

PATRICK WHITE, CONQUISTADOR

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Was there ever a time, Sire, when you looked death in the face? Do you know the strange new geography death offers? ...Accept now the certainty that as the senses that served us in life are dead, a new sense... is born in us, awaiting only that moment to lead us to white beaches and black forests¹.

The new world can be the place of death as well as of life, the death of spirit which threatens people arriving in a strange new environment in which the Book of Nature seems inscrutable and incoherence threatens. No longer the central referent, the newcomers sense themselves as somehow peripheral, obscurely aware of themselves as intruders and often reacting against this by using violence not only against the land and its original inhabitants but also against themselves.

This is not a generally accepted view of Australian history. But it is implicit in the work of Patrick White, and his significance lies in the way in which throughout his long career as a writer he addresses himself to this central question of the new world: how to make experience intelligible, how to help the "people of a half-savage country become a race possessed of understanding," as he put it to me in a letter.

He was a writer who had not given up on what Barthes has called "the great secular myth" of literature, the belief that writing can make a difference, not only to the self but also to society. True, this belief was progressively challenged by social and personal circumstance. But to the end he remained a writer of epic ambition, unfashionably so, in a culture increasingly preoccupied with the pragmatic and the economic. As a citizen he spoke out on a range of issues, from the treatment of Aboriginal Australians, for whom the two hundred years has been an unmitigated disaster, to the destruction of the environment and the dangers of nuclear war. The credo which he put into the mouth of his character, Eden Standish, in his second novel, *The Living and the Dead* (1941), remained substantially unchanged to the end, however much he might have qualified it with the self-irony which came with experience. "Sick of politics. The political lie," Eden nevertheless insists on the importance of commitment:

I believe... not in the parties of politics, the exchange of one party for another, which isn't any exchange at all...
I can believe, as sure as I can breathe, feel, in the

1.- Carlos Fuentes, *Terra Nostra*. Translated by Margaret Sayer Peden, London, Penguin, 1978, 426.

necessity for change. But it's a change from wrong to right, which is nothing to do with category... We were not born to indifference - indifference denies all the evidence of life. This is what I want to believe. I want to unite all those who have a capacity for living, in any circumstance, and to make it the one circumstance. I want to oppose them to the destroyers, to the dealers in words, to the disease, to the most fatally diseased - the indifference. That can be the only order. Without ideological labels².

I would argue that White never disowned the belief in human possibility as well as the naivety implicit here. Throughout his career he wrestled with the question of value. For him it was not something given but had to be achieved by the individual, wrestling with self and world to achieve the unique combination of the aesthetic, the political and the metaphysical which he opposes to the indifference around him to the geography of death. In what follows, then, I would like not only to trace the stages of this struggle.

The first point to be made is a negative one. Concerned as he might be with "Australia", this concern is not so much with physical fact as psychic possibility. His imagination is Modernist, concerned not so much with some imagined conjunction between words and things or between self and world, as with the ways in which this conjunction occurs within a self who lives not so much within language as beyond it. What significance there may be in existence lies in this gap between self and language. As White puts it at the end of his career: "I've got to discover - by writing out - acting out - my life - the reason for my presence on earth"³. But this presence also seems anomalous. Language in the new world is not necessarily connected with nature or with reality. It was rather an aspect of self-reflection. Thus the self was somehow shut out from a "reality" which it desperately needed if it were to escape the fate of Narcissus.

Caught in this dilemma, from the beginning White stood apart from the main tradition of Australian writing, which he saw as the "dreary dun-coloured of spring of journalistic realism." Rejecting literalism which equates "truth" into physical, social or historical "fact", he attempted rather to name the unnameable, to express the further reaches of experience, of life at its most intense which he set against the death of the spirit he saw around him in the "Great Australian Emptiness", a world of merely material abundance.

For him, therefore, Australia was a "country of the mind", a possibility to be discovered, a possibility, moreover, which was personal, rather than a matter of geography. At the same time, the self was made to find itself only in relation to certain

2.- Patrick White, *The Living and the Dead*. London, Penguin, 1967, 254. There are perhaps echoes here of E. M. Forster's essay, "Two Cheers for Democracy".

