bodies would continue to be carried out, and hidden under a blanket, while those who were persuaded they were still alive would insist on returning to the wreckage, to search for teeth, watches, and other recognized necessities. Most deceived, however, were the souls, who protested in grey voices that they had already been directed to enter the forms of plants, stones, animals, and in some case, even human beings. So the souls were crying, and combing their smoked-out hair. They were already exhausted by the bells, prayers, orders, and curses of the many fires at which, in the course of their tormented lives, it had been their misfortune to assist.

Only the Chariot itself rode straight and silent, both now and on the clouds of recollection. (RC 399)

The rejection of the Other is carried out in a truly Foucauldian fashion<sup>1</sup>: Australia, as it appears from White's visions, marginalizes the mad, the eccentric, the abnormal since the norms she sets for her people are the rational, mediocre, utilitarian and the people who speak on her behalf classify anything beyond such as undesirable and detrimental for the well-being of the country. On the spiritual plain, however, the deception occurs within recognized, institutionalized religions, particularly Christianity, that, as a rule, copy state systems, which overlook individualities, do away with opponents and stifle dissenting voices, concentrating instead on masses and the ways of completely subjugating them in order to maintain their ascendancy over them. Interestingly enough, White speaks here of the "deceived" souls who were forced to reincarnate into a variety of forms from plants and stones to humans, the latter preceded by "even," which – with an eye on paradox – classifies the apparently highest beings at the lowest, least desirable position. The uncanny image of the crying souls, combing their smoked-out hair transposes the vision into a macabre grotesque, a kind of purposeful hyperbole of the life lived in a society of hypocrites, torments and deception.

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<sup>1</sup> See Michel Foucault [1961]. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Trans. Richard Howard. London: Routledge, 1967.

It may be surmised, moreover, that White, following the Buddhist (and unorthodox Christian) doctrine of reincarnation – inscribes himself well into the Indigenous Australian belief of integrity of the material and the spiritual, the unity of landscape, plants, animals and humans. He skilfully knits into it the Western symbol of the chariot in the sky, which – replacing the traditional Christian cross – serves as a centring point of the Australian version of Western civilisation that combines, among others, British (post)colonialists, Jewish refugees and Aboriginal people. The Chariot, riding “straight and silent,” echoes impressively the (English) Romantic version of poetry as powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity, itself becoming a Whitean symbol of poetic inspiration, “mystery and poetry” of which he spoke on many occasions and which he developed into the Mandala in his subsequent novel.

### Patrick White’s poetic diction: painting with words

Very frequently, White uses metaphors of colours to brighten up the descriptions, to make them closer to the quality of painting:

The marbled sky was heartrending, if also adamant, its layers of mauve and rose veined by now with black and indigo. The moon was the pale fossil of a moth.

“Who brought them up?” Mrs Jolley laughed against the rather nasty wind. “I have always consideration for Somebody’s feelings, particularly since Somebody witnessed such a very peculiar death.”

Miss Hare was almost turned to stone, amongst the neglected urns and the Diana – *Scuola Canova* – whose hand had been broken off at the wrist.

“Will you, please, leave me?” she asked. (90)

The extensive use of figures of speech, most notably similes and metaphors, adds to White’s predominately poetic style: “When all was said, she would remain a sandy little girl. Her smiles would weave like shallow water over pebbles” (91) or “the black gusts of darkness” (91) and “the serpents of her conscience” (91).

White frequently employs the **Australian idiom**, largely derived from British cockney, which uses substandard grammar (“if we was”) and double negation and specific syntax (“none of my girls as is not

able”), which, to a great extent, was supposed to underline his affinity with the land and nation.

Patrick White's style consists in an extensive use of dialogues, which demonstrates his interest in dramatic techniques, alongside short, as it were, disinterested descriptions of nature or simple physical activities that are juxtaposed on emotions or/and reflections:

She had followed her employer out to the terrace. It was almost evening. Great cloudy tumbrils were lumbering across the bumpy sky towards a crimson doom.

“I did not see your letter,” Miss Hare replied.

Mrs Jolley scarcely hesitated.

“Oh,” she said, “it was at the P.O. All my correspondence is always directed to the P.O. A matter of policy, you might say.”

Miss Hare was observing the progress of a beetle across the mouth of a silted urn. She would have much preferred not to be disturbed. (RC 88)

It is not untypical of White to compose paragraphs consisting of just two sentences, like in the example above: one more descriptive, the other more reflective, the effect being close to the application of the stream of consciousness techniques. Another example of this kind:

“Everybody is unfortunate, if you can recognize it,” said Miss Hare, helping her beetle. “But there are usually compensations for misfortune.”

Mrs Jolley drew in her breath. She hated it on the horrid terrace, the wind tweaking her hair-net, and the smell of night threatening her. (89)

White seems to know all too well how to construct (female) characters, how to make them look and speak genuinely, opening, at the same time, their psyche to show emotions and motivations, which may easily be accounted for on the basis of his autobiography and the psychological portraits of, first, his mother, Ruth, and, second, his godmother, Gertrude Morrice.

### **Himmelfarb: the Other of Jesus**

Betrayal, guilt and failure dog the characters in *Riders in the Chariot*. White shows the essence of pain and individual human tragedy, showing, for instance, the mock-crucifixion of Himmelfarb alongside the three others' failure:

This last torment shows how White's visionaries often bring out the worst in others. Like Himmelfarb, the other three riders suffer at the hands of those close to them. Mary Hare is mistreated by both her father and her housekeeper-companion; Dubbo is sexually exploited not only by his mentor-minister but also by his landlady; after squandering his paycheck on booze and whores, Ruth Godbold's wife-beating husband dies, leaving her to support herself and her six daughters as a washerwoman. (Wolfe 1990: 8)

The power of *Riders in the Chariot* comes from its consistent use of symbols, and it is not only the chariot and its riders, but the most significant one – the native tree with a crucified Jew, Himmelfarb, that was supposed to speak out to Jews and Christians alike in a macabre, though somewhat grotesque, attempt to repeat Jesus' passion.

In their first encounter in the place where the orchard once had been, Himmelfarb, a new arrival from the Nazi Germany, tells Miss Hare that it is difficult for the Jews to appreciate the beauty of the blossoming nature since “[u]ntil so very recently, we were confined within ghettos. Trees and flowers grew the other side of walls, the other side of our experience, in fact” (RC 118), which was meant to indicate their victimisation and inwardness, strengthened by his subsequent declaration that “I am a Jew, and centuries of history have accustomed me to look inward instead of outward” (RC 118). Soon he discovers that they have something in common: they are both meant to be sacrificial:

“Did you realize it is possible to distinguish the figure of a hare [her family name] if one looks carefully at the moon?”

“No, I did not. But I am not at all surprised,” she replied earnestly.

“The sacrificial animal.”

“What is that?” she asked or panted.

“In some parts of the world, they believe the hare offers itself for sacrifice.”  
(RC 120)

Their affinity develops between them when he told her the story of his life spent in Germany and how he found his home in Australia. But Australia did not welcome him as he had anticipated:

On arrival in the country of his choice, Himmelfarb had shocked those of his sponsors and advisors who took it for granted that a university professor would apply for a post equal to his intellectual gifts. Whether he would have received one was a doubtful matter, but refusal would at least have provided him, and them, with that wartime luxury, an opportunity to grouse.

Himmelfarb, however, had no mention of applying. His explanation was a simple one: "The intellect has failed us."

Those of his own race found his apostasy of mind and rank most eccentric, not to say contemptible. To anyone else, it was not of sufficient interest that an elderly, refined Jew should allow himself to be drafted without protest as a wartime body; he was, in any case, a blasted foreigner, and bloody reffo, and should have been glad he was allowed to exist at all. He was, exceedingly, and did not complain when told to report at the piggery. There, he became attached to those cheerful, extrovert beasts, enough to experience distress as it was slowly proved he no longer had the strength for all that was expected of him. (RC 257)

Himmelfarb's wistful avowal of great significance that "The intellect has failed us" sounds as if it were directed against the Jewish, the "chosen nation," the enlightened ones, since Mr Feinstein of *The Solid Mandala* also de-mythicises the Jews by asserting that

"We Jews," said Mr Feinstein, and he attached an almost visible weight to it, "we Jews are not always that enlightened. But when we are, then we are. Take my old father – who founded the firm – another independent mind for you – my old father had seen the light before reaching these to-some-extent," Mr Feinstein cleared his throat, "enlightened shores." (SM 104)

The Jews' self-indictment turns out to be, in fact, their indictment of Australia, their other "promised land" in which the former is just "a blasted foreigner, and bloody reffo" and the latter sneeringly speaks of Australia's "to-some-extent enlightened shores." While for Mr Feinstein Australia is the place where one can do business, for former Professor Himmelfarb – it is not, and his ultimate Australian experience, like in the Way of the Cross, takes him to many places and, eventually, to his final Station, Brighta Bicycle Lamps.

At his dull job, he remembered all those people he had failed: his wife Reha, betrayed and sacrificed on the infamous night of Nazi atrocities in November 1938, the dreadful dyer, the Lady from Czernowitz, to name just a few. From that time on, the time when he had died his spiritual death, he was longing for reconciliation in physical, material and ultimate death. Now, he was aware that he had to pay off his life and salvation in a sacrificial spectacle in a bike workshop:

The morning Himmelfarb's hand was gashed by the drill which bored those endless holes in the endless succession of metal plates, was itself an endless plain, of dirty yellow, metallic wherever sweating fanlight or louvre allowed the sword to strike. The light struck, and was fairly parried by defensive daggers, of steel, as well as indifference. Equally, wounds were received. (RC 280)

The bizarre spectacle of crucifixion started with the self-inflicted wounds from workman's tools that, alongside human indifference, warded off light as a promise of salvation and where, in White's poetic language, "[o]ver every surface, whether skin or metal, humidity had laid its film. Flesh united to mingle with it. Only metal appeared to have entered into an alliance with irony, as the machinery continued to belt, to stamp, and to stammer with an even more hilarious blatancy, to hiss and piss with and increased virulence" (280). This ultimate unity of flesh and blood is indicative of primitive, original wholeness into which the human is returning in one of the cycles of Eternal Recurrence with an ironic persistence of an inorganic substance, insensitive to a great organic spectacle going on, and continuing its own mechanical cycle of production of the inanimate matter, which manifested its being through a ridiculous imitation of animate life.

Then, "Himmelfarb's hand came in contact with the head of the little drill" (280) and soon was running blood, but when he went to the wash-room to wash it off, the blood "ran out of the wound in long, vanishing veils. At moments the effect was strangely, fascinatingly beautiful" (281). This was the end of stage one of his Christ-like offering:

That night his dreams were by turns bland and fiery. His wife Reha was offering, first the dish of most delicious cinnamon apple, then the dish of bitter herbs. Neither of which he could quite reach. Nor was her smile intended for him, in dual state of veiled bliss which he remembered. Finally she turned and gave the apple to a third person, who, it was her apparent intention, should hand the dish.

But he woke in a sweat of morning, less comforted by his dead wife's presence, than frustrated by his failure to receive the dish. (281)

The importance of this dream lies in its symbolic meaning taken from the story of the Garden of Eden (Australia was for some time believed to be the location of the biblical Eden, particularly by the British). Himmelfarb's dead wife, Reha, acting out the part of Eve (woman in Hebrew)

and the apple as the symbol of human fall, disobedience and temptation, do not need an extra clarification but, again, White's numbers come to fore, this time – three, like the Holy Trinity, the tripartite division of poetry into the Pure, the Ornate, the Grotesque or the Freudian tripartite model of the human mind of the ego, the superego and the id, and this third element (“a third person”) could be the unconscious into which, as Freud had it, all negative desires are repressed or, alternatively – as Jung would wish – is the cultural territory which we, humans, all share, that is, the Collective Unconscious. However, in his re-working of this traditional Judeo-Christian myth, White most likely wanted to prophesy Himmelfarb's future ultimate sacrifice from the hands of his co-workers who would play the role of the wicked like this third person (the serpent in the story of Eden) was supposed to hand the dish of apple to him.

All this started with a problem of Himmelfarb's being the Other and his inability to negotiate the meaning of friendship or/and its local, Australian variant – mateship with the foreman, a dinky-die Aussie, which proved for them to be irreconcilably different not only in terms of the language they spoke but also in its distinct conceptualisation:

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,” 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 sayin'. 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 wew tingling on the tufts of his armpits.

“Okay,” he said. “Skip it!”

And went away as if he had been treading on eggs. (RC 401–402)

Ernie represents what probably constitutes the core of working-class Australians: the cult of mateship, simplicity of character, distrust of more complicated words and, generally, of people of other classes. White, most

likely, tries to argue that the impossibility to create one Australian nation is also due to the people of Himmelfarb's kind, who either considered him to be God-given, others as some kind of nark: "They were the most suspicious of all. ... And collected their wives, who were standing stroking their mink as they waited, and got into their cars, and drove towards the brick warrens where they hoped to burrow into safety. So Himmelfarb remained without a friend. Or mate, he repeated gingerly" (402).

Life is a great mystery and, as Himmelfarb wisely observed on several occasions, the intellect failed people in constructing its meanings. Admittedly, also the formal, institutionalised religions – no matter whether Christian or Jewish – obscured the recorded message from God in both the Torah and the Bible, since the written word is not only a sign of visible and audible absence and a mark of death (of the author), but also because it leaves the task of building the text's meaning to its interpreters and churches are such ones. In a post-war capitalist Australian society where basically everything is a commodity for sale, priests also sell a good news of salvation but people are either indifferent or feel deceived or confused. And intellect is of no avail, either. Björkstén (1976) argues that "Intellectuals who 'collect words' are severely handled in his novels; they are the 'dead.' Their rational intelligence fails short of the requirements needed for understanding the mystery of man. They are condemned to remain outside. But for the 'elect' the situation is different. They are lonely, sometimes detested, and often rejected" (20). And Himmelfarb was such a case.

In the outrageous scene of his pseudo-crucifixion, he was held in derision because of his individual Otherness and as being a representative of the race, "*the Jews [who] have crucified Our Lord*" (emphasis original, RC 532) and, among the cheers and boos from the mob, he was told to

"Go home! Go home!" giggled and chanted the young girls.

"Go home to Germany!" sang the older women.

There was a clapping and a stamping as the men's chorus interpolated, "Go home! Go home! Go home to hell!"