3.- Patrick White, *Memoirs of Many in One*. London, Cape, 1986, 157.

kinds of place. Till well into his life, he tells us in his autobiography, houses and landscape meant more to him than people, and it was memories of the landscape which drew him back to Australia after World War II. In Europe he had not felt at home. Accident of birth had given his sense of self and world a different inflection. Where the major European artists and thinkers who were his contemporaries were drawn towards abstraction, White was drawn to the earth, to rediscover some "primitive pact with pure feeling, / [The] flesh as it felt before sex was" (W. H. Auden). Disillusioned with a Europe which in the aftermath of World War II seemed a "Gothic shell" in which "the ghosts of Homer, St Paul and Tolstoy sat waiting for the crash,"⁴ his imagination was therefore drawn back to the Australian landscape of his childhood, to a country to which he felt he belonged "by reason of generations of my ancestors"⁵ - the Whites had settled in the fertile Hunter Valley in the 1820s.

Not that this feeling came easily. Until 1948, his life had oscillated between the two sides of the world, beginning school in Australia and completing it at an English public school. After that he returned briefly to Australia to work as a jackeroo before going up to Cambridge where he read Modern Languages and decided to stay on in London after he went down. In his first novel, *Happy Valley* (1939), written during that time, Australia had figured as "Egypt, the land of plagues, only not so legendary". But the war, during which he served as an intelligence officer with the R.A.F., drove him inwards. Service in the Western Desert and after the war a time in Greece reminded him of the Australian landscape, which drew him as if back to his "spiritual territory" - the way of Western civilisation seemed to have led to the abyss. Perhaps therefore it was time to return to a deep centre within the self, to desist from "making history" in order to recover his place in the cosmos. As a child he had sensed this need, feeling an affinity with the Aborigines. Indeed, looking back, he wondered whether "an avatar of those from whom the land had been taken had invested [him] one of the unwanted whites"⁶. Now, therefore, it was time to recover the past.

The Aunt's Story (1948) is about this recovery. Significantly, the narrative has a mythical base - as Mircea Eliade remarks, it is easier to bear the burden of being contemporary with a disastrous period of history by becoming conscious of one's place in a larger order of things.⁷ The central character, whose name, also significantly, is Theodora Goodman, is a Ulysses figure. The goal of her wanderings, however, is not so much a place as a state of mind, the "silence, simplicity and humility" she knew as a child on the family property of "Meroe" (the name Herodotus gave to the capital of Abyssinia, site of the legendary Happy Valley). Australia figures here, then, as a place where it is possible to rediscover the sacred, where some kind of hierophany may occur, allowing a glimpse of "the shape of things".

4.- Patrick White, *The Aunt's Story*. London, Eyre and Spottiswood, 1969, 146.

5.- Patrick White, "The Prodigal Son", *Australian Letters* 1, 3, 1969, 38.

6.- Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass*, London, Capes, 1981, 16.

7.- Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or Cosmos and History*, Princeton University Press, 1974, 118.

The Aunt's Story is perhaps the most intensely realised and formally perfect of his works. Style here marks not the despair of the world, as it so often does in Modernist works, but its recovery. If solitude rather than society is White's true milieu, then the land here offers this society. But it is society of a peculiar kind, an occasion for the silence essential to art.

Possibly all art flowers more readily in silence [he wrote shortly after his return]. Certainly the state of silence and humility is the only desirable one for man. While to reach it may be impossible, the attempt to do so is imperative⁸.

What one experiences in this silence, however, becomes increasingly difficult to express since it moves beyond commonsense, beyond the comforting equation of thinking and being, words and things. Instead of understanding, shaping and remaking "reality", the self becomes passive, surrendering the attempt to establish mastery. As Theodora Goodman comes to realise,

You cannot reconcile joy and sorrow... In flesh and marble, or illusion and reality, or life and death. For this reason... you must accept and you have already found that one constantly deludes the other into taking fresh shapes, so that there is sometimes little to choose between the reality of illusion and the illusion of reality. Each of your several lives is evidence of this⁹.

To return to the question of the new world with which we began, White thus renounces the imperial project of conquest and exploitation on which the settlement of Australia is based.

In doing this, however, he risks the incoherence which threatens the settler as conqueror. Indeed, the incoherence he faces is even greater since, as the reference to Theodora's several lives suggests, the coherence of the self is at risk. Yet White's achievement lies precisely in the way he confronts this danger instead of retreating from it as Australians generally have done into the false security of things, a world without finality in which the self becomes a thing amongst things.

The choice between these two worlds, the world in which the self confronts the twin terrors of madness and nothingness, "the cocksure modernity"¹⁰ and one in which it clings to the fringes of experience, is the subject of *Voss* (1957) and, in a somewhat different way, of *Riders in the Chariot* (1961). Before he wrote these novels, however, it was necessary to take possession of the place he had discovered.

8.- "The Prodigal Son", 39.

9.- *The Aunt's Story*, 293.

10.- Carl A. Rasche, "The Deconstruction of God." In Thomas J. Altizer et al. (eds.) *Deconstruction and Theology*. New York, Crossroad, 1982, 21.

In *The Tree of Man*, the first novel written after his return home, is the equivalent of the justification and consecration of the newly discovered country celebrated, for instance, by the raising of the flag¹¹. In it he attempts the transformation of chaos into cosmos by reworking the myth of the “pioneer” or new settler, to show that the crucial task of settlement is to move inward not outwards, to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary. Similarly, that true heroism lies here not in external action but in the quiet but steady fidelity to this quest, which culminates in Stan Parker’s final vision of God in a gob of spittle lying “glittering intensely and personally on the ground.” Here neither objects nor human action have autonomous or intrinsic value. They are rather receptacles of some mysterious force which give them their meaning and value.

In *Voss* this force is associated with the land itself, which, “incompressible, invulnerable, it is that which [human beings are] not becomes a kind of hierophony”¹². In this way, White turns to his own ends another central trope of Australian culture, the epic struggle with a harsh and demanding land, making it a means to the sacred. The struggle resolves itself here not in triumphant possession but renunciation. *Voss*, whose story is based on that of the German explorer Leichardt who perished in the attempt to cross Australia from east to west, discovers that he is not the *Promethean* hero he claimed to be, not God, not even the antagonist of God, but a mere human being, vulnerable, subject to physical necessity and finally death. From this emerges the paradoxical insight that this is also the mystery of God himself, revealed as “man with a spear in his side...” Reality is not conferred by our own purposes but by our suffering. *Voss*, who begins as a figure of the Nietzschean will to power, thus ends his life in acceptance.

Riders in the Chariot deepens this insight. But here the force of the paradox, that in order to find one’s life it is necessary to lose it, begins to assert itself, asserting itself, moreover, not just theoretically but in terms of his own practice as an artist. If meaning is a matter of correspondence, the suburban Australia White describes here as the suburb of Sarsaparilla fails to correspond to the fierce intensity of the vision he would impose on it. The moments of this vision which are the goal of the action invade the narrative and disrupt the social reality he creates so vividly, splitting the novel in two. It is not just that the four central characters, riders in the chariot of vision, are antagonists rather than protagonists of the world they inhabit. More seriously, either they or the world they inhabit are incredible. Australian suburbia presented here in his fiercely satiric account of it cannot accommodate either the visionaries of their vision nor can they live in it. Alf Dubbo, the Aboriginal painter, dies and Himmelfarb, a Jewish survivor of the holocaust, becomes the victim of a mock crucifixion. Miss Hare, the eccentric spinster, disappears, dissolving into her own impossibility. Only one of them, Mrs. Godbold, an Earth Mother figure, survives, but on the neglected outskirts of society.

White had always been preoccupied with suffering, of course, and the epigram from Gandhi to his first novel, *Happy Valley*, points to the source preoccupation:

11.- Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 11.

12.- Ibid., 4.

It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering which is the indispensable condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone ... The purer the suffering, the greater is the progress.

As one of the characters in that novel puts it, this is because of a "mystery of unity [he discerned] about the world". This does not manifest itself as unity, however, but finds "its expression in cleavage and pain" since, to the extent that we perceive it, we realise that it is literally unspeakable and beyond our comprehension. There is thus no necessary connection between being and meaning. What we most desire is in a sense too much for us, beyond our comprehension or control, "a grandeur too overwhelming to express," as White puts it in his autobiography. Existence thus becomes a kind of agony,

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 writes¹³.

Engaged in this struggle, the riders in the chariot of vision in this novel are therefore unable to compromise with commonsense. There is thus a personal crisis evident in *Riders in the Chariot*, in the extremity of its events and in the intensities of its language, which suggest an obsession with violence which is directed not just at linguistic emotional habit, but also at the world of commonsense. White was beginning to realise that hell may be contained in the dream of paradise and that what might at first appear the lyrical innocence of Australian suburban life may be closer to delirium - the death of Himmelfarb suggests, for example, there may be a connection between the happy-go-lucky Australia and the totalitarian nightmare of Europe on which he, like his creator, had so self-consciously turned his back.