With a joyful, brassy resonance, because the puppet in their lives had been replaced at last by a man of flesh and blood. (RC 534)

If the howling crowd of men and women had any doubts while trying to hoist the Jew, tied up to the jacaranda tree, bleeding and with one of



his hands pierced, they were saved by remembering: "It is the foreigners that take the homes. It is the Jews" (535–536). Australian xenophobia led, therefore, to the final scene of Himmelfarb's personal and collective responsibility drama:

The Jew had been hoisted as high as he was likely to go on the mutilated tree. The rope pulleys had been knotted to a standstill; Blue's accomplices had fumblingly, but finally, fastened the ankles. There he was, nobody would have said crucified, because from the beginning it had been a joke, and if some blood had run, it had dried quickly. The hands, the temples, and the side testified to that in dark clots and smears, too poor to attract the flies. If some of the spectators suffered the wounds to remain open, it was due probably to an unhealthy state of conscience, which could have been waiting since childhood to break out. For those few, the drops trembled and lived. How they longed to dip their handkerchiefs, unseen. (537)

The spectacle of Himmelfarb's crucifixion, though terrifying and uncanny, was meant to be a joke, as Ernie, who saved his life, explained later: "we have a sense of humour, and when the boys start to horse around, it is that that is getting' the better of them. They can't resist a joke" (544).

Himmelfarb was not allowed to repeat Jesus' sacrificial offering of almost two millennia before and "left the factory in which it had not been accorded to him to expiate the sins of the world" (545). It may be surmised that that was due to the fact that Australia is not the Holy Land, and Himmelfarb – least Voss – was not Jesus, even though he might have thought of himself that way. Notwithstanding this, most probably White wished to indicate the differences between the times: Himmelfarb's story is the story of Jesus told from the contemporary, post-war point of view, where a can of beer may play a role and the whole spectacle of crucifixion turn to mockery, to a joke, a farce. Of course, this is not to say that in contemporary times there is no place/space/need for a Messiah and he (she?) would have never been crucified, assassinated, shot by a fire squad. What is probably at stake here is that nowadays, after the Holocaust, Messiahs come from average families, work as artists, writers, washerwomen, they are white, they are black, sometimes red-haired. White, as it seems, was a great believer in democracy. Björkstén (1976) concludes:

Nikos Kazantzakis has set the re-enactment of Christ's Passion in Greece; Patrick White lets it take place again in Australia, a modern, civilized, rational and humane Western society. This did not increase his popularity in his

home country, all the more so since it was there that the Jew was sacrificed after having survived Germany, a country in which it is easier to locate and accept anti-Semitism. But what White portrays in *Himmelfarb* and in the fourth chosen figure, the Aboriginal Alf Dubbo, is the deadly mechanism of exclusion that is wielded by a conformist society, in his own particular case Australian society. Every society that does not tolerate its odder members has the mechanism of the German solution of the Jewish “problem” built into its system; in *Riders in the Chariot* Patrick White shows how easily it is set into operation. (70–71)

Though drastically shocking, the Swede’s grim predictions in regards to Australian nationalism made in 1973 (English translation, 1976) did not ruin the country’s international reputation then and, hopefully, they will never come true, but one has to bear in mind the ugly scenes at Cronulla Beach and adjacent suburbs, Sydney, back in 2005 (Graham Haggan actually starts his 2007 book, *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism*, with the mention of them in Preface).

### The Mandala – White’s Centre of the Self

White’s mysticism and symbolism is further reinforced in his subsequent novel, *The Solid Mandala* (1966), in which the mandala symbol plays a fundamental role and which, as it has been mentioned before, is the most autobiographical novel Patrick White has ever written not only due to the fact of presenting in it a faithful portrait of his parents, his fascination, first, with reading and then writing, his problems with asthma that haunted him throughout most of his lifetime, but mainly because he endeavoured to construct, based on a Jungian psychological model, his self-portrait in a duality and oneness of twin brothers and used for this a symbol of a mandala, a self-centre.

On the one hand, the Mandala is a graphical representation of the **centre** (the Self for Jung), and on the other, a “magic ring,” the symbol of experiencing God, man’s divinity residing in himself as it is presented in his writings. It is noteworthy that, originally, **Mandala** is a Sanskrit word meaning “circle” and that Mandalas have got spiritual and ritual significance in both Hinduism and Buddhism from which Carl Gustav Jung took the term and adopted it to his psychoanalysis.

The basic form of most Hindu and Buddhist mandalas is a square with four gates containing a circle with a centre point. Each gate is in the shape of a T. Mandalas often exhibit radial balance. In various spiritual traditions, mandalas may be employed for focusing attention of aspirants and adepts, as a spiritual teaching tool, for establishing a sacred space, and as an aid to meditation and trance induction. In the Tibetan branch of Vajrayana Buddhism, mandalas have been developed into sand painting. They are also a key part of Anuttarayoga Tantra meditation practices.

In common use, the mandala has become a generic term for any plan, chart or geometric pattern that represents the cosmos metaphysically or symbolically, a microcosm of the universe from the human perspective. It may appear in dreams and visions or it may be spontaneously created as a work of art. It is present in the cultural and religious representations and in our dreams the mandala indicates the phenomenon of centring the individual psychic in which the ego reconsiders its (dominant) position through the assimilation of the collective unconscious contents (symbols or archetypal images). In modern dreams, the mandala can be a sophisticated electronic device – an electronic watch or sophisticated circular machinery. Often the UFOs seen on the sky are also mandala symbols (Jung worked extensively upon this idea). Other mandala images can be circular fountains, parks and their radial alleys, square market places, obelisks, buildings with a circular or square shape, lakes, rivers. Additionally, the mandala symbolizes a safe refuge of inner reconciliation and wholeness. It is a synthesis of distinctive elements in a unified scheme representing the basic nature of existence.

In Patrick White's novel, *The Solid Mandala*, its protagonists, the retired Brown brothers, Arthur and Waldo, who moved into the neighbourhood of Sarsaparilla, are two opposing yet common parts of Patrick White's mind and personality, even though, as he claimed later in *Flaws in the Glass*, he identified more with Waldo than Arthur: "I see the Brown brothers as my two halves. Arthur might have been a portrait of my cousin Philip Garland if Philip's childish wisdom had matured; instead he was admitted to an asylum in his teens, and remains in one to this day. Waldo is myself at my coldest and worst" (FG 146–147). And *The Solid Mandala*, we read: "These are our twins,' Mother touched their hair to explain. 'Yes, Waldo is the smaller. He had his setback. But is

better. Aren't you, Waldo, better? You're strong now.' He had heard it so often he didn't always answer" (SM 31). Arthur was more favoured by parents than Waldo, the weaker one: "Mr Brown, so they say, was disappointed in his sons. Anyways, Arthur had been his favourite" (SM 16).

From the very start, the locals are divided into these who receive their arrival with curiosity and some anticipation of good relationships, and those who are decidedly against them. The dividing line is stretched between married couples. In order to nag his wife, Bill Poulter, the sweeper, tells her to "move in with that pair of poofteros across the road," adding that they are a "couple of no-hoppers with ideas about 'emselves" (18), to which, in their defence, she replies that "[t]here's more in the Brothers Brown than meets the eye" (18). But the sight of them, as they appeared to her neighbour's eyes, was rather dismal:

Then Mrs Dun did resentfully notice the two old men, stumping, trudging, you couldn't have said tottering – or if so, it was only caused by their age and infirmities – along what passed for pavement between Barranguli and Sarsaparilla. The strange part was the old gentlemen rose up, if only momentarily, blotting out the suburban landscape, filling the box of Mrs Dun's shuddering mind. She was still shocked, of course, by Mrs Poulter's thoughtless alarm. It could have been that. But she almost smelled those old men. The one in the stiff oilskin, the other in yellowed herring-bone, in each case almost to the ankle. And, as they trudged, or tottered, they were holding each other by the hand. It was difficult to decide which was leading and which was led. But one was the leader, she could sense. She sensed the scabs, the cracks which wet towels had opened in their old men's skin. (18–19)

Mrs Dun's attitude to the Brown brothers is officially declared to Mrs Poulter to be indifferent: "[a]s for those old men," said Mrs Dun, "they're nothing to me." "They're nothing to me," Mrs Poulter agreed" (21). Yet, as it seems, their declaration is not sincere although they are not yet prepared to admit what is really on their mind:

"Only those old men of yours had a look, had a look of," Mrs Dun stumbled over what was too much for her.

"Yes?" Mrs Poulter's voice reached out.

The lips were parted in her mauve cheeks. The eyes were so liquid. It was as though she were waiting to swallow down some long-for communication while half expecting it to choke her if she did.

But Mrs Dun could not oblige. Her neck jerked, the wrinkles closed, and Mrs Poulter, ruffling up her chrysanthemums, remarked in a neutral tone of voice:

"After I've left the flowers, I usually make for the cafeteria, and have a coffee. It warms you up on cold mornings."

"Yairs," said Mrs Dun. "Or a malted. The malted's what I go for." (21–22)

The hesitation and understatement, the breakdown of communication, the comeback to the banal and routine hides something mysterious, a humane feeling the middle-class women are afraid to admit even to themselves. It is better not to show the signs of compassion, understanding and solidarity with those who are down and out. Nonetheless, Mrs Poulter recalls the brothers' parents well:

"But Mr Brown was a good man. Now *Mrs* Brown – that was the mother of the two boys – she was always doing a favour. Even to her own husband she was good too, mind you, but she never stopped letting you see she had thrown herself away."

"How?"

"I can't tell you exactly how. She was a lady. You never saw such beautiful lace insertion. Some of it she dipped in tea, for variety like."

"You don't say!" Mrs Dun was entranced. (SM 16)

The Brown mother, like Patrick White's mother, has always considered herself an English upper middle class representative, almost an aristocrat, and felt she was superior to average Australian women who lack her class: "Mother might have been grunting it if she hadn't been taught how to behave. She was what people call vague, or English. She didn't Come Out of Herself, which was a Bad Thing in a new country" (SM 32). Additionally, like Mrs White, Mrs Brown believed she had married below her class: "It was the kind of remark which appealed to Mother. For touches like that she had Married Beneath Her" (35).

Since their early childhood, the relationship between the brothers was not an easy one since Waldo felt he was not a favoured child of his parents and always sickly. Once, his father explained the cause of his multiple illnesses: "[h]e was born with his innards twisted. We had to have the doctor sort them out. That's why Arthur got a start on him" (32).

So Waldo grew delicately in the beginning. It was expected of him. When he had a cold he stayed at home and learned the names of plants from Mother. There was a certain pale-green, sickly light which made him feel sad: the light of delicate plants and waiting for Arthur to return from school. Because much as he loved to drift about the house touching the furniture and

discovering the books he only partly understood, he was lost without his twin. He could not have explained it, least to Arthur, who certainly knew. (32)

Their father was proud of Arthur: “Arthur’s the fair one, the copper-knob,” Dad used to say, mashing Arthur’s hair with his hand as though the hair had been something else” (32) and “Dad used to say in the beginning: ‘Arthur’s so strong he’ll make a wrestler. Or some kind of athlete’” (33). And further on:

And Waldo. There was never any question of Dad’s ignoring or not being fond of Waldo. He was just in his dealings with everyone. But Waldo was born with that small head, with what you might have called that withered-looking face, if you had been inclined to unkindness. The heads of father and son were both, in fact, carved in rather minute detail, and where they gained in similarity was the eyelids, not the eyes, the hair-coloured hair, the thin lips which tended to disappear in bitterness or suffering. Physical suffering, certainly, was something Waldo hardly experienced after early childhood. But Dad probably suffered without telling, or giving expression only indirectly of his pain. There was his leg. His foot. Often strangers, and always children, were fascinated by George Brown’s boot, which was something members of the family hardly noticed. It fell into the same category as inherited furniture. (33–34)

Waldo felt a stranger to his father, and so was he for him. One evening, when Waldo was hanging over the gate waiting for his father to return home from the bank where he worked, he noticed with dismay how yellow and horrid-looking his father’s skin was. His father did not seem at all pleased to see Waldo at the gate, but had somehow to say something in order to not to look unfriendly to his other twin-son:

So Dad wet his lips, and said what jumped into his head.

“Where is Arthur?” he asked.

Waldo did not know. Or rather, he did. Arthur was in the kitchen with Mother, who was allowing him to knead the dough.

Dad began spluttering, reaching out with his lips for something he was being denied. Then he realized. He bent and kissed Waldo. Waldo kissed him. Or touched with his lips his father’s cheek, which, in spite of the clammy summer evening, was colder than he remembered of any person’s skin. It was a shock to discover, through the smell of sweat and crushed weed. While Dad and Waldo stood looking at each other.

So Waldo was in the position of a stranger, but one who knew too much. (34)

This passage presents yet another example of autobiographical motifs contained in the novel and adequately illustrates Patrick White's cold relationships with his father, the paternal reservedness and calm detachment. Like the novelist himself, Waldo assumes the position of a knowledgeable ignorant and amateur psychologist. As he indicated in *Flaws in the Glass*, he was always in need of fatherly love and felt sorry he never really got it from him, but he wished he would have offered the gift of love to him: "Then George Brown their father, a wizened man with a limp, got up and went in to stoke the stove for Mother as he usually did before tea. There were times when Waldo loved their father, he really did. He would have liked to, anyway, and often the intention is acceptable" (SM 49).

He also longed for the mother's touch, especially in moments of depression and sadness, but in his case, the touch has got a definite Oedipus complex dimension: "If it came to that, in moments of exposure, his common state was one of runtish misery. He longed for Mother's hand to reach out and touch some part of him which perhaps could never be touched" (SM 47). The mother figure features prominently in the novel since it seems to be a reflection of the mother archetype of which Jung speaks in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1990 [1976]) and which forms the mother-complex resulting in, among other things, the son's possible homosexuality, hatred towards women, alcoholism and early death (this point will be given more attention in the chapter on White's apparent misogyny). Mrs Brown, like Mrs White, cannot come to terms with the fact she had married a social inferior and dies after a long struggle with cancer and alcoholism – the mother portrait Patrick White painted in *The Eye of the Storm* as well.