The next novel, *The Solid Mandala* (1966), explores this possibility, though with much less intensity. Arthur Brown is the victim not just of his conventional brother, Waldo, but of the murderous commonplace to which Waldo pays tribute. But this novel also points in the direction White was subsequently to follow, away from society to the struggle with the self and its multiple possibilities. In a sense, this move was more or less inevitable. Any proper name, as Barthes remarks, is a form of reminiscence, and Australia, as we have been arguing, was that for White. Now, however, actuality was beginning to challenge reminiscence. Australia was a physical, indeed a social, political and economic fact; it belonged to others as well as himself. Instead of silence he was confronted with noise, the idle chatter of Mrs. Flack and Mrs. Jolley and their friends in *Riders in the Chariot* and of the "ladies" in the bus at the beginning of *The Solid Mandala*. Dislike here was not merely a matter of taste. Reality seemed to be at stake:

13.- *Flaws in the Glass*, 70.

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 unconscious¹⁴.

The conventional novel depends upon the illusion that it is possible to understand others. But now it was beginning to seem as if there were nothing to understand and thus nothing to write about. Once more, then, he "looks death in the face," feels the burden of the new world. As Wilson Harris points out, the "middle of the road hero," the character of personal complexity and social implication, belongs to traditional societies. In colonial societies like Australia personal complexity and social density, what Henry James called "the surrounding envelope" of manners and custom, is lacking. The novelist, therefore, must feel this lack, together with the fact that existence can no longer be taken for granted, must reconstruct it from within by means of "faith in the powers and resources of the human person at many levels of feeling"¹⁵. The only place in which this faith may be found, however, is within the self, though this discovery is by no means assured. Indeed, under close scrutiny the self becomes more and more problematic. Looking into its mirror, therefore, White increasingly sees an image of his own disarray. Yet it is the struggle with this disarray that invests the work of this period with dramatic intensity and personal urgency since what is at issue is the question of power as well as of identity. As Milan Kundera argues, this is the central question for the artist in a world which seems organized against him, a world of mass media and mass consumption. It also becomes his burden:

He feels unsure of himself with [others] and cannot bring himself to make a frontal attack and the more he suffers from the fear of trying for something modest and well defined, the more he wants to conquer the world, the infinity of the undefined, the undefinedness of the infinite¹⁶.

Where others are content to receive their lives and their world from others, living by mass-produced images, the writer insists on making his or her own. "By writing books, the individual becomes a universe"¹⁷. But this sets him against commonsense: "since the principal quality of a universe is its uniqueness, the existence of another universe constitutes a threat to its very existence"¹⁸.

14.- Ibid., 104.

15.- K. L. Goodwin (ed.), *National Identity*. London, Heinemann, 1970, 171.

16.- Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, London, Penguin, 1983, 106.

17.- Ibid., 105.

18.- Ibid., 19.

So it is that in *The Solid Mandala* and the novels following it, with the possible exception of *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), a reworking of *Voss*, White is in a sense fighting for his life, struggling to preserve his difference from rather than identify with a society which he feels more and more unreceptive, even antagonistic to his designs upon it - and the turbulent political events of 1975, in particular the dismissal, of the Whitlam government, which had seemed to him to promise a return of intelligence, sympathy and imagination to politics, only increased this feeling of alienation.

Hurtle Duffield, the protagonist of his next novel, *The Vivisector* (1970) is his portrait of the artist. Disinherited by his own family and a permanent outsider, he is a hero of spiritual dangers, living on the frontier between meaning and meaninglessness, everything and nothing. Love, personal conviction, history and even his art itself seem to be at risk, as much denied as affirmed as he teeters on the edge of incoherence. But at the same time exploring "the geography of death," White is here beginning to develop the new sense Fuentes speaks of, a sense capable of leading him into a new country opening out before him. This movement, however, takes place in language. Hurtle Duffield, for instance, dies in the attempt to paint the vision of God, "endless obvi indi-ggod" - God as indigo, the ultimate colour in the alchemical spectrum, and the fracturing of language becomes its triumph.

White had always been acutely aware of the limitations of language, that "the sign is not the thing it stands for, the name is not the action" and that therefore "the true world" may be "unattainable, unprovable, unpromisable" (Nietzsche). In *Happy Valley*, for instance, Hilda, Oliver Halliday's wife, is contrasted with Alys, the woman he loves. Hilda had never "touched anything but the outer conversations of words"¹⁹. But Alys lives as it were beyond herself, in language; her life was, "if anything, an understatement of fact, a system of delicate and undoubtedly unconscious and indirect implication"²⁰. In a society whose "eyes [were] closed to the possibilities of truth"²¹, her existence was both troubling and revealing, since it pointed beyond words to experience, to a "sudden illumination in a face that was not altogether confined to a face, that overflowed and pointed out significant contours in the darkness"²².

This is clumsily put, but thirty years later, White is still concerned with this illumination, though *The Vivisector* it is not so much a matter of waiting and receiving, but also involves the "daily wrestling match" described in *Flaws in the Glass*, and the "sweat and blood" it generates are indeed scattered on the pages of this harsh but dazzling work.