Another autobiographical motive in the novel – probably the most important one symbolically – are the four glass marbles Arthur won as a child (young Patrick had a box in which he kept all unusual little playthings, his treasures), only later recognised as mandalas, the symbols of totality. Even before he found out about them in a reference book, they had a mystical value for him as promises of reconciliation and wholeness of being. And, again, like in *Riders of the Chariot*, there are four mandala "riders," mystics and visionaries, out of whom only Waldo (the more aspiring, rational part of Patrick White's psyche) refuses to acknowledge a mystical dimension of the marble he was given, seeing in it just a piece



of stone with a kind of knot inside. Arthur's marble was made up of green and crimson whirls, whereas Dulcie Feinstein's was a cloudy blue one – the colours of Virgin Mary (Dulcie was, like Mary, Jewish, but shown as ugly: “[h]er swollen nose aggravated her angry sullen look. She was really very ugly,” SM 102) and Mrs Poulter's – a speckled golden one, which in Jung signifies the perfected soul. In his classic, *The Eye in the Mandala* (1976), Peter Beatson convincingly argues that

[i]t is only after Waldo has died, and his marble has been lost in the filth and darkness of an alley (SM p. 307), that Arthur can discover his true self [his mandala, RW]. After the loss of Waldo's marble, the first ray of morning light shows him his own mandala on the palm of his hand [the Christ-like motive also found in *Voss*, RW] (SM p. 307) and he knows that he is not destined to die. His apotheosis is achieved through conjunction with Mrs Poulter whom he raises up by giving her an incarnate god to worship after her canvas Christ has fallen, while he himself is completed by being both her Lover and Son. (165)

Beatson is most definitely correct when he refers (though without naming it!) to Oedipus complex in Arthur or, metaphorically speaking, in White's irrational part whom Arthur plays in the novel and making an allusion the D. H. Lawrence's highly acclaimed novel of 1913, *Sons and Lovers*. Symbolically, the incestuous son replaces the fallen God of Christianity, Jesus Christ, the picture of whom literally breaks into pieces. This may also have something to do with the Reformist movement within Christ's Church that removed all images of God from people's homes as well as churches in the aftermath of Reformation (White's infamous “the C. of E.”). Most importantly, however, *The Solid Mandala* is the novel in which White showed a gradual, cyclical process of degeneration and regeneration the twins had been going through. Yet, in death they proved different: Waldo met his death that was, unlike Voss's, more than just physical, but Arthur, the half-wit and visionary, completed his descent by being reborn. Symbolically, the last movement in Arthur Brown's dance of the mandala ends with “his mouth ... a silent hole, because no sound was needed to explain” (257). Wolfe (1990) comments, “We are back in the Hindu sphere. The ultimate revelation defies language” (16): life is a constant suffering and one has to suffer in silence.



## Suffering: a Path to Insight

Had we to give a simple definition of human life or define its essence, we would not have missed the idea of suffering. Suffering, as it seems, is inscribed in human existence and leads to enlightenment, psychological insight. In White's fiction, suffering comes frequently as a result of either retardedness, exclusion, futile love or despair connected, for instance, with rawness of Australian country life:

In *Happy Valley* love and sensibility are crushed, or driven underground. But White's motives are neither brutal nor sadistically moral; he wants to trace suffering in human relationships, intensified in this case by the cruel flatness of Australian country town life. The suffering comes from living among people "with eyes closed to the possibility of truth"; the environment is a prison, and the illumination hurts. (Dutton 1963: 14)

It is also important to recognize the fact that the epigraph to the novel, which reads, "It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering which is the one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone... the purer the suffering the greater the progress," comes from Mahatma Gandhi, a non-Christian. In *Riders in the Chariot*, Mrs Hare "suffered, rather, from seeing the weak exposed to those whom she considered strong, and so, she would attempt to keep her friends separate, in compartments that she hoped might protect them from one another" (25).

Interestingly enough, in Aboriginal culture, for which White had a great admiration, there is no space for suffering alleviated to a moral imperative:

There was no room, in such a culture, for a sense of tragedy. Suffering, like death, had to be accepted. But just as there is an almost abrasive matter-of-factness in the compelling myth of Crow and Crab, so, too, suffering was not an occasion for moral grandeur. The point of suffering was its material reality. It was made bearable by a religious understanding of the world which was underpinned by myth and sustained by ritual. (Rickard 1999: 14)

Suffering does not make people better or morally superior; it is pointless if it does not enrich you in a material sense, that is, in a sense of the

land – the land is yourself and your spirit-beings, so for Aboriginal people it is probably the only reasonable explanation for suffering.

In *Patrick White: A Tribute* (1991), Dorothy Green argues that, due to his growing scepticism as to a unanimous effort to build a multicultural, multiracial nation by the main intellectual and political forces, White left this task to the social outcasts, artists and eccentrics, which has been proven by, among other novels, *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Solid Mandala*:

As the 1960s wore into the 1970s, White's faith in his country's future diminished: the present had become too disillusioning. The quality of its political and business leadership was poor and there seemed no hope of bringing about a sense of collective responsibility for the land itself. In *Riders in the Chariot*, *The Solid Mandala*, *The Vivisector*, *The Eye of the Storm* and *A Fringe of Leaves*, the pursuit of integrity became the occupation of the fringe dwellers of society: the simple-minded, the humble and anonymous, the outcasts, the artists, and eccentrics. (1)

Like Arthur Brown's, these visionaries' task is great: they are supposed to build a nation – the task too demanding, too responsible, too great for politicians and “academic turds,” as he often called University intellectuals and professional critics, the people who are not conscious of the mission or not apt for the task going beyond their personal and egoistic aims, surpassing immediate private gains and requiring efforts, both conceptual and practical.

Also, progress, as White saw it, was the descent of the soul “which finds God not by fasting, meditation and detachment, but by entering into dialogue with the material world and its creatures” (Beatson 12) and then its return in repetitive cycles or what Nietzsche called “Eternal Recurrence of the Same” or Blake understood as “innocence and experience.” The Western world and Australia, in particular, has rejected and forgotten the spiritual element of human existence, therefore, it is imperative to keep the spirit of the nation, place and an individual so that the balance between the material and immaterial is maintained in a harmonious whole.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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### Patrick White's Misogyny: The Mother-Complex

Even though White's protagonists in his major novels like *Voss* and *The Solid Mandala* are male, it is this specific Whitean kind of women who attract attention in a prevailing bulk of criticism, starting from, perhaps, Mrs Goodman of *The Aunt's Story* through Mrs Flack of *Riders of the Chariot* and finishing off with Mrs Hunter of *The Eye of the Storm*. Because of an unfavourable presentation of his women characters in his novels, White was quite commonly and understandably (feminism of the 1960s onwards) accused of misogyny which is normally understood as the hatred or dislike of women and which has got a long tradition not only in the West but also in the East. Many influential Western philosophers have been described as misogynistic, the most ancient being Aristotle who famously declared that the female is female by virtue of certain lack of qualities and later St Thomas Aquinas announced that woman is an imperfect man. Selden et al. (2005 [1985]) argue that:

When John Donne wrote 'Air and Angels' he alluded to (but did not refute) Aquinas's theory that form is masculine and matter feminine: the superior, godlike, male intellect impresses its form upon the malleable, inert, female matter. In pre-Mendelian days men regarded their sperm as the active seeds which give form to the waiting ovum, which lacks identity till it receives the male's impress. In Aeschylus's trilogy, *The Oresteia*, victory is granted by Athena to the male argument, put by Apollo, that the mother is no parent to her child. The victory of the male principle of intellect brings to an end the reign of the sensual female Furies and asserts patriarchy over matriarchy. (115)

As can be seen, misogyny has really got a long history in Western civilisation and is, to use Jungian language, archetypal since it is also a prominent feature of the mythologies of the ancient world as well as

various religions, including three major ones: Judaism, Christianity and Islam – they are all misogynistic in the fundamental sense of the word.

For the sources of Patrick White's alleged misogyny we should look into his formative years he spent in the company of his female relatives. In his autobiography, *Flaws in the Glass*, he confesses:

Great Aunt Lucy, her [Great Aunt Grace's] younger sister, I liked less. Aunt Lucy was plump and quilted. While she looked soft and comfortable, she wasn't. She breathed hard, and was inclined to snort. The Micks enraged her. She saw them as the source of most Australian evil, with the result that I took to flying past. St Canice's on the corner. I never felt safe from nuns and priests, drunks, larries, or the Mad Woman. (2)

His hatred of women makes him accuse, at least some of them, of racial and/or religious discrimination, which in Australian context has a specific connotation and only magnifies centuries-long Anglo-Irish conflict and carries it also along Protestant-Catholic lines. That he never felt safe in the company of the "Mad Woman" becomes clearer the moment he recalls the picture of a woman kept in the house which

belonged to the poet Hayley, of no importance except as the friend of genius. He had a mad wife he used to chain to the flint columns of a summerhouse so that she could take the air. There was a cemetery with headstones carved to commemorate the lives of pets. There was a medlar tree, umbrella-shaped, under the stench of rotting fruit. (3)

The vision of a mad woman, the poet's wife, released temporarily from her house prison to take a gasp of fresh air and chained to the column like a dog on a leash is presented and fortified the description of pets' cemetery in the background, which, inescapably, makes one think of affinities between "mad" women kept at home and domestic pets (Miss Hare of *Riders in the Chariot* readily springs to mind, too). Yet, not all White's women are mad or ugly or both. There is in his autobiography a prototype of an old woman who was good because, among other things, she treated a child like himself as her "intellectual equal." This was his godmother's mother, Mrs Morrice:

Old Mrs Morrice was small and self-contained, with wrinkles and rings, and compact hair like steel wool. She seemed to spend her life sitting on the edge of a hard sofa, or at any rate that was what she was doing whenever I visited

them after a long hot walk across Rushcutters Bay Park and up Loftus Street, Darling Point. The brown summer heat and the cracks in Sydney asphalt became part of me, to last for ever. But it was refreshing to arrive and sit on the edge of the hard sofa with my hostess, and sip a glass of cold lemonade. The great thing in Mrs Morrice's favour was that she treated a child as her intellectual equal. We discussed Shakespeare, we read *Hamlet* together. She spoke the most precise English, with the curious, rustling 'r' which also distinguished her daughters' speech. (FG 25)

But it was not old Mrs Morrice with who served for a role model in his novels but rather his godmother, Gertrude Morrice, who, as White admitted in *Flaws in the Glass*, introduced him to Aldous Huxley and D. H. Lawrence, and was a starting point for Theodora of *The Aunt's Story*:

In her old age, in the dormitory at the seedy home, Gertrude Morrice had developed a doubting smile. The passive wrists lying on the chenille bedspread had grown wisps of long black silky hair. My godmother was the starting point for Theodora of *The Aunt's Story*, which I like to see as some return for the unobtrusive opening of windows in my often desperate youthful mind. (FG 25)

Within this stream of female characters that shaped White's view of women is the one of elderly maids who used to serve his parents and, later on, him and his life-long partner, Manoly. When they moved into a house at Centennial Park in Sydney, he wanted to check out if the middle-class rituals in Australia had changed since his parents' day:

Not all that much, it seemed at first. There were still elderly maids in starched caps serving at table in ladies' clubs. One old girl, May, remembered working for my mother at 'Lulworth'. It was a departure from convention when some of the relics went out cooking and serving in private houses. The menu was always the same: vichyssoise, beef fillet, and exquisitely sliced French beans. They were touching, these old women, their arthritic hands offering platters, joggling your elbow if you hadn't responded to their offerings. There was one I remember called Myrtle Park, a frail Dickensian spinster I always enjoyed meeting again over my shoulder. (FG 151-152)

In *Patrick White* (1963), Geoffrey Dutton argues that *The Aunt's Story* (1948) is the most difficult and ambitious of White's novels since "it abandons the solid framework of narrative for an encounter between the ghosts of Europe and the illusions of an old maid's mind," adding

that “the difficulties of this book come from the angular subject herself, Theodora Goodman, and the nature of her experience” (20). Who is she, then, and what are her experiences? It would probably be too simplistic to straightforwardly admit that she was a mad spinster, but that she was a loner certainly rings the bell since “White has always felt compassion for the lonely or the clumsy” (21). Most certainly she was inept and awkward, and “[i]f gestures were completed, it was according to a law of motion, which takes over from the will, and which now guided Theodora Goodman’s black” (AS 12). The colours with which White paints her portrait are even less favourable:

Black had yellowed her skin. She was dry and leathery, and yellow. A woman of fifty, or not yet, whose eyes burned still, under the black hair, which she still frizzed above the forehead in little puffs. You would not have noticed Theodora Goodman. Her expression did not tell. Nor did she love her own face. Her eyes were shy of mirrors. Her eyes fell, except in moments of necessity, frizzing out the little puffs of hair, when she outstared, with a somewhat forced detachment, her own reflection. (12)

Notwithstanding her physique, she was an institution unmarried women were supposed to constitute in her times – an aunt: “This thing a spinster, she sometimes mused, considering her set mouth; this thing a spinster which, at best, becomes that institution an aunt” (AS 12), and hers was the story she was supposed to tell. Thus, White’s greatest achievement in this novel was, as Dutton has it, “that the mad Theodora, with her dignity and humour, eventually sits in judgement upon us who are sane, or think we are. This makes it an uncomfortable book” (21).

The first part of the novel, *Meroë*, is “a clear, strong narrative, full of wit and deathly quiet irony and a richness of metaphor, with White’s characteristic gift of not letting anything seem unimportant” (22). This part is aptly introduced by a quotation from Olive Schreiner, a South-African novelist, to the effect that a human soul soon reaches “that solitary land of the individual experience, in which no fellow footfall is ever heard” (AS 9), which set a pace for the whole novel on womanhood, solitude and self-exclusion.

The choice of the place’s name for the setting is so typical of White: *Meroë* comes from “a dead place, in the black country of Ethiopia,” and most certainly the choice is not accidental: it is supposed to somehow connect Australian *Meroë*, a dreary land farm, dilapidated, the fences of

which are falling apart because Mr Goodman, the owner, has no sense of duty to the land, with the mystery of the legendary Ethiopian Meroë.

The narration starts with a very unsettling opening statement: "But old Mrs Goodman did die at last" (AS 11), yet this is how death opens up the gates of freedom, freedom understood as deliverance and liberation – as it is in case of Theodora – from the mother:

I am free now, said Theodora Goodman. She had said this many times since the moment she had suspected her mother's silence and realized that old Mrs Goodman had died in her sleep. If she left the prospect of freedom unexplored, it was less from a sense of remorse than from not knowing what to do. It was a state she had never learned to enjoy. Anything more concrete she would have wrapped in paper and laid in a drawer, knowing at the back of her mind it was hers, it was there, something to possess for life. But now freedom, the antithesis of stuff or glass, possessed Theodora Goodman to the detriment of grief. (12)

Freedom as non-reality, as non-tangibility, as a strategy of mind, as pure will does not find place in Theodora's vision of life, in her own life project. Her mother's death that brings her freedom simultaneously brings her uncertainty as to her own identity, and she believes that children can restore it: "[s]ince her mother's death, she could not say with conviction: I am I. But the touch of hands restores the lost identity. The children would ratify her freedom" (13).

Theodora is suicidal, perhaps not literally but rather metaphorically; she desperately wants to finish off her unfortunate – and uneventful – life, the life as if it were a plot of an uneventful story: dull and boring. In a shooting episode with Frank and a little hawk, she takes her gun and shoots the bird:

After that Theodora often thought of the little hawk she had so deliberately shot. I was wrong, she said, but I shall continue to destroy myself, right down to the last of my several lives. Once she walked past the spot where the hawk hung on the fence, blowing stiffly in the wind. It was her aspiration. In a sense she had succeeded, but at the same time she had failed. If Frank had not understood the extent or exact nature of her failure, it was because he could not. His eyes would remain the same glazed blue. (AS 73–74)

Theodora herself could only solve the mystery of her own life, not Frank, not any male. She killed her aspiration, her talent, her abilities;

she killed herself. Her later admirer, Clarkson, describes her as “a shabby rag of skin passing judgement on souls,” and that he hates her “[t]he way you can hate something that is untouchable” (112). The Untouchables – as collective characters – have a special place in White’s writing and Theodora is most certainly one of them. She lives her life as a mystery, as a legend (Voss readily springs to mind as a male counterpart) who is not touched by the surrounding reality, as a body which has “several lives,” untouched and untouchable, never to pass away and never to stay unmoved. Australia is, then, the last link in the long chain of Western civilisation, which seems to be gradually – but inevitably – fading away.

Theodora, a female character, possesses unfeminine features and abilities such as a crack shot, which – from a wider perspective – is yet another indicative of White’s gender mixing: he constructs his main characters so that are able to overcome the limits of their own gender. When he describes relativity of feelings in Theodora, he immediately contrasts her vision of the world with that of her sister, Fanny:

She could not mourn like Fanny, who would cry for the dead until she had appeased the world and exhausted what she understood to be sorrow. Fanny understood most things. The emotions were either black or white. For Theodora, who was less certain, the white of love was sometimes smudged by hate. So she could not mourn. Her feelings were knotted tight. (12)

Fanny serves here as an example of what White despised most: shallowness of mind, mediocrity and ignorant arrogance. When he says that Fanny understood most things he, obviously, is ironic because he does not believe in a simple division of the world into blackness and whiteness: the world’s dichotomy is a much more complex issue, probably insoluble and unknowable. The only possible human stance will be that of uncertainty in the face of mystery of existence. Like in painting, the purity of life (love, truth, innocence) is smudged, blurred, spoilt by a pending prospect of death (hatred, lie, experience), the unknowable, unexplainable; you never know the limits, you never know the words. Fanny’s outer features were also despicable:

Once she had been plump and pretty. Now she was red and fat. She cried because it was expected, and because her clothes were tight, and because it was easier to cry, and because she increased in importance by crying for the dead. She also remembered vaguely a piece of pink coconut ice offered by her mother’s hand. So Fanny cried. (AS 14)



Superficiality of Fanny's affection towards their mother is reinforced by the colour normally associated with ugliness or/and bad health ("red"). The exaltation of grief soon changes into the tragedy of domesticity when she declares, blowing her nose, that the boys must have overcoats because they grow so fast.

Another female character, Mary Hare of *Riders in the Chariot*, has also been presented as a "red girl," which her father declares to be synonymous with ugliness:

Once in her presence – or she had been standing, rather, in the drawing-room alcove, apart, touching the waves of an emerald silk with which the day-bed would fascinate the fingers – her father had thrown down his cap with more than his usual violence, and shouted, "Who would ever have thought I should get a *red* girl! By George, Eleanor, she is ugly, ugly!" (27)

As a man of property – also not such a proud owner of his daughter, Norbert Hare believed that a person of his status and position in the middle-class society deserves more from life than just a "red girl." His wife felt responsible for the whole situation, partially as the mother of the child and the life-giver, partially as a female defender of the oppressed female and a faithful interpreter of the invisible and unknowable:

With more than her usual kindness, Eleanor Hare motioned to their child, and when the latter had come forward – because what else could anyone do? – the mother smothered a sigh, and sighed, and suggested, "Plain is the word, Norbert. And who knows – Mary's plainness may have been given to her for a special purpose." (27)

The wording of physical ugliness has been replaced by physical "plainness," and the plain characters were to play a special role in White's fiction – the role of visionaries, prophets, and eccentrics.

In *The Solid Mandala*, we find the following passage illustrating a certain type of male-female relationships in White's imaginary suburb of Sarsaparilla:

The bus was making a slow progress, on account of the pay-as-you-enter, and queues at the shelters, and kiddies who had missed the special. Mrs Poulter looked out. She was proud of the glossier side of Sarsaparilla, of the picture windows and the texture brick. She brightened with the leaves of the evergreens which the sun was touching up. Then she saw Bill, and waved. But

he did not respond. He went on sweeping the gutters for the Council. It was against Bill Poulter's principles to acknowledge his wife in public. Sometimes on her appearing he went so far as to take time off to roll himself a cigarette. But never wave. She accepted it. She was content enough to realize he was wearing the old fawn sweater, no longer presentable except for work, because the loose stitch she had been trying out had begun to stretch and sag. (SM 13-14)

The refusal on the male's part to acknowledge his wife in public and the female's humble acceptance of that gives an indication of gender asymmetry in traditional (white) Anglo-Celtic Australian society.

In Part One of *Riders in the Chariot*, beside the conflict between Mary Hare and her father, Norbert Hare, much of the attention is devoted to the conflicts and fierce confrontations between women, the characters of whom are clearly delineated and defined. Mrs Jolley, the housekeeper, is doubtless presented as an archetype of evil embodied in the female. She, being convinced of her moral superiority over her employer, Miss Hare, tries to dominate her completely, inferring from her weakness, mental instability, lack of practicality ("Mrs Jolley could have devoured one whom she suspected of a weakness," 90). She is presented in an Eden-like setting like an Eden-like character:

As for Mrs Jolley, night had closed on her like a vise, leaving her just freedom enough to wrestle with the serpents of her conscience. So the two women were thrashing it out on the gritty terrace. The wind, or something, had torn the housekeeper's hair-net, and she hissed, or cried, from between her phosphorescent teeth. (91)

Mrs Jolley had a female role model she wished to follow, Mrs Flack. Typically, "Mrs Jolley would not exactly go, she would *proceed*, rather, to her friend's residence at Sarsaparilla" (91). But her idol shows distance to her: "As for Mrs Flack herself, she would seldom greet her friend with more than: 'HmMMM!' Or: 'Well I never!' Or at most: 'I did not look at the calendar, but might have known.' Yet Mrs Jolley understood the significance of it all. She might have been a cat, except that she was rubbing on the air" (92).

Mrs Flack was a victim to many illnesses and ailings and, as the narrator claims, she was "wedded to her Heart, it might have seemed, if it had not been known she was a widow" (93). The narrator continues his

sarcastic description by explaining her talent for gossip with the biblical concept of omnipresence:

Yet, in spite of such complications and allegiances, she would get about in a slow, definite way, and even when she had not been there, was remarkably well informed on everything that had happened. Indeed, it had been suggested by those few who were lacking in respect that Mrs Flack was omnipresent – under the beds, even, along with the fluff and the chamber-pots. But most people had too much respect for her presence to question her authority. Her hats were too sober, her reports too factual. Where flippancy is absent, truth can only be inferred, and her teeth were broad and real enough to lend additional weight and awfulness to words. (93)

This description, no matter how biased, seems adequate enough to convince the reader that such female characters are real to life and likely to exist or, to use White's favourite wording, might have existed. White always criticised Australian middle-class hypocrisy and the cult of the mediocre. Particularly irritating for him was Australian practicality and the worship of usefulness, clearly visible in the architecture of Australian suburbia like his imagined Sarsaparilla. He aims at Mrs Flack's pretentiousness:

If Mrs Flack's brick looked best of all, her tiles better, brighter-glazed, it was perhaps because of her late husband's connections with the trade. There KARMA stood, the name done in baked enamel. [...] Mrs Jolley loved the latch at Mrs Flack's. She loved the hedge of Orange Triumph. To run her glove along the surface of Mrs Flack's brick home gave her shivers. The sound of its convenience swept her head over heels into the caverns of envy. (92)

White's sarcasm directed at the Flacks' business name "KARMA" which stands in an extreme opposition to what it supposes to mean<sup>1</sup> and "the hedge of Orange Triumph" as a distant, ironic echo of the Parisian *Arc de triomphe* (paradoxically, Orange is now the name of French telecommunication corporation) is the sarcasm directed at Australian

<sup>1</sup> Karma – [ORIGIN Sanskrit karman action, effect, fate.]

In Buddhism & Hinduism, the sum of a person's actions, esp. intentional actions, regarded as determining that person's future states of existence; in Jainism, subtle physical matter which binds the soul as a result of bad actions. Now also gen., fate or destiny following as effect from cause. (SOED, CD-ROM)

Yoga & Health The good Karmas from your past have helped you. J. Didion Whatever happens it's in her karma.

middle class, or rather, Australian suburb dwellers who live in a total ignorance, shamelessly and overconfidently.

### “Some dirty abo bloke!”

In the main-stream (white) Australian collective consciousness, particularly dominant in the era of implementation of White Australia policy of the 1950s and 1960s, Aboriginal people were popularly considered unclean, dirty. White’s heroines copy faithfully this stereotype, demonstrating their prejudice and narrow-mindedness. In a dialogue between Mrs Jolley and Miss Hare in *Riders in the Chariot*, the latter is asked whether she saw nobody she knew:

“No,” said Miss Hare, in a sense truthfully.

But feared for what, in truth, had also been a lie.

“That is.” She corrected herself, “I saw the dark man.”

“Pooh! Some dirty abo bloke!” I would not have an abo come near me. And in the bush! They are all undesirable persons. And in the bush! You will run into trouble, my lady. Mark my words, if I am not right.”

Though she had to smile, and not to herself.

“I am told the aboriginals *are* a very dirty lot. And drunk, and disorderly,” Miss Hare had to admit.

But it was she herself who felt dirty. Mrs Jolley had dirtied her. (80–81)

The metaphorical use of the word “dirty” is indicative of Australia’s moral dirt in terms of racial discrimination and abuse of indigenous people. In his fiction, however, Patrick White did not, in any possible way, try to be an advocate of the black people’s cause: he just demonstrated with precision and sometimes in naturalistic detail their social status in a post-war Australia and the attitude most Anglo-Celtic Australians showed to them.

### (Female) Friendship

White never believed in authentic friendship, least female friendship, since, from a theoretical point of view, two females are not, and never will be, complementary and will never form human wholeness, unity:

they are destined to be alone. When finally Mrs Flack admitted with a sigh to being quite alone,

[a]t that moment something would happen, of such peculiar subtlety that it must have eluded the perception of all but those involved in the experience. The catalyst of sympathy seemed to destroy the envelopes of personality, leaving the two essential beings free to merge and float. Thought must have played little part in any state so passive, so directionless, yet it was difficult not to associate a mental process with silence of such a ruthless and pervasive kind. As they continued sitting, the two women would drench the room with the moth-colours of their one mind. Little sighs would break, scintillating, on the Wilton wall-to-wall. The sound of stomachs, rumbling liquidly, would sluice the already impeccable veneer. Glances rejected one another as obsolete aids of communication. This could have been the perfect communion of souls, if, at the same time, it had not suggested perfect collusion. (94)

The irony with which the narrator speaks of “the perfect communion of souls” – otherwise an intricate and attractive philosophical concept – indicates clearly that kind of female conspiracy that is aimed at the weaker: the other women, men and, generally, those absent. The silent, unspeakable collusion between the women who, apparently, are friends but whose social status is irreconcilable fulfils their hidden desires to dominate, to overpower, to compensate for the unsuccessful (personal) lives, for the lack of love and ambitions, for the narrowness of their minds of which the narrator speaks as of “one mind,” with a derogatory modifier “moth-colours.” We may also add passivity, directionlessness, thoughtlessness to further characterise their ruthless and pervasive union. The return to reality was quick and painless:

Mrs Jolley was usually the first to return. Certain images would refurnish the swept chamber of her mind. There was, for instance – she loved it best of all – the pastel blue plastic dressing-table set in Mrs Flack’s second bedroom.

Mrs Jolley’s face would grow quite hard and lined then, as if a pink-and-blue eiderdown had suffered petrification.

“Alone perhaps, but in a lovely home,” she would be heard to murmur.

“Alone is not the same,” Mrs Flack would usually reply. (94)

Reality is constructed from clichés: from repeated, worn-out phrases, the meaning of which is by far gone and never to be repossessed. Mrs Jolley’s thoughtless mind (“the swept chamber of her mind”) is only able to reproduce images of tangible objects such as the pastel blue plastic

dressing-table set. It is noteworthy that the object is artificially produced, it is plastic and, as later Miss Hare will declare, "plastic is bad" (...). But Miss Hare is on the other side: she is the weak.

As tea and contentment increased understanding of each other, as well as confidence in their own powers, it was only to be expected that two ladies of discretion and taste should produce their knives and try them for sharpness on weaker mortals. Seated above the world on springs and *petty point*, they could lift the lids and look right into the boxes in which moiled other men, crack open craniums as if they had been boiled eggs, read letters before they had been written, scent secretes that would become a source of fear to those concerned. Eventually the ladies would begin. Their methods would be steel, though their antiphon was always bronze. (95)

The narrator uses sarcasm and irony in the depiction of these two female characters, extending his criticism from shallow materialism of Australian middle-class to its pretence to God-like omniscience but instead producing signs of human false psychology. Characteristically, this criticism turns to be gender-oriented: two unmarried, middle-aged females are getting ready for a warfare with the rest of the (predominately male) world, the world they construct in their discourses involving the absent, the non-present, the distant. They both exhibit self-contentment, no self-criticism and they are both convinced of their moral mission in the society at large. Their conviction is probably based of the feeling of their own power in the counter distinction to those against whom it is directed. The metaphor of knives and their being tested for sharpness on weaker mortals may recall either a tyrant rule or a sacrificial offering to an unknown god. The women function here as a kind of intermediary between the (weaker) humans (weaker morally, socially and financially) and the divinities they are supposedly serving. Their mid-position seems to be comfortable and undemanding: they have the (divine) power to see through human minds.

Knives are weapons as well as tools; yet, the impression here is that they are oppressive, murderous and treacherous weapons used to execute the will of their users, like, with a proper sense of proportion, in Shakespearean tragedies. It seems that the narrator is trying to say that we are witnessing the contemporary tragedy of human banality, mediocrity, plainness: the invasion and rule of the average, pointless, pretentious. They may not spill blood (even though there is a mock-crucifixion scene

later on in the novel), but they crucify hope, they kill spirit. The gossip in their mouths takes the form of knives of steel, the poison their mouths produce kill and the hissing sounds turn them into biblical serpents or proverbial domestic geese, symbolic of silliness (“Mrs Jolley began to hiss like any goose. Her pink-and-blue was changed to purple,” 97) since their conclusions and commentaries on what was going on around Sarsaparilla are always presented as superficial, tendentious and naïve. Their partnership – the sisterhood of souls – under the guise of friendship had almost a religious dimension: it always purified at least Mrs Jolley’s mind and soul:

The two ladies seldom continued their conversation at parting, unless to consider briefly the prospects for rain or fine, and soon Mrs Jolley would be going down the streets, still holding her head in a chastened way, like a communicant returning from the altar, conscious that all the ladies, in all the windows, of all the homes, were aware of her shriven state. For, there was no doubt, friendship did purify. (99)

Friendship may, indeed, be cathartic but it requires sacrifice and may be really dangerous: “Mrs Jolley was all murmurs. ‘Friendship’, she said, ‘sometimes involved a plunge’. ‘Friendship is two knives,’ said Miss Hare. ‘They will sharpen each other when rubbed together, but often one of them will slip, and slice off the thumb’” (104). Miss Hare realised how narrow the gap is between (female) friendship and hatred and between evil and good when

[t]owards morning Mrs Jolley appeared in the flesh and wrenched the little tiller from the cold hands. As she joggled the boat in anger, dewdrops fell distinctly from all its protuberances.