One of its epigrams, from the artist Ben Nicholson, comments on the significance of this struggle: "As I see it, painting and religious experience are the same thing, and what we are all searching for is the understanding and realization of infinity." The other epigrams, from Blake's "The Human Abstract", from St. Augustine and from Rimbaud, also emphasise the cost of this attempt. As St.

19.- Patrick White, *Happy Valley*, London, Harrop, 1939, 16.

20.- Ibid., 119.

21.- Ibid., 217-8.

22.- Ibid., 218.

Augustine puts it, "people love truth when it reveals itself, and they hate it when it reveals themselves." So, in Rimbaud's words, the artist "becomes beyond all others the great Invalid, the great Criminal, the great Accursed One." At the same time, however, he also becomes "the Supreme Knower. For he reaches the unknown."

For White, however, this knowledge becomes increasingly problematic, dangerous even. The sense of the world's faithlessness to the man or woman of good faith which pervades this novel also threatens the notion of God as the one-who-is-faithful, presenting him as terrible, as "the Vivisector," the Savage God Yeats predicted. In *A Fringe of Leaves*, the crucial encounter with God occurs when its heroine, Ellen Roxburgh, desperate with hunger, eats a piece of human flesh. Nevertheless, this encounter also points to what is positive, that the vivisector God also identifies with the victim. He is not the "Lord God of hosts", the God of "the winning side" Ellen meets with her husband and pastoralist brother-in-law in Van Diemen's land. He is present rather in the shabby little church in which, at the end of her story, in reliving "the betrayal of her earthly loves" she experiences a moment of peace, a letting "silence enclose her like a beatitude"²³.

According to White himself, Simone Weil's thought has had a strong influence on him, and this is very clear here. The "God of love" Ellen glimpses is the crucified God of *Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot*, but much more strongly identified here with suffering humanity. Ellen Roxburgh's story exemplifies what Weil sees as the central truth of existence, the universal subjection of the human spirit to force, to the physical necessity which is evident in the fact our bodies are vulnerable, subject to necessities of all kinds, grow old and finally die. But this scene in the poor church also suggests the way in which this subjection also gives rise to the "sorrowful love" Weil describes:

This subjection is the common lot, though each spirit will bear it differently. No one who succumbs to it is by this fact regarded with contempt. Whoever, within his own soul and in human relations, escapes the domination of force, is loved, but loved sorrowfully because of the threat of destruction that constantly hangs over him²⁴.

It is significant therefore that Ellen makes no "attempt to interpret [the] peace of mind which descended on her"²⁵ here. About this God, as God, there is nothing to be said, since he is only present as it were in his absence in suffering, in the pain of our absence from divinity as beatitude, and subjection to physical necessity. What can and must be spoken about is our humanity, this subjection to the attempt to dive into the "deep end of the unconscious" and wrestle with what emerges there, as White does in *The Eye of the Storm* (1973). The novels which follow continue this attempt. They

23.- Patrick White, *A Fringe of Leaves*. London, Cape, 1976, 390-1.

24.- Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil*. Oxford, Mowbray, 1977, 317.

25.- *A Fringe of Leaves*, 391.

are thus works of what Michael Leiris has called "tauromachy", resembling a bull fight in that the writer risks his or her life as a person and as a writer in a display of daring, confronting death on the one hand and the loss of self on the other. Becoming his own subject, White turns his back here on the closed world of the merely fictional, turning to its origins in what Yeats calls "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart."

Evidently these are difficult and uncomfortable books. But they are also witness to the enormous freedom of the novel as a form, his mastery of this freedom and the courage with which he achieves this mastery. In *The Vivisector* Hurtle Duffield threatens not just the social order but sanity itself. But *The Eye of the Storm* is perhaps even more outrageous in that it assails the ultimate complicity of "l'homme moyen sensuel", dealing with death and physical decay and thus drawing the reader into the "peril of soul" associated with the profanation of taboo, dealing with what is forbidden or ignored by commonsense on account of the danger it represents²⁶. Here White not only explores the humiliations of an ageing, once beautiful society woman, Elizabeth Hunter, and even describes her death, but also insists that these physical humiliations are in fact a central occasion of heroism, heroism being seen as a matter of style. As the epigram, from a Noh play, puts it, "I was given by chance this human body so difficult to wear." So it must be worn with style, affirmed rather than denied. Elizabeth's death thus represents the final triumph of art over nature as, echoing Shakespeare's Cleopatra, she calls for her nurse to make her up, put on her jewels and place her on her throne, the throne in this case being a commode. There she dies, having performed her part to the end, turning death and physical humiliation into a kind of victory, "no longer filling the void with mock substance" but herself become "this endlessness"²⁷. There is nothing sentimental about this victory. It is of the kind which is earned through "silence and moral loneliness, through pain, misery and terror in the profoundest depths of ... [the] spirit"²⁸.