“You do hate me,” said Miss Hare, observing evil in person.

The rescuer’s face was quivering with exasperation. The mouth had aged without its teeth, and should have proclaimed innocence, but words flickered almost lividly from between the gums.

“I am only thinking of your health,” Mrs Jolley hissed. “I am responsible in a way, though do not know what possessed me to take it on.”

The evil is also good, Miss Hare understood. (101)

By choosing women for the negative characters of most of his novels, White showed himself as, though undeclared and camouflaged, male chauvinist and misogynist. His misogyny has – it cannot be doubted –

a sexual explanation, too. His “sexual ambivalence,” as he formulated it in *Flaws in the Glass* (20), gave him an option to think of women not as sexual partners or, at worst, as sexual objects, but rather as the ‘other’ of men.

## Femininity as a Spectre of Death

Within the same vein of his discourse of women, White introduces his mother’s type into his fiction in *The Eye of the Storm* (1973), thus preparing a ground for *Flaws in the Glass*, in which he openly accused his mother of tyranny and ruthlessness. Like *The Aunt’s Story*, it opens up strongly with a scene involving an old woman but, unlike it, the woman is not dead but painful:

The old woman’s head was barely fretting against the pillow. She could have moaned slightly.

‘What is it?’ asked the nurse, advancing on her out of the shadow. ‘Aren’t you comfortable, Mrs Hunter?’

‘Not at all. I’m lying on corks. They’re hurting me.’

The nurse smoothed the kidney-blanket, the macintosh, and stretched the sheet. She worked with an air which was not quite professional detachment, not yet human tenderness; she was probably something of a ritualist. ...

‘Oh dear, will it never be morning?’ (ES 9)

The relationship between the old woman patient, Mrs Hunter, and the nurse, Mary de Santis, is complex and, therefore, a number of its aspects should be taken into consideration. As has already been mentioned, the character of Mrs Hunter has been modelled on Ruth, Patrick White’s mother, and she has her preferences and makes choices. The choice is Mary de Santis, the name of whom she cannot remember (“Which one are you?”, 9), and her selection is negative since she hates other nurses (“I hate all those other women ... It is only you I love, Sister de Santis,” 10). Though seriously ill and almost blind, she demands from the nurse a looking glass since she wants to “*sound* intelligent. And look – presentable” (9). The other nurse, Flora Manhood, tends her body and makes her up while de Santis tends her soul:



In spite of her desire to worship, the younger woman might have been struck with horror if the faintly silver lids hadn't flickered open on the milkier, blank blue of Elizabeth Hunter's stare. Then, for an instant, one of the rare corruscations occurred, in which the original sapphire buried under the opalescence invited you to shed your spite, sloth, indifference, resentments, along with an old woman's cruelty, greed, selfishness. Momentarily at least this fright of an old idol became the goddess hidden inside: of life, which you longed for, but hadn't yet dared to embrace; of beauty such as you imagined, but had so far failed to grasp (with which Col grappled, you bitterly suspected, somewhere in the interminably agitated depths of music); and finally, of death, which hadn't concerned you, except as something to be tidied away, till now you were faced with the vision of it.

It was the spectre of death which brought them both toppling down.  
(120–121)

The emphasis on “an old woman's cruelty, greed, selfishness” and contrasted with her attempts to be made up and look presentable add to the macabre and simultaneously grotesque spectacle of self-staged death. As usual in White, we are thrown into the midst of flux: the barbaric idol turns to a worshipped goddess of life, beauty and death – the things you were not able to grasp and understand yet.

Edgecombe (1989) comments on this semantic glide from a mystic vision to a deadly spectre:

As Elizabeth Hunter has had momentary vision of an absolute mystic calm, so by a comparably transient privilege, she Platonically connects the dulled unimaginative mind of Flora Manhood to absolute ideals of beauty, life, and even death as the enabler of a richer life, not a bump in hospital routine which needs “to be tidied away.” But the elatedness is banished by a shift in mood (so frequent in the novel, and here registered in the semantic glide from “vision” to “spectre”), and the women are disconnected from their transport and returned to a squalid reality: the goddess reconverts to idol, and the reluctant visionary becomes a disgruntled nurse once again. Nonetheless, this intimation of mystery has to some extent been facilitated by the very artifice that at first glance would seem to be hostile to such disclosures. (122–123)

Vision, as opposed to spectre, has in White positive connotations and it seems that his purpose in *The Eye of the Storm* is a criticism of the institution of the family – not just his own family – but the traditional, matriarchal/patriarchal family, with the powerful figure of one of the parents in the centre – the other being a mere, weak complement to her/him – and the children lacking their love and competing for it between themselves.

Doubtless, it is the model of Anglo-Saxon middle-class family that White criticises strongly (“families can eat you,” 22), in which rivalry and hatred dominate over love and compassion. As a clever thinker, to justify his judgements and objectify them, he makes a foreigner, often a Jew/Jewess articulate them: “Mrs Lipmann’s eyebrows reached towards each other like glistening, palpitating caterpillars. ‘I will never understand why Anglo-Saxons reject the warm of the family’” (21–22). Of course, White would not be himself – or at least in line with stereotypes – not to mock her pronunciation (“I have made the betts,” 21) and describe her as “this small unhappy Jewess” (21).

This Jewish mania of White finds its issue in another female character bearing a Jewish surname, Dulcie Feinstein whom he introduced in *The Solid Mandala*. This time, what he attacks through the exposition of this character is the quality he observed in his parents – the Australian middle-class affluence. Dulcie, attracting the attention of other guests gathered at Mrs Musto’s party, relieved Waldo from the fear of him being made an object of their interest:

Now that he had stopped being afraid he had begun to despise their hostess, along with her kindness, her riches, and her choice of politely insulting guests. Poverty was the only virtue. The girl Dulcie was probably poor. In her pink, as opposed to white, dress. Not that he didn’t despise Dulcie as well. In his crusade of bitterness there was only room for one ardent pauper. The girl in pink, besides, was about his own age, and might handle too clumsily some of the truths he was anxious to establish.

So he avoided Dulcie. Even when he was looking at her you couldn’t have told. Or only Dulcie could have.

She appeared overheated. The uncontrolled tennis ball had plainly branded the side of her face. She was also plain. If not downright ugly. Waldo would have hated to touch her, for fear that she might stick to him, literary, not deliberately, but in spite of herself. (SM 90)

The object of Waldo’s revulsion has been, in fact, not the girl but rather all the qualities exhibited by middle-class Australian society: the love of riches, hypocrisy, insults, the choice of guests – the things he observed and despised in his own home, particularly in his mother, Ruth. Dulcie, the persona with whom he feels a certain affinity as an outsider and pauper, is not – as one may speculate – the other of Waldo, or at least he does accept such a possibility even though he claims she might

know what he wants to know. He reacts angrily to Mrs Musto's words, "You two, Dulcie and Waldo, ought to find something in common. You are about the same age," Mrs Musto said – she was as stupid as that" (SM 90). Yet, in time, he changed his attitude towards her. One Saturday afternoon at the Feinsteins, "[w]hen he came into the room Waldo felt for the first time this is Dulcie being herself. You couldn't say she was exactly ugly. Or perhaps he was just used to her by now" (111), which probably means that ugliness – like many other aesthetic qualities – is a subjective category and its designation may change considerably in one within an extended period of time or, alternatively, it is time that makes ugliness (in women) tolerable.

Finally, a word for Patrick White from his *Flaws in the Glass* on the topic under discussion – his misogyny:

I read constantly that I am a misogynist. If I had married a woman or two and jumped into bed with three hundred others, treating all of them abominably, I'd have been known as a woman lover. Only the feminists, understandably, would have accused. In life I have known far more admirable women than admirable men. Those who have read my books attentively, not just glanced through one or two of the more controversial at the time when they were conversational fodder for dinner parties, must surely have seen this. Of course my women are *flawed* because they are also human beings, as I am, which is why I'm writing this book. Every day as I sit down at my desk I struggle to overcome a revulsion for what I am doing. But it had to be done. (FG 252)

All White's arguments apart, it seems that the most convincing explanation, though perhaps one-sided and simplistic, is to look, in a Freudian way, into his early childhood, the failed relationship with his mother, a very good contact with his Nanny, a substitute of a caring and loving biological mother, and a disappointing relationship with his father. That is one aspect. The other one is his education in an English boarding school, which may account for his initial interest in the male body and then, on entering the world of adults, a growing and sustained fascination with male homosexual artists, mainly painters and actors who, to some extent, were his personal realisation of a long dream of becoming one of them. As he explains in *Flaws in the Glass* (1981),

Those who are doomed to become artists are seldom blessed with equanimity. They are tossed to drunken heights, only to be brought down into a sludge

of headachy despair; their arrogance gives way to humiliation at the next curve of the switchback. This particularly applies to the artists of the theatre. Most children have theatre in them. Those who carry it over into adolescence and, more or less, maturity, commit the ultimate indecency of becoming professional actors. If I didn't go all the way, I became instead that far more indecent hybrid, a frustrated one. Sexual ambivalence helped drive me in on myself. Lacking flamboyance, cursed with reserve, I chose fiction, or more likely it was chosen for me, as a means of introducing to a disbelieving audience the cast of contradictory characters of which I am composed. (19–20)

White admits to being composed of contradictory characters, a hybrid with sexual ambivalence that allowed him to freely move between genders, once being the Jungian animus and the other times – the anima.

### **Laura – the Other of an Australian woman**

Therefore, to argue that he hated *all* women would be a serious error. There is this one, Laura, the Other of an Australian woman, the literary character he fathered and the other of man since, as Jung argues about the animus in his *Aspects of the Feminine* (1986): “Woman is compensated by a masculine element and therefore her unconscious has, so to speak, a masculine imprint. This results in a considerable psychological difference between men and women, and accordingly I have called the projection-making factor in women the animus, which means mind or spirit” (171).

Laura, whom Voss meets at the Bonners' house in the outskirts of Sydney, seems to be constructed as a peculiar kind of complement to Voss, his alter ego, both in regards to them being the Other of the people with whom they lived, their origin, aspiration and intellectual capacities and as his female counterpart, always eager to improve and develop:

Few people of attainments take easily to a plan of self-improvement. Some discover very early their perfection cannot endure the insult. Others find their intellectual pleasure lies in the theory, not practice. Only a few stubborn ones will blunder on, painfully, out of the luxuriant world of their pretensions into the desert of mortification and reward.

To this third category belonged Laura Trevelyan. She had been kept very carefully, put away like some object of which the precious nature is taken for granted. She had a clear skin, distinction, if unreliable beauty. Her clothes

were soothing, rather moody, exactly suited to her person. No one in that household could write a more appropriate note on occasions of mourning, or others calling for tact, in that version of the Italian hand, which courts the elegant while eschewing the showy. (V 74)

It is quite infrequent in White to count a female into a laudable category of those few (male) ones who, stubbornly and blundering on, will continue through, as he calls it, "the desert of mortification and reward," without, as we learn only later, a spectacular success in material terms but rather becoming, as in the case of Voss, a local legend. And since she is a woman, stereotypically and perhaps chauvinistically, Laura is regarded as weak and thus kept away from dangers and challenges of life as struggle and protected as an object of value constituted not so much by her beauty, which is not evident ("unreliable"), but rather her ability to write – the feature White esteemed highly:

She was the literate member of the family, even frighteningly so, it seemed to the others, and more by instinct than from concentrated study. Not that the merchant had denied his girls the number of governesses requisite to their social position, and the French Mademoiselle, and the music master, it need not be added. The niece's knowledge of the French tongue, modest, though sufficient, was terribly impressive to some, and on evenings when her aunt entertained, she would be persuaded to perform, with admirably light touch, one of the piano pieces by Mendelssohn or Field. (V 74)

Like Voss (and White), she was born outside of Australia (in England) but brought up there by her uncle. She has got a problem with constructing her own identity since she does not feel either British or Australian; what she feels, however, is that she is unwanted – she does not belong anywhere, and, in this respect, she seems to be closer to White himself. Also, from the autobiographical point of view, that White equips her with a moderate command of French and the ability to play the piano – very much his own way and to complete his self-portrait he invents a native German for whom he was taken when visiting Danzig before, as he calls it, Hitler's war, seems to be a convincing proof that in each of his major characters one may find a fraction of his own character. As a woman, or the effeminate part of the author, Laura is aware of her limitations:

If she was a prig, she was not so far gone that she did not sometimes recognize it, and smart behind the eyes accordingly. But to know is not to cure. She was beset by all kinds of dark helplessnesses that might become obsession. If I am lost, then who can be saved; she was egotist enough to ask. She wanted very badly to make amends for the sins of others. So that in the face of desperate needs, and having rejected prayer as a rationally indefensible solution, she could not surrender her self-opinion, at least, not altogether. Searching the mirror, biting her fine lips, she said: I have strength, certainly, of a kind, if it is not arrogance. Or, she added, is it not perhaps – will? (V 74–75)

Laura represents the features of character which were admirable in Voss, of course, in due proportions: she hesitates when Voss does not, she is not certain how to distinguish between strength and arrogance – Voss does not see a problem here: he is both strong and arrogant and, primarily, where Laura just ponders upon a possibility of will taking over her strength/arrogance, Voss is positive his actions are motivated by will, “pure will.” Additionally, while she is doubtful in the matters of her religion, Voss unflinchingly rejects it, believing, like Nietzsche, that religion is an occupation for women:

The German thought somewhat surreptitiously about the will of God. The nurture of faith, on the whole, he felt, was an occupation for women, between the preserving – pan and the linen-press. There was that niece of the Bonners, he remembered, a formal, and probably snobbish girl, who would wear her faith cut to the usual feminine pattern. Perhaps with a colder elegance than most. (V 48)

Yet, evidently, Voss is attracted to Laura in a way two opposites are, and Laura needs Voss to serve an inspiration for her. Walsh (1977) notices an exceptional character of Laura and her unusual intelligence as standing out of the background of her middle-class environment:

At the other [end of the scale of intelligence] is Laura Traveyan, isolated in her small circle by her cool, ‘Cambridge’ intelligence and taste for the things of the mind. She meets Voss at the time when she was tortured by the possibility of losing her religious faith. Voss is a totally new experience for her, alien both to her conventional connections and to her own preference for moderate rationality. He was like lightning or inspiration, and inspiration, the uncalled for, the unearthed experience, is important in a novel which is to be devoted in a major way to exploring the pure and abstract will: important, that is, as another possibility or dimension in human experience. (43)

And this another dimension in human experience which Walsh mentions is her mystical relationship with Voss, particularly when he is away in the desert: no physicality is involved and the contact between them is via thoughts and letters which they are never meant to read: "Dear Miss Trevelyan, *do not pray for me*, but I would ask you to join me in thought, and exercise of will, daily, hourly, until I may return to you, the victor" (V 153).

She is transformed under his influence and inspiration from a passive, withdrawn woman, uncertain of herself, to an inspired, passionate and natural believer in a higher order of the mind: "the passivity of her existence flares into intensity in his presence. She appreciates him in a way that no others in her circle can but she is also still sufficiently 'rational' to understand his nature" (Walsh 43). Laura towers intellectually over other women, simple women, the servants, whose knowledge is based on intuition:

'You have not slept, miss.'  
 'I would not say that I had not slept,' Laura replied. 'How can you tell, Rose?'  
 'Oh, I know. There are things you can tell by knowing.'  
 'You are determined to mystify me,' laughed the girl, and immediately frowned to think how she must run the gauntlet of her servant's intuition.  
 'I am a simple woman,' Rose said.  
 Laura held her face away. The yellow light was blinding her.  
 'I do not know what you are, Rose. You have never shown me.'  
 'Ah, now, miss, you are playing on my ignorance.'  
 'In what way?'  
 'How am I to show you what I am? I am not an educated person. I am just a woman.' (V 75)

Laura's intelligence, as a female middle-class outcast, is comparable to man's superior mode of knowledge. Yet, even in a dream in which she appeared as a mother figure, she was powerless, unable to help the physically exhausted Voss, whose only hope that remained with him was his own will:

Once during the night she came to him, and held his head in her hands, but he would not look at her, although he was calling: Laura, Laura. So a mother holds against her breast the head of a child that has been dreaming, but fails to take the dream to herself; this must remain with the child, and will recur for ever. So Laura remained powerless in the man's dream. (V 297-298)

Laura's powerlessness in the face of Voss's declining physical strength makes her less prone to contempt, but when men are described as feminine, which White frequently does, it has most definitely got a clearly pejorative connotation and denigrates them to the (lower) position of women, both in a social and intellectual sense:

Then, there were the few men who assumed humility without shame. It could well be that, in the surrender to selflessness, such individuals enjoyed a kind of voluptuous transport. Voss would sometimes feel embittered at what he had not experienced, even though he was proud not to have done so. How they merge themselves with the concept of their God, he considered almost with disgust. These were the feminine men. (V 48)

On the whole, it may justifiably be argued that White was perverse in his misogyny. It seems that the most atrocious female portrait he has sketched was the one of his mother as Mrs Hunter in *The Eye of the Storm* – an elderly dying woman obsessed with her past, never able to love anyone and never been loved by anyone. Certainly, Laura as a female character is closer to the writer himself as the feminine part of his mind than to any other woman presented in his novels. Most female characters, however, will be pathetic and kitschy, particularly those set in suburban Sydney, the embodiments of all-powerful materialism, shallowness and narrow-mindedness. In his essay "Patrick White's Perversity" (1998), Andrew McCann writes that

White's writing is ... driven by [the] sense of the ambiguity of the signifier, or feature, though beyond a contempt for the kitsch of suburban consumerism his literary modernism has little in common with the minimalism that characterises Boyd's architectural norms. White's most emphatically suburban characters typically dress and speak in a way that rehearses the logic of the feature as a kind of personal style. ... Yet in White's writing the presence of this sort of kitsch does not simply condemn his characters to the state of 'prescribed happiness' Adorno describes. While characters like Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack in *Riders in the Chariot* do embody both the banality and the evil which seem to imply the triumph of forms of social hygiene and order, elsewhere in White's work identification with or desire for the comfort of the feature or signifier seems itself to push beyond derisive caricature, to embody the very excessiveness – evident in grotesque performativity – that threatens to shatter the fantasmatic decorum of featurist space. (64)



White's idea, as it may be concluded from a wide range of his texts and the female characters presented in them, was to construct an androgynous ideal, the motif especially important to *Riders in the Chariot*, *The Solid Mandala* and *The Vivisector*, where Hurtle Duffield's women turn out to be, in fact, one woman playing out various roles at the same time, that of mother, wife, daughter and sister, which echoes Freud's concepts of one woman in three formulae: mother, wife and death (cf. Freud's essay "Three Caskets"). Stemming from the premise of the unity of the selves, Bliss argues

If all selves are ultimately one, then the single self must fail [like, for instance, Miss Hare of *Riders in the Chariot*, RW] to separate and complete itself apart from the whole, whether by heroism which can never truly protect, or love which can never be adequate to its task. But, again paradoxically, only those who strive to love, to save, and to be 'themselves', are allowed this failure, which, when judged by its consequences, can be seen as a sort of *felix culpa* or fortunate fall. For failure can open the way to a greatly enlarged understanding and experience of life. (11)

The failure archetype, according to Jung, is part of collective unconscious and constitutes our individual, personal unconscious and, as such, marks a stage in personal development or, to use Jungian language again, situates us on the path from the impure soul to perfected one.

## The Mother-Complex

The failure Patrick White experienced in the relationship with his mother and then his choice of sexual orientation allows us to formulate a thesis that it was a result of the mother-complex he had developed in his boyhood. Carl Gustav Jung argues that its foundation is formed by the mother archetype, very common in any civilisation, in which of primal importance is the personal mother, grandmother, and then stepmother, mother-in-law and any woman performing this function, e.g. a nurse (as it was in White's case) or governess. Characteristically, Jung continues, "[m]any things arousing devotion of feelings of awe, as for instance the Church, university, city or country, heaven, earth, the woods, the sea or any still waters, matter even, the underworld and the moon, can be mother-symbols" (1990: 81). Because of its shape and protection it

gives, the magic circle or mandala is also classified as mother archetype. Jung enumerates negative mother symbols as well: the witch, the dragon, a large fish, a serpent. From the mother archetype there stems the mother-complex in the development of which the mother always plays an active role. As Jung asserts,

[t]he effects of the mother-complex differ according to whether it appears in a son or a daughter. Typical effects on the son are homosexuality and Don Juanism, and sometimes also impotence<sup>2</sup>. In homosexuality, the son's entire heterosexuality is tied to the mother in an unconscious form; in Don Juanism, he unconsciously seeks his mother in every woman he meets. The effects of a mother-complex on the son may be seen in the ideology of the Cybele and Attis type: self-castration, madness, and early death. Because of the difference in sex, a son's mother-complex does not appear in pure form. This is the reason why in every masculine mother-complex, side by side with the mother archetype, a significant role is played by the image of the man's sexual counterpart, the anima. The mother is the first feminine being with whom the man-to-be comes in contact, and she cannot help playing, overtly or covertly, consciously or unconsciously, upon the son's masculinity, just as the son in his turn grows increasingly aware of his mother's femininity. (85–86)

The mother-complex Patrick White developed is not only evidenced in his autobiography, *Flaws in the Glass*, in which he officially acknowledged his homosexuality, but it is clearly seen in the woman characters he constructed in his major novels that were based on his mother-type. In the former, he, unsurprisingly, did not point a finger at his mother as a source of his homoerotic cravings for the simple reason that he might not have been aware of it even though he admitted his fascination with Ruth putting on her make up. But had he ever thought, even from hindsight, that this would push him into a man's embrace? Not likely.

Jung (1990 [1976]) distinguishes another aspect of the mother-complex, Don Juanism, which is also very much part of White's own psyche and appears as

bold and resolute manliness; ambitious striving after the highest goals; opposition to all stupidity, narrow-mindedness, injustice, and laziness; willingness to make sacrifices for what is regarded as right, sometimes bordering on heroism; perseverance, inflexibility of will; a curiosity that does not shrink even from the riddles of the universe; and finally, a revolutionary spirit which strives to put a new face upon the world. (87)

<sup>2</sup> But the father-complex also plays a considerable part here [Jung's note, RW].

Practically, every single word that Jung used to describe Don Juanism can be equally well used to characterise Patrick White's complex personality and/or to sketch his psychological portrait: he really was a person who tried strongly to change the Western world, "a revolutionary spirit" who condemned it for its love of materialism and little spirituality.

Conclusively, Patrick White seems to be a man of contradictions, which he tried to reconcile throughout his whole lifetime. Whether he was a man of success or failure – the failure that he offered to Australians so frequently in his novels and which they wholeheartedly disliked – time will tell since, as he once said, "The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming" (V 269). Nonetheless, just one thing seems to be certain: he was exceptional, he did not really belong to his time – he should have been born much earlier or much later – now, we probably need him more than they needed him in the 1960s or 1970s, now in the era of globalisation, ultramodern technologies, the omnipresence and omnipotence of international banks, corporations, Facebook-like portals. Whoever now speaks of landscape imagination, visions, chariots in the sky? The mad, the excluded, the artists. Because they see differently; others do not see – they just look.

We have been living in the symbol-less era. Intellectual elites across the globe dismiss various symbols as basically meaningless and not appropriate to today's reality. White was this rare example of a person who wanted to bring symbolism back on the agenda of readerly and scholarly discussion in the late twentieth century. Most certainly, with the help of Carl Gustav Jung, more can be deduced from his texts, very meticulously constructed and abundant with meaning. The thesis of his mother-complex that has been formulated here explains a lot, particularly when taken into consideration in the context of the construction of his female characters, his alleged misogyny and also homosexuality to which he admitted in his 1981 autobiography.



## AFTERWORD

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In viewing Patrick White's literary output through the lens of, on the one hand, European literary traditions, particularly, the tradition of Modernism and its grand narratives, and autobiography, postcolonial and critical theory, on the other, this book supports the claim that Patrick White was a truly transnational, multicultural Australian writer who greatly changed the perception of, particularly, Australian novel in the world and extended the intellectual horizon of Australia itself. He transformed the novel to make it "not necessarily the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism" and endow it with "the texture of music, the seriousness of paint" (PWS). His novels are, therefore, constructed in such a way as to give the reader the impressions of gaps and ambiguities: they are always open-ended and never easily classified and interpreted. As Susan Lever spoke of White's novels:

White transformed the possibilities for the Australian novel by demonstrating that it was a place to test ideas against complex spiritual, psychological and emotional experience, not only an avenue for national storytelling. His series of brilliant novels established the form as the dominant literary mode to express the shifting intellectual debates and allegiances of contemporary times. It has remained a source of opposition to dominant assumptions about Australian life, and a means of wayward commentary on the more rational and established ideas about what such life may mean. (2009: 498)

This extension of novel's possibilities within the Australian context makes it comparable with its European and American counterparts, in many respects exceeding their potentials in terms of language and landscape varieties of which Australia abounds. That White abandoned national heroism to the advantage of individual and collective psychologizing, resulting frequently in failure most certainly produced a flaw in so-far unspoilt image of Australia as a pioneering and innocent nation

and destroyed its myth as a lucky country, which, needless to say, did not earn White respect and admiration. As a result,

White's novels offer a pessimistic European perspective on Australian life and, though fully immersed in literary tradition, he experimented with formal conventions, shifting from revisionist history novels to contemporary satire, and finally to question his own fiction-making. His novels are poetic, extravagant, and critical both of Australian society and the role of the individual artist within it. (Lever 2009: 498)

In consequence, his language is poetic, rich in metaphors, similes and unusual syntax: he was the last "metaphysical" poet – an Antipodean heir of the grand tradition of the seventeenth-century English metaphysical poets – but instead of versifying as they did, he painstakingly put words on sheets of papers so that they reflected in short paragraphs and dialogues the world he saw in a grain of sand, a leaf of grass, a Sunday morning. He was aware of the limitations language has and that words cannot convey meaning adequately enough; therefore, for the unknowable he chose visions, imagination, the *Unheimliche* in the belief that the "material world" (RC 117) gives stimuli for the operation of the mind and imagination enlivens the world, opens it up for the inquisitive mind and makes it show its processes, translates the unknowable and unfamiliar into more understandable, more familiar, more homely. He knew perfectly well the limitations of the human, both in physical and mental senses; that is why his descriptions of daring explorations, like in *Voss*, are to be regarded as studies in Australian consciousness that tells us there is a border beyond which the self cannot press on, that the only thing awaiting us is failure, a total collapse: "Given, then, that failure is so deeply and ineradicably rooted in the Australian experience, it is hardly surprising that this theme should be central both to Australian literature in general and to the work of Patrick White" (Bliss 1986: 4).

Since White was a socially conscious writer, the project of Xanadu that he articulated in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) may be compared to the grand project of constructing a multiracial and multicultural Australia, a truly transnational nation. In his pessimistic vision the project was likely to fall into crumbles because of emptiness and inauthenticity dominating Australian society, majority of who want to fill it with various material goods and possessions.