This is profoundly disturbing to commonsense, but White has always contested the simple-minded confusion of *faring* ill with *doing* ill. For him, suffering, sickness, old age, death, poverty, failure and loneliness are signs of election, not, as they are for so many in our society, as somehow evil since, like Camus, he has always seen himself in the service not of those who make history but those who suffer it. As a result, he has always lived out the realm of ideas closer to the bone, the "real unmetaphorical bone, bone as frail as grass and easily crushed"²⁹. A biological wisdom governs his work. So it is not surprising that from death he turns in the next novel, *The Twyborn Affair* (1979), to sexuality and to the preoccupation with difference and with loss which is its mark.

In *Flaws in the Glass*, White insists on his homosexuality and on its centrality to his life as an artist. But implicitly in *The Eye of the Storm* and explicitly in *The Twyborn Affair* and its successor *Memoirs of Many In One*, its poignancy also

26.- Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1969, 12.

27.- Patrick White, *The Eye of the Storm*. Melbourne, Penguin, 1975, 532.

28.- Pétrement, *Simone Weil*, 405.

29.- Beverley Farmer, *A Body of Water*. Brisbane, University of Queensland Press, 1990, 120.

becomes evident. First of all, these texts mourn the loss of authority, in the loss of the father who appears in these works as peripheral and also profoundly vulnerable. The profanation of the mother is also dramatised and in the process transfigured in *The Eye of the Storm*, Elizabeth Hunter, as the autobiography tells us, is in some sense his own mother. But that means that Basil also is a figure of White himself, thus transforming the situation since the outrage the novel commits is not against the mother, who emerges heroically, but against himself, a much less adequate figure. It is the mother, not the son, who becomes the great artist and the great human being.

In *The Twyborn Affair* the problem is located within the self. Picking up once again the theme of *The Solid Mandala*, expressed in the epigram from Patrick Anderson, "yet still I long / for my twin in the sun", White presses much further here, exploring the "cast of contradictory characters" within himself and ranging across experience, venturing into areas normally regarded as obscene and profoundly challenging to commonsense. The main character becomes three characters, three aspects of the one self Eudoxia, Eddie, Edith; at first a young woman married to a Byzantine Greek living in the South of France, then a young Australian man, recently returned from war in Europe to work on a sheep station and finally a woman again, Edith Trist, madame of a high class brothel in London where she is killed during the Blitz. This extravagant surface, however, is counterpoint to a profound pathos, the same quest for authority, for the lost father who appears only briefly here as the vulnerable judge with gentle hands. Embodiment of "some infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing," more an absence than a presence. The fact that this presence is never recovered means also that the various selves are never reunited, though the glimpse Edith/Eddie has of him as she/he dies, of "the judge Pantocrator looking through a gap in the star-painted ceiling," concludes the novel on a note of hope, of unity, a hope confused in the final image of the sunlight rose garden and of a bird shaking "his little velvet jester's cap, and [raising] his beak towards the sun"³⁰.

Inconclusiveness here is positive since the self, both a structuring device and a way of life, reaches a formal conclusion. True, there is something impetuous and excessive in an almost adolescent way about the way in which this novel outrages propriety, exploring a range of sexual and social behaviour which lies beyond good taste, good manners and, some would say, beyond morality. Nevertheless, the effect is also therapeutic. Abandoning control to the unconscious brings about a new, more positive view of the relations between the self and the world and the ways in which that self is manifest and the "real person" emerges not as some elusive self which exists above the *melée*, but as the sum of the roles she/he plays, rather like an actor who never comes off stage. Life, it seems, is process, and that process is the secret of life. As the first epigram from David Malouf, has it:

What else should our lives be but a series of beginnings,
of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off
from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of
what we have not yet become.

30.- Patrick White, *The Twyborn Affair*. London, Cape, 1979, 412.

In *The Twyborn Affair*, therefore, White's concern with figures of rejection, Jews, Aborigines, the simple-minded and eccentric, culminates in his own self, on display here, "with nothing on but a bandaid," with his perversities and anxieties as well as with his deepest longings for the sacred. This is by no means a work of self-enclosure, however. Intimacy, the knowledge of the boudoir, combines with public ritual, with a range of cultural and historical reference and these save the self from drowning in its own reflection. Display becomes an assertion of life in its full range ready to risk danger, exposure and even death. As in the bull fight, ritual transforms the finality of pain and death, making it an assertion of style, turning the geography of death into abundance and finding this abundance precisely in the crisis of the self.

In this way, White attempts to maintain himself in consciousness not only against "the Great Australian Emptiness" but also against the growing pressure of physical weakness and old age. His last novel, *Memoirs of Many In One* (1986), represents a final act of defiance. It is an act of repetition as an act of assertion, repeating the image with which his autobiography opens, the image of his adolescent self in the Long Room of the house in Felpham, gazing into a "great glided mirror, all blotches and dimples and ripples"³¹. In this last novel, however, the mirror is clearer and the image more composed, if more ironical. He has become a character in his own novel, "old Patrick," who sits munching bloater sandwiches, who is something of a bore, who is peripheral to the passionate life, fantasies and death of the main character, Alex Demirjian Gray - the death of the author with a vengeance! Yet this death also points to a new life, not just because the life of Alex, his characters echoes, or better, parodies his own, but also because he who once seemed turned in upon himself to the point of self-torment seems at least to have achieved impersonality, to have discovered the other(s) who spring out of the rebellion of divided consciousness. No longer foreign to what is and to what he is, White here completes the task Holstius laid on Theodora Goodman at the end of *The Aunt's Story*, "to accept the two irreconcilable halves" of the self³². Nor are these selves merely parodic, much less nihilistic. Alex does not subvert order and creation but continues it. Actress and artist, she is the enemy of false art and pretension, turning a revolver on the first night audience at the Sand Pit Theatre.

Just as importantly, she has literally, if farcically, entered into the land. The part she is given in the Sand Pit's significantly named *Nothing Or Something* reworks the theme of *Voss*, but reworks it as farce. Buried in the sand for most of the play, she is supposed to spring up from it when "a big bushy Irish convict with marks of the car all over his back" finally breaks his chains shouting, "so much for the humanity of English gentlemen and bullies" and to cry "I am the spirit of the land, past, present and future"³³ - a parody of Laura Trevelyn's words at the end of *Voss*: "'Voss did not die... He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be'"³⁴. But Alex is a character unanswerable to history as well as to the needs of the self, and she interrupts

31.- *Flaws in the Glass*, 1.

32.- *The Aunt's Story*, 293.

33.- Patrick White, *Memoirs of Many in One*. London, Cape, 1986, 150.

34.- Patrick White, *Voss*. London, Penguin, 1971, 448.

the scenario written for her with what is in effect a cry for justice, for the rewriting of history:

...Forestalling my cue I spring out shrieking, instead of the line I have been given, "I am the Resurrection and the Life," whereupon Benno, the archetypal Aborigine from somewhere Wilcannie way, with a dash of the Sephardic from the Gold Coast, grabs me and whirls me around his shoulders³⁵.

The audience, startled at this "unorthodox message" first lets out a gasp and then begins to laugh. But we can recognise here an important moment not only for Patrick White but for Australian society in the recognition of the other, the Aborigine as the phantom who waits for us in the land, the "primitive shadow" in Jungian parlance, the "negative" side of the self, sum of all the unpleasant qualities we prefer to hide and of all that is insufficiently developed in us. As Jung points out:

The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real³⁶.

At the end of his career, pursuing the problem of himself, White thus reveals that this is also the crucial problem of the new world, echoing the insight of Carlos Fuentes at a crucial moment in his epic of the new world, *Terra Nostra*, in which the conquistador is confronted with a phantom.

The phantom began to laugh monstrosly. "They sacrificed themselves for you... Sacrificed themselves for you. Sacrificed themselves for you... and with every burst of laughter, his body shrank, the creature hid his face between his hands and howled. "Fear not, brother, fear not," I am your pursuing shadow...

Suddenly the creature stood tall, looked straight into my eyes. I was looking at myself... He was my exact double, my turn, my mirror³⁷.

To return to the point at which we began, it seems that finally White's imagination has come to terms with the geography of death, insisting on it as the

35.- *Memoirs of Many in One*, 151.

36.- Anthony Storr (ed.) *Jung, Selected Writings*. London, Fontana, 1983, 91.