Patrick White is, therefore, the poet of the surroundings associated with his own private mysteries, the poet of his own private spaces, landscapes and settings, be them suburban or desert or mental, the introvert. He worked out his own system of beliefs that he developed as if it were an unbroken circle of progression coming out from the centre, the self – his own self:

Characters, images, situations and themes are repeated so insistently that they must surely be constant and unchanging components of White's temperament and world-view. He seems, in fact, to invite the reader to regard the various works as different manifestations of the same continuous vision by the way he links them together into an unbroken chain. Each novel contains a seed that unfolds in time to become the dominant preoccupation of the next. Holstius, the 'tree walking' of *The Aunt's Story*, grows into *The Tree of Man*, Stan Parker's lonely vigils in stony places are transformed into Voss's obsession with the desert. The Comet that appears at the end of *Voss* emerges as the Chariot in the next novel, and its fourfold conjunction of the Riders surrounded by the Whirlwind is, in turn, metamorphosed into the key symbol of *The Solid Mandala*. (Beatson 4)

The same may be repeated in case of White's characters who, as he admitted on many occasions, are himself and are strictly connected with symbols and visions he produces to make his version of the Unknowable more transparent and legible to the reader:

Arthur Brown's passing remark in this novel [*The Solid Mandala*] to 'the Viviseckshunist' swells into Hurtle Duffield's *Vivisektor*, while the 'Mad Eye' that Hurtle paints as a boy becomes the growing point of *The Eye of the Storm*. As well as these overt signs of continuity we find explicit thematic utterances in the earlier novels illuminating obscure corners of the later ones, while symbols and concepts that have risen to consciousness in the later works organize and elucidate in retrospect much that was only latent in the earlier years. In spite of the manifold forms into which Patrick White has incarnated his vision, there has been no basic change of direction. (4)

Since he was a painter of words, he keenly sketched human portraits, not only mental as poets do, but also physical – his interests in the bodies, both beautiful and ugly, are obvious. His inquisitiveness stems from early childhood observations of adults in his extended family, particularly his mother and godmother (Theodora and Ruth in his novels) and his father. The panorama of his psychological characters is vast and the range

colossal from individual eccentrics, visionaries, artists, mad women to explorers, farmers, doctors, postmen, some of whom are him:

Like the painter Hurtle Duffield, who sometimes seems to speak with author's own voice, White appears convinced that his medium will always be inadequate to his message. Although, like Laura in *Voss*, he would 'describe in simple words the immensity of simple knowledge' (p. 236), he often seems to agree with Arthur of *The Solid Mandala* that 'words are not what makes you see' (p. 51). Not only do his characters repeatedly voice a disgust with or suspicion of the refractory nature of language, but *in propria persona* White has insisted that he shares their discomfiture. In a 1973 interview he says, 'I am hobbled by words,'<sup>1</sup> and in his 'self-portrait', *Flaws in the Glass*, he complains of the difficulty of forcing 'grey, bronchial prose' to 'give visual expression to what I have inside me' (p. 150). (Bliss 12)

Patrick White's contribution into what is referred to as Australian literature cannot be overestimated. This specific sense of estrangement, peculiarity, oddity he introduced into it, for the most part, undermined the very concept of it. His fiction dismantled – however, not from the start – nationalism as the foundation principle, thus making Australian literature a truly transnational one in the light of postcolonial theory. He added to it what it basically and fundamentally lacked from its very birth – spirituality, the mystic dimension, imagination. He felt at home with the ideas of Transcendentalism, which presents a highly individualistic vision of humanity, with individually discerned aesthetic and spiritual priorities. In the fashion of its critique of formal religion and its resistance to pure rationalism, White distanced himself from Church, particularly the "C. of E." (he respected the Greek Orthodox Church), but certainly did not adopt rationalism being aware of its limitation in its overlooking emotions and spirituality, which he saw as an indispensable complement of humanity.

Finally, his confessional autobiography and the coming out – the shock for conservative Australia of the 1980s: the Nobel Prize winner for literature officially acknowledges his sexual orientation in writing, thus starting a fashion for confessional literature in the Antipodes, which simultaneously caused some problems, also overseas:

The Nobel Prize gave rise to misconceptions abroad: that White was the only writer of importance Australia had produced; that there had been no

<sup>1</sup> Herring and Wilkes, 'A Conversation with Patrick White', *Southerly* 33, 1973: 138–139.



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symbolic or metaphysical writers before him; and that he had 'introduced a whole new continent' to world literature. The truth is otherwise on all three counts, especially the second. White's was the crowning achievement of a long spiritual tradition ... In the age of moral relativism, his belief in absolutes seemed an anachronism. His love of country was one of these, as defined by Richard Aldington: 'Patriotism is a lively sense of collective responsibility. Nationalism is a silly cock crowing on its own dung-hill.' In a world given over to destructive nationalism, Patrick White's life stands like a beacon. (Green in *Patrick White: A Tribute* 5–6)

It is, by all means, evident enough that Patrick White's writing or his patriotic spirit did not originate in a vacuum of Australian desert landscapes – they gave the shape to them and added colours to his painter's palette, as it has been stated on several occasions before, but one thing seems undeniable: the world, including Australia at large, looked at this smallest continent and at themselves through a different prism and they saw what had not noticed before.

Nowadays, in the era of growing globalisation, the old maps of meaning are giving way to uncertainties, which almost instantaneously take forms of new, sometimes radically different interpretations. Like in this project, the intention was to extend them beyond the boundaries of nation-states, societies and cultures and make them as much transnational as local.



# APPENDIX

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## Words and Critics

### **Life**

“Life ... was a succession of whirlpools: emotion, discovery, magic, the disenchantment which usually follows too feverish anticipation” (FG 6).

### **Imagination**

“Imagination was not part of the White make-up” (FG 9).

### **Scholar’s Mind**

“I knew I hadn’t a scholar’s mind. Such as I had was more like a calico bag hanging from the sewing-room door-knob, stuffed with snippets of material of contrasting textures and clashing colours, which might at some future date be put to some practical, aesthetic, or even poetic use. I believe it is this rag-bag of a disorderly mind which has more than offended some of my Australian academic critics. For them the controlled monochrome of reason, for me the omnium gatherum of instinctual colour which illuminates the more often than not irrational behaviour of sensual man” (FG 38).

### **Artist as a Sodomite**

“An artist in the family tree was almost like a sodomite; if you had one you kept him dark” (FG 57).

### **‘Historical’ Novel**

“(If there is less gush about that other so-called ‘historical’ novel *A Fringe of Leaves* it is perhaps because they sense in its images and narrative the reasons why we have become what we are today.)” (FG 104).

### **Love Oneself**

“The ability to love oneself is probably what makes an actor; that it also to some extent makes the novelist I discovered only much later. In my youth I found it hard to reconcile life and art; if I did, I think I suspected I was committing an insincerity” (FG 84).

### Tragi-comedy of Sex

“On the longer leave in London I frequented pubs, got drunk, and walked the streets through a metal confetti. I learned a lot about the whore’s mentality, and the variations on her one client, in fact the whole tragi-comedy of sex” (FG 85).

### Inspiration

“Bronchitis, Menuhin playing Bartok’s Violin Concerto, and a virulent review of *The Tree of Man*, helped me resolve the death of Voss. I had not felt up to it before. Suddenly I was injected with adrenalin enough to hack off the head” (FG 141).

### Mistakes

“I never make the mistake of re-reading a novel once it has gone to the printer. That is why I can’t answer people who ask me the meaning of line 7 page 18. Playing safe? Perhaps. On the other hand I have to get on with what has still to be written” (FG 142).

### Flaws in the Glass

“The mirror in the bathroom at ‘Dogwoods’ had a flaw in it like a faint birthmark. I associate the bathroom with Manoly’s voyage to Greece in 1958. He was away what seemed like years, but the break had to be made to exorcise the homesickness, the doubts, the longings most migrants suffer from. I had the bathroom renovated. A sulky youth laid approximately six tiles a morning, then sat around listening to a transistor. I couldn’t wait for him to knock off and leave me to a different kind of solitude.

While on my own I was growing vague. Once in the middle of the night I found myself about to piss in the bathroom waste-paper basket. I grabbed at food, I guzzled drink. The dogs were my only comfort, Solomon sleeping at my feet, Lottie snuggled into one armpit” (FG 142–143).

### Farting

“Some critics complain that my characters are always farting. Well, we do, don’t we? *Fart*. Nuns fart according to tradition and *pâtisserie*. I have actually heard one” (FG 143).

### The Other: A Jewish Dunny

“Behind him now, all was music of a kind, and laughter, as he blundered down the passage. He heard at last, against the doors he opened, Mrs Feinstein following him.

‘I want,’ he mumbled foolishly.

‘You want a bath-room?’ Mrs Feinstein asked most sympathetically.

‘No,’ he said, in what he heard was his surliest voice. ‘The other.’

‘Here,’ she said, opening the door.

So that he did not have to go any farther, out through any grass, looking for a dunny. Here was a real porcelain lavatory with mahogany seat, on which he sat down at once and gave way to the diarrhoea which had been threatening him.” (SM 110)

### **Humbleness**

“The seasons we experienced ran through every cliché in the Australian climatic calendar: drought, fire, gales, floods along the road at Windsor and Richmond. During what seemed like months of rain I was carrying a trayload of food to a wormy litter of pups down at the kennels when I slipped and fell on my back, dog dishes shooting in all directions. I lay where I had fallen, half-blinded by rain, under a pale sky, cursing through watery lips **a God in whom I did not believe** [bold added]. I began laughing finally, at my own helplessness and hopelessness, in the mud and the stench from my filthy old oilskin.

It was a turning point. **My disbelief appeared as farcical as my fall** [bold added]. At that moment I was truly humbled” (FG 144).

### **Inklings of God’s presence**

“My inklings of God’s presence are interwoven with my love of the one human being who never fails me. This is why I fall short in my love of human beings in general. There are too many travesties of an ideal I am still foolish enough to expect after a lifetime’s experience, and knowledge of myself” (FG 145).

### **Being Different**

“So the white crook-neck thing, white too about the wattles, stood around grabbing what and whenever it could, but sort of sideways.

‘Why’re the others pecking at it, Pa?’

‘Because they don’t like the look of it. Because it’s different.’ (Vi 9)

### **Someone so unimportant as father**

“I have heard about you, Waldo,” Mr Feinstein clicked. “I have heard about your father. He is, they say, a fine man.”

It surprised Waldo that anyone should have heard of somebody so unimportant as his father, let alone imagine him a “fine man”. (SM 104)

### **Jung’s Sacrifice**

Jung de-emphasized the importance of sexual development so fervently postulated by Freud and focused on the **collective unconscious**. He was very concerned about moving away from Freud and losing his friendship, about which we can read in his book, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961): “When I was working on my book about libido and approaching the end of the chapter ‘The Sacrifice,’ I knew in advance that its

publication would cost me my friendship with Freud. ...For two months I was unable to touch my pen, so tormented was I by the conflict. Should I keep my thoughts to myself, or should I risk the loss of so important a friendship? At last I resolved to go ahead with the writing – and it did indeed cost me Freud's friendship" (1961: 191).

### Truth as a Physical Fact

"This conflict is due to the strange supposition that a thing is true only if it presents itself as a *physical* fact. Thus some people believe it to be physically true that Christ was born as the son of a virgin, while others deny this is a physical impossibility. Everybody can see that there is no logical solution to this conflict." (Jung 1991 [1958]: xi)

"Both are right and both are wrong. Yet they could easily reach agreement if they dropped the word "physical." "Physical" is not the only criterion of truth: there are also *psychic* truths which can neither be explained nor proved nor contested in any physical way. If, for instance, a general belief existed that the river Rhine had at one time flowed backwards from its mouth to its source, then this belief would in itself be a fact even though such an assertion, physically understood, would be deemed utterly incredible. Beliefs of this kind are psychic facts which cannot be contested and need no proof." (Jung 1991 [1958]: xi–xii)

"Religious statements are of this type. They refer without exception to things that cannot be established as physical facts. If they do not do this, they would inevitably fall into the category of the natural sciences. Takes as referring to anything physical, they make no sense whatsoever, and science would dismiss them as non-experienceable. They would be mere miracles, which are sufficiently exposed to doubt as it is, and yet they could not demonstrate the reality of the spirit or *meaning* that underlies them, because meaning is something that always demonstrates itself and is experienced on its own merits. The spirit and meaning of Christ are present and perceptible to us even without the aid of miracles. Miracles appeal only to the understanding of those who cannot perceive the meaning. They are mere substitute for the not understood reality of the spirit. This is not to say that the living presence of the spirit is not occasionally accompanied by marvellous physical happenings. I only wish emphasize that these happenings can neither replace nor bring about an understanding of the spirit, which is the one essential thing." (Jung 1991 [1958]: xi–xii)

"The fact that religious statements frequently conflict with the observed physical phenomena proves that in contrast to physical perception the spirit is autonomous and that psychic experience is to a certain extent independent of physical data. The psyche is an autonomous factor, and religious statements are psychic confessions which in the last resort are based on unconscious, i.e., on transcendental, processes. These processes are not accessible to physical perception but demonstrate their existence through the confessions of the psyche. The resultant statements are filtered through the medium of human consciousness: that is to say, they are given visible forms which in their turn are subject to manifold influences from within and without. That is why whenever we speak of religious contents we move in a world of images that point to something inef-

fable. We do not know how clear or unclear these images, metaphors and concepts are in respect of their transcendental object. If, for instance, we say "God," we give expression to an image or verbal concept which has undergone many changes in the course of time. We are, however, unable, to say to what degree of certainty – unless it be by faith – whether these changes affect only the images and concepts, or the Unspeakable itself. After all, we can imagine God as an eternally flowing current of vital energy that endlessly changes shape just as easily as we can imagine him as an eternally unmoved, unchangeable essence. Our reason is sure only of one thing: that it manipulates images and ideas which are dependent on human imagination and its temporal and local conditions, and which have therefore changed innumerable times in the course of their long history. There is no doubt there is something behind these images that transcends consciousness and operates in such a way that the statements do not vary limitlessly and chaotically, but clearly all relate to a few basic principles or archetypes. These, like the psyche itself, or the matter, are unknowable as such. All we can do is to construct models of them which we know to be inadequate, a fact which is confirmed again and again by religious statements." (Jung 1991 [1958]: xii–xiii)

### Nationalist literature

"At the end of the 1940s, Australian fiction was dominated by a group of left-leaning nationalists. If we set aside the work of expatriate writers like Henry Handel Richardson, Christina Stead and Martin Boyd, the local novel generally offered social-realist depictions of the struggling poor, mainly set during the Great Depression, with historical fiction as an education in the nationalist tradition of liberal humanism. By the 1950s Vance Palmer, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Miles Franklin, novelists associated with an earlier age of nationalist writing, were completing their careers, with vast political-historical trilogies in the case of Palmer (*Golconda*, 1948–1959) and Prichard (Goldfields trilogy, 1946–1950) and Miles Franklin's last Brent of Bin Bin novels (*Cockatoos* and *Gentlemen of Gyang Gyang*, 1956). Xavier Herbert, published *Soldiers' Women* in 1961, and began labour on his last great opus, *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975). The strength of *The Aunt's Story* as a *tour de force* of technique adapted to subject matter might be read as a comment on the comparatively straightforward nature of these novels, what White called 'journalistic realism' and Stead, referring to Dymphna Cusack's fiction, saw as full of 'valueless clichés'". (Hazel Rowley, *Christina Stead: A Biography*, Minerva, 1994: 361)

### Modernist Australian Literature

"Beneath all the debate about modernism in art lay the fundamental commitment to modernity of Australian society. European Australia was a product of Enlightenment thinking – an experiment in secular democracy. The political forces that contested artistic territory all subscribed in some degree to elements of modernity – whether an interest in social justice and equality, or individual liberal freedoms. These were often expressed in novels that promoted national pride in egalitarian ideals while deploring the failure to provide equality of economic opportunity. The widespread post-war com-

mitment to technology and science reinforced an Australian faith in material progress as the source of human freedom and fulfilment. In the period since the 1950s, literary modernism (and its postmodernist successor) has been positioned as a critique of this faith, though many Australian novelists vacillate between appreciation of the material and individual freedoms of secular democracy and a critique of Australian complacency and conformity. Ambivalence about the Australian achievement marks fiction across a range of interest groups, especially evident in the post-structuralist critique of liberal democracy that, nevertheless, acknowledges its benefits. Australian novelists most often critique the restrictive and limited nature of Australian democracy, rather than demand its overthrow.