37.- Fuentes, *Terra Nostra*, 486.

geography not only of the new world but of humanity in general. In this sense, *A Fringe of Leaves*, passed over in our earlier discussion, stands out as a turning point, since it is her time with the Aborigines which is crucial for Ellen Roxburgh, bringing her to understand her true situation as someone afflicted and subject to necessity. But it is only here, in *Memoirs Of Many In One*, that the note of responsibility sounds, and his last published work, three short stories published as *Three Uneasy Pieces*, concludes on this note. The last story in this volume, "The Age of the Wart," turns on the search for this lost twin, this dark and painful self, and it concludes on a note of reconciliation:

He has come. He is holding my hands in his. I who was once the reason for the world's existence am no longer this sterile end all. As the world darkens, the evil in me is dying. I understand... It is we who hold the secret of existence, we who control the world. WE³⁸.

Instead of being appalled by it, White suggests, therefore, that it is the existence of evil which revives the dream of paradise, the dream of the new world in general and of Australia perhaps in particular. Its existence is therefore for him a sign of hope, the first grain of sand which may yet bring to a halt the mindless machine which churns out stories of endless happiness as well as consumer goods. Existence for him is not static, not comfortable, but more like the seething worlds engulfing and being engulfed through all the ages of time which his mother glimpsed in the baby Krishna's mouth. But it is this insight which makes him a champion of freedom, a permanent opponent of that dream which, as Kundera points out, so easily turns into totalitarianism, "the age-old dream of a world where everybody would live in harmony, united by a single common will to faith, without secrets from one another"³⁹.

In a world without finality, and the consumer society is the "new world" writ large, a world of the pure event and the instant present and thus of indifferent and inertial passion⁴⁰, White insists on a tragic vision of fatedness, of necessity. In this way, the harshness of the Australian landscape and of his social experience becomes something positive, even theological. The problematic of the self for him does not involve the negation of God. To the contrary, it helps to break the allegorical reading of the Biblical "I am who I am", which would make some kind of equation between the human self and the divine and point to the ungroundedness of being, to a God.

...past all
Grasp God, throned behind

38.- Patrick White, *Three Uneasy Pieces*. Melbourne, Pascoe Publishing, 1987, 58-9.

39.- Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 233.

40.- Jean Baudrillard, *The Revenge of the Crystal: Selected Writings on the Modern Object, 1968-1983*. Sydney, Pluto Press, 1990, 16.

Death with a sovereignty that heeds but hides
bodes but abodes⁴¹.

Mrs. Volkov in *The Vivisector* compares the experience of this God to the sting of a wasp, "like red hot needles entering at first very painful then I did not notice any more, only sea and sky as one, and one like a rinsed plate"⁴². Spanish writers will recognise the affinity here with the vision of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, and with the way White proposes it; "one must throw overboard everything known good loving trusted which might interfere with the wretched trembling act of faith."⁴³

Literature for White therefore becomes more than literature, it becomes a form of faith. For that reason, it also becomes a form of precariousness, concerned with the great gap between what is and what can be said - hence the difficulty of his work. Style for him does not just involve a way with words or of management of character and narrative but a stance towards life, a definition of his own reality which takes him beyond the bounds of commonsense, driving him on to the impossible attempt to express what is inexpressible and setting him permanently upon the frontier, between the sayable and the unsayable, belonging and alienation, reason and madness. Yet, to recur to the question of the new world, the fact that he exists upon a frontier liberates him from the predicament of European modernists like Valéry unable to "believe either in the sub- or in the ob-jective," feeling that "nothing, not even oneself, could be of interest except in crossing some strange threshold"⁴⁴. For them, this threshold remained "an illusion, and moreover uncrossable". For White, however, the sense of self in process, "a Magellanic cloud of momentary energies" (George Steiner), matched his historical and social situation and that of the culture in which he found himself⁴⁵. The Australian poet Christopher Brennan, for instance, defines the Australian as "the Wanderer on the way to the self."

The wit, the laughter, the vitality and the strange tenderness for all those who are vulnerable which pervade White's later work testify, then, to the courage which has looked death in the face and opened out to a new sense of self and world so that the soul claps "its hands and sign(s) and louder sings / For every feather in its mortal dress." As Wilson Harris has pointed out, the new world demands new definitions of reality, a different sense of the confluence between self and not-self. The achievement of Patrick White is to have faced this challenge.

41.- Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Wreck of the Deutschland." In W. H. Garner (ed.): *Poems and Prose Gerard Manley Hopkins, Selections From His Poems and Prose*. London, Penguin, 1954, 23.

42.- Patrick White, *The Vivisector*. London, Cape, 1970, 637.

43.- Ibid., 587.

44.- Quoted in Farmer, *A Body of Water*, 209.

45.- Australia's best known folk song and unofficial national anthem "Waltzing Matilda" is about a similar character, nomadic in space, if not within himself.