This ambivalence is evident in experiments with form in the novel, and the inconsistent alignment of experimental form with radical politics by various critics of the Australian way. Australian novelists often want both things at once – a liberal humanist world where individuals can make their way to success, and a society that takes responsibility for those who fail. Taking White's lead, Australian novelists have been grappling with the irresolvable elements in Australian life – the good life that allows social mobility to some working people, but manages to deny it to those on the fringe (particularly Aborigines and new migrants); the political equality that acknowledges the rights of women, but leaves some of them poor and excluded from full participation in work and wealth; the cheerful materialism that gives many Australians only superficial contentment.

In the 21st century, Australian materialism appears to be merely a regional variety of global consumer capitalism. In the 1950s, when Europe lay devastated, it represented an outpost of material well-being, a new ally and slightly backward mimicker of the United States. Even so, writers like Gavin Casey could identify a looming suburban malaise (*Amid the Plenty*, 1962), though White represented this in an acerbic satire on Australian complacency, especially of the suburban matriarchs of *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), taking Humphries' more benign and ambivalent suburban matriarch into darker territory." (Lever 502)

### White's Novels

"Despite the critics, *Voss* and *The Tree of Man* ensured that the novel would become the art form of choice for literary writers who wanted to explore more than the social, political conditions of life – who wanted to ask big questions about the individual's spiritual state. The novel has remained the prime genre for Australian writers and readers because White not only brought poetic language and psychology (and a degree of pretentiousness) to the novel, he also made it a medium to criticise, satirise, analyse and philosophise about Australian life. White continues to be criticised for his so-called elitism and distance from politics by readers who ignore the oppositional nature of his writing; it consistently opposes the complacencies of modernity, without plumping for an overarching solution. *Riders in the Chariot* went further than White's earlier novels, demanding that ordinary Australians acknowledge the catastrophe in Europe, and their own relationship to it. For all its obvious manipulation and extravagance, the novel gave an insight into the European tragedy of Nazism and linked it to post-war Aus-



tralian life, with its suburban expansion and European migrants. White's vision of the crucifixion of Himmelfarb on a jacaranda tree may be excessive and even improbable, but the novel's interests are so wide-ranging that they encompass many of the subjects and modes of later novelists.

Astley, Keneally, Stow and Koch, together with Elizabeth Harrower – whose novels share White's despair at the boredom and brutality beneath suburban family life in Australia – all might acknowledge gratefully the influence of White. But only Astley and Keneally maintained continuous writing careers beyond the 1970s. White may have inspired younger writers in one or two novels, but sustaining a career was more difficult." (Lever 506)

### **Australian Novel vs. Australianness**

"Embedded within the concept of Australian literature is a deeply held assumption that the Australian novel is closely associated with the experience of being Australian. Readers have been actively encouraged to accept this; in the process, they willingly suspend disbelief that Australia rendered imaginatively is also Australia rendered authentically. By this process, the making of Australian literature has been undertaken on a broad reader-based assumption: that novelists and novels – even when disregarded, which was a constant complaint – along with other creative artists and arts, contribute to deeper understandings and experiences of being Australian. Literature is not intrinsically national, nor is its reading necessarily so, but each has the effect of contributing to the idea that literature can be understood because of its nation of origin. Literature thus conceived simultaneously critiques and evaluates, modifies and changes, the idea nation. The adjective Australian thus appended to literatures gives great force and assumption to the proposition that imagination and nation can and do coexist in literature. The very idea of coexistence, for all its diversity and critical engagements, is powerfully reinscribed by the production of each new novel and each new act of reading. The triangulated relationship between writers, publishers and readers thereby invents and continually renews the concept of coherence in literatures and in nation. It is clear that Australians shared a strong liking for the novel, in common with much of the English-speaking and European-influenced world. Australians have always written and read novels in large numbers, and to this day they constitute one of the largest *per capita* book-reading publics in the English-speaking world. Despite their reputation as outback adventurers, soldiers and sporting heroes, therefore, Australians constitute a literary nation or, at the very least, a nation of readers." (Richard Nile and Jason Ensor in *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* 524)

### **An Abo Question**

"Patrick White showed exquisite courtesy to his at times gauche questioners [two dozen young Christian Brothers visiting him at his home]. No, he had had few associations with Catholics, although he observed them closely. No, he had not made a special study of Aboriginal psychology; indeed, he had never met an Aborigine. What did he think of

A. D. Hope's charge that he wrote 'illiterate verbal sludge'? He smiled faintly but, Brother Davy thought, tolerantly." (Edmund Campion in *Patrick White: A Tribute* 9–10)

### **The European Mind**

"In 1957 Patrick White published *Voss*. My admiration for that feat of arms against the establishment views in which we had been born, and for its illumination of the story of the European mind in its meeting with the country, made me feel that Patrick, even in his long absence from Australia, knew it deeply. And he and Manoly moved into the city, the themes changed. The Cold War, its deliberate nastinesses, its hypocrisies and hidden or overt threats to any who thought differently from the dumb majority, had probably driven others of my generation into retreat and silence, or into looking for support in Jungian psychology and for hope in European philosophers and art. The 1950s saw the beginning of such retreats – the poetry of Australians at that time became more reclusive, more defensive, less ambitious. McAuley turned Catholic, Kenneth Mackenzie died in a river, Joan Mas in a bay, and more writers seemed to be going overseas. That Patrick had come back, was writing here, and was not rejecting Australia for Abroad, meant a great deal." (Judith Wright in *Patrick White: A Tribute* 14)

### **The Sydney City Novels**

"So from *Riders in the Chariot* onward through the rest of the great city novels, he was interpreting a different Australia from that of *Voss*, but certainly one I was living in, though far from Sydney. The city, that increasingly multinational complex of themes and people and crude politics, was an international symbol as well as a national one. It was not my arena, but through it came the increasingly destructive influences that were despoiling the world. I was watching, with increasing distress and horror, not only the terrible building up of the great weaponry of the Cold War, but the effects of the technological and industrial invasion of the land I loved." (Judith Wright in *Patrick White: A Tribute* 14–15)

### **"Sydney"**

Coming out of the sky I visit Sydney.

Sprawled across a lumpy mattress of hills  
 some rivers draining sourly to the heads  
 an odd shape of fish scales and concrete  
 bleaching on a little promontory  
 not far from some kind of bridge,  
 it has an uncertain charm  
 provoked most likely by sunlight and water –  
 both rather dirty I should add  
 as are the towers crowding like thirsty cattle  
 down to a square called Circular.

The locals seem inordinately proud of it.  
Some claim that Melbourne is inferior  
others that San Francisco and Venice  
aren't much better. I found good fish  
poor postcards and bread, and few  
who could pronounce my name.

The trip to the airport  
was a Morse emergency of dashes and stops.  
Safely back in the sky I was asked  
by my neighbour had I visited the Cross?  
No, I replied. I'd seen little down there  
even suggestive of religion.  
(Andrew Taylor, *Collected Poems*, 2004: 579)

### **The New Australian Materialism**

"I felt I had to move into that arena, if only to try to rescue something of what I loved from the new materialism, the dollar-minds and the ugly politics of the time. Whatever bonds Australians had slowly begun to forge against their early fear and hatred of the land and its original peoples seemed to be endangered. I was part of a kind of resistance movement, called conservation; and was now seen as politicised, less a writer than a supporter of hopeless and reactionary causes." (Judith Wright in *Patrick White: A Tribute* 15)

### **The Fraser Island Novels**

"For a time, Patrick seemed to be above that battle, working steadily along his own lines. I remember a short correspondence we had (over the miners' attack on Fraser Island perhaps) when I had told him a little of how I felt about his work and the importance of his remaining a writer – not, as I was, too harassed and driven by that battle to concentrate on writing. But when the monsters attacked his own arena and Centennial Park was at stake, he too was leading the protest; and when he published the 'Fraser Island novels' (I think of *The Eye of the Storm* as well as *A Fringe of Leaves* as essentially emerging from his visit to that lovely threatened island) I was a hopeless addict once again." (Judith Wright in *Patrick White: A Tribute* 15)

### **A Bond of Continuity**

"But since our background is a shared one, and our stories have something in common above and beyond that, I think we have had a bond of continuity. Both of us stemmed from days when the Australian tale was just beginning, with all its uneasy European legacy, its own contribution of blood and ugliness, and its struggle towards understanding. That so great a writer has emerged from that background can't help but give me hope that we're after all redeemable." (Judith Wright in *Patrick White: A Tribute* 16)



### Cross and crucifix

“The Crucifix, a cross with *corpus*, a symbol used by the Catholic Church, in Lutheranism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Anglicanism, in contrast with some Protestant denominations, which use only a bare Cross.

The cross, which is today one of the most widely recognised symbols in the world, was used as a symbol from the earliest times. This is indicated in the anti-Christian arguments cited in the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix, chapters IX and XXIX, written at the end of that century or the beginning of the next, and by the fact that by the early 3rd century the cross had become so closely associated with Christ that Clement of Alexandria, who died between 211 and 216, could without fear of ambiguity use the phrase *τὸ κυριακὸν σημεῖον* (the Lord’s sign) to mean the cross, when he repeated the idea, current as early as the Epistle of Barnabas, that the number 318 (in Greek numerals, ΤΙΗ) in Genesis 14:14 was a foreshadowing (a “type”) of the cross (T, an upright with crossbar, standing for 300) and of Jesus (IH, the first two letters of his name ΙΗΣΟΥΣ, standing for 18), and his contemporary Tertullian could designate the body of Christian believers as *crucis religiosi*, i.e. “devotees of the Cross.” In his book *De Corona*, written in 204, Tertullian tells how it was already a tradition for Christians to trace repeatedly on their foreheads the sign of the cross.” (On-Line Encyclopedia)

*The Jewish Encyclopedia* states (on-line):

“The cross as a Christian symbol or “seal” came into use at least as early as the second century (see “Apost. Const.” iii. 17; Epistle of Barnabas, xi.–xii.; Justin, “Apologia,” i. 55–60; “Dial. cum Tryph.” 85–97); and the marking of a cross upon the forehead and the chest was regarded as a talisman against the powers of demons (Tertullian, “De Corona,” iii.; Cyprian, “Testimonies,” xi. 21–22; Lactantius, “Divinæ Institutiones,” iv. 27, and elsewhere). Accordingly, the Christian Fathers had to defend themselves, as early as the second century, against the charge of being worshipers of the cross, as may be learned from Tertullian, “Apologia,” xii., xvii., and Minucius Felix, “Octavius,” xxix. Christians used to swear by the power of the cross. Although the cross was known to the early Christians, the crucifix did not appear in use until the 5th century. French Medievalist scholar and historian of ideas M.-M. Davy has described in great details Romanesque Symbolism as it developed in the Middle Ages in Western Europe.”

### On Our Spiritual Poverty and Symbol-lessness

“We are, surely, the rightful heirs of Christian symbolism, but somehow we have squandered this heritage. We have let the house our fathers built fall into decay, and now we try to break into Oriental palaces that our fathers never knew. Anyone who has lost the historical symbols and cannot be satisfied with substitutes is certainly in a very difficult position today: before him there yawns the void, and he turns away from it in horror. What is worse, the vacuum gets filled with absurd political and social ideas, which one and all are distinguished by their spiritual bleakness. But he cannot get along with these pedantic dogmatisms, he sees himself forced to be serious for once more with his alleged trust in God, though it usually turns out that his fear of things going wrong if

he did so is even more persuasive. This fear is far from unjustified, for where God is closest the danger seems greatest. It is dangerous to avow spiritual poverty, for the poor man has desires, and whoever has desires calls down some fatality on himself. A Swiss proverb puts it drastically: ‘Behind every rich man stands a devil, and behind every poor man two.’” (Jung 1990 [1976]: 15)

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## SUMMARY

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This project is an attempt to present the literary output of one of the most prominent Australian novelists ever, Patrick White (1912–1990), in the light of contemporary literary theories, such as New Historicism, Freudian and Jungian psychology, Derridian deconstruction, Cultural and Postcolonial Studies.

The author formulates a thesis, stemming from New Historical approach, that his autobiographies, most notably *Flaws in the Glass* (1981) and “The Prodigal Son” (1958), may help solve the puzzle of his life and, in effect, help construct the meanings of his major novels.

Therefore, Part One introduces Australia from the (Post)colonial perspective and discusses White’s two autobiographies, while Part Two concentrates on the application of Jungian psychoanalysis and archetypal psychology, alongside the other above-mentioned methods, to the reading of Patrick White’s major novels like *Voss* (1957), *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) or *The Solid Mandala* (1966).

Attention is also given to White’s apparent misogyny that can be found in the construction of his female characters and which is largely the reflections of his childhood and the ideas connected with Jungian archetypal psychology, particularly the mother-complex – the most likely source of his sexual orientation and his ambivalent attitude towards women he developed throughout his lifetime.



## STRESZCZENIE

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Publikacja ta jest próbą przedstawienia twórczości Patricka White'a (1912–1990) – jednego z najznakomitszych pisarzy australijskich – w świetle współczesnych badań literackich, takich jak Nowy Historycyzm, psychologia freudowska i jungowska, dekonstrukcja derridiańska, studia kulturowe i postkolonialne, z jakimi mamy do czynienia na świecie, a szczególnie w krajach angielskiego obszaru językowego.

Autor stawia tezę wywodzącą się z podejścia nowo-historycznego, iż autobiografie pióra Patricka White'a, szczególnie *Flaws in the Glass* (1981) i "The Prodigal Son" (1958), mogą pomóc rozwiązać zagadkę jego życia i w efekcie przyczynić się do skonstruowania znaczenia jego głównych powieści.

Część Pierwsza przedstawia zatem Australię z (post)kolonialnej perspektywy i omawia dwie autobiografie Patricka White'a, podczas gdy Część Druga koncentruje się na zastosowaniu jungowskiej psychoanalizy i psychologii archetypów, jak również innych wspomnianych metod, do odczytania głównych powieści Patricka White'a, takich jak *Voss* (1957), *Wóz ognisty* (1961) czy *Węzeł* (1966).

Autor zwraca również uwagę na rzekomą mizoginię, którą można odnaleźć w konstrukcji jego kobiecych postaci i które są w przeważającej mierze odbiciem dzieciństwa pisarza oraz archetypów zaczerpniętych z psychologii Carla Gustava Junga, w szczególności kompleksu matki – najbardziej prawdopodobnego źródła jego orientacji seksualnej i ambiwalentnego stosunku do kobiet, jaki rozwijał się u niego w czasie całego życia twórczego.



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