

INTRODUCTION

THE RAISON D'ÊTRE OF THIS BOOK

Patrick White's novels do not belong simply to Australian literature but, more widely, to the literature of the West. The prime element in White's intellectual development was his study of French and German literatures during his formative years at Cambridge University from 1932 to 1935, when he was in his early twenties. British and British Commonwealth universities in those days did not venture far into the twentieth century in their study of literature, hence White studied chiefly nineteenth-century writers. His closest affinities remained with nineteenth-century Continental novelists, as he acknowledged when he said 'I am a nineteenth-century novelist.' He was influenced chiefly by such nineteenth-century writers as Flaubert, Stendhal, Rimbaud and Goethe. Only two works by Continental writers who influenced him significantly belong to the twentieth century, Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901) and Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes* (1913), both published before World War I.

White's residence in England during his years at Cambridge and then in London exposed him to British literature, which also left its mark upon his work. One can detect the influence of James Joyce, stylistically and thematically. Another Irish novelist whom White admired, George Moore (1852–1933), had been responsible for the Europeanisation of English-language literature, thereby providing White with a model for his own Europeanisation of Australian literature. Moore, asserted his

chief critic, Jean-Claude Noël, 'fut un des principaux agents de diffusion en pays de langue anglaise de diverses attitudes esthétiques du continent européen' [was one of the main writers to disseminate various aesthetic attitudes of the Continent throughout English-speaking countries].¹

White's acquaintance with American literature began with his reading Steinbeck in England during the 1930s. He picked up a number of story strands for *Happy Valley* from Steinbeck's *The Pastures of Heaven*, published in England in 1933, and that may well be the reason for his travelling to the USA to find a publisher for *Happy Valley*. His stay in the US from 1939 to 1940 enabled him to become further acquainted with American literature when it was little known in other English-speaking countries. There he became acquainted with Willa Cather's work; her novels of the 1920s influenced him from *The Aunt's Story* on. Cather's chief contribution was to provide in *My Antonia* (1918) a model for the pioneer novel *The Tree of Man* (published in 1955 in the US and 1956 in the UK). *My Antonia* and *The Tree of Man* are the classic pioneer novels of their respective countries.

White's origins in Australia and his residence in Europe and in America are reflected in his first masterpiece, *The Aunt's Story* (1948): part One is set in New South Wales, part Two ('Jardin Exotique') in southern France and part Three ('Holstius') in the American Midwest and Southwest. The 'Jardin Exotique' section is more deeply immersed in Continental European culture than anything previous in Australian literature. And the final section of the novel gives a varied picture of America, its enormous productivity along with its abandoned settlements, as Theodora travels by train from Chicago to Taos in New Mexico.

From first to last, one finds in White's novels continual evidence of his exposure to European culture, a culture that he wanted to incorpo-

¹Noël (1966).

rate into Australian literature. Sometimes the European influence comes from a medium outside literature, like the Goyaesque images that recur throughout his work. Through these images he links the newest of worlds to the oldest in a harsh reminder to Australians that the violence of Europe can irrupt in their sheltered land. There is a score or more of such scenes as the crucifixion scenes in *Happy Valley* and *Riders in the Chariot*, the bloated body of a dog floating in the water in *The Living and the Dead* and *The Eye of the Storm*, the drowned man in the tree in *The Tree of Man*, Voss' decapitation, the spearing of Palfreyman in *Voss* and of Austin Roxburgh in *The Eye of the Storm*, the bird impaled on the bough in *The Eye of the Storm*, the dog tearing off Waldo's penis in *The Solid Mandala*. (Goya is mentioned twice in *The Vivisector*.) These scenes appear to express a latent, lingering antagonism in White to Australia; it is as if he wanted to remind Australians that it was not an idyllic land.

During most of White's lifetime (1912–1990), Australians had a very uncertain sense of national identity, a fact that younger Australians living in the confident and prosperous country that has emerged would hardly be aware of. When White was in his twenties, in the 1930s, ambitious Australians fled to Europe to acquire another, more prestigious identity and to absorb an older and more developed culture. White was part of this movement. Until the second half of last century, too, Australians had a very diffident attitude towards their literature: the literature was not widely read by the general public and was rarely studied in school or university. Some people even boasted perversely of never having read an Australian work. Things began to change radically only in the 1970s as Australia became a more prosperous country.

White took a negative idea of Australia to England with him when he attended secondary school and later university there, and had that notion confirmed and reinforced by his English associates; most of them looked with condescension on Australia. Ruth White, his mother, like Hurtle's mother in *The Vivisector*, 'always said Australia was common' (p. 185);

Ruth chose to spend her last years in England. The young Patrick absorbed her viewpoint, for he made vulgarity and lack of education one of the chief targets of his satire, pretty much equating them with evil in the persons of Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack in *Riders in the Chariot*; he never portrayed any vulgar Europeans. Before his return to Australia in 1946 he was not committed to Australia and did not feel that he belonged in it. When he was in the US in the late 1930s, he thought of living there, in Cooperstown in upstate New York, but the war intervened and his life changed. After the war, he thought of living in Greece, but was discouraged by Manoly Lascaris, his lifelong partner, who didn't want to confront his family with his relationship with Patrick. Even in the late 1940s his doubts about returning to Australia can be seen in his reluctance to have Theodora return to it at the end of *The Aunt's Story*: she tears up her return ticket and opts for a mental home in New Mexico.

But he *did* return in 1946 and found its culture in his terms mediocre and lacking in spirituality. Years later, in 1958, in his essay 'The Prodigal Son', White told of his disdain for the Australia he returned to. At the very end of *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986) he wrote of our 'Philistine environment and bourgeois habits'—four years before his death. In his old age he failed to update his image of Australia, in which he had lived continuously for forty years. After he recovered from his disappointment at the public reception of *The Aunt's Story*, however, he made a deep commitment to Australia and undertook the enormously ambitious task of raising its culture. He did that under the influence of what he had absorbed primarily from European and secondarily from American culture.

Against this Euro-American version of White that I have presented here is the fact that seven of his twelve novels are set wholly in Australia and another four partly in Australia. Why doesn't that tip the balance towards affiliating him with Australia? The main reason is his lack of feeling for the country: there is no sense that it is a beautiful country with a breathtaking coastline, or that there are people of integrity, aspiration

and achievement within it. (The idyllic presentation of Rhine Towers in Voss is a concession to his early memories of the White family estate of Belltrees in the Hunter Valley.) He chose to hold himself apart from it and never quite belonged here. Born in England, White seems to have felt adopted into Australia, a changeling like Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector*. The commitment that he felt towards it was to its cultural advancement, quite like Voss' determination to make the map of Australia. When Mr Bonner asks him if he has studied the map of Australia, Voss replies, 'The map? ... I will first make it' (p. 19). White did not study Australian literature: he wanted to create it. His way of doing so was through what he absorbed primarily from European and secondarily from American culture, and it is through those traditions that we should approach him.

All the diverse influences I discuss in this collection of essays constitute a statement of where he lived, when he lived, and the nature of his education. All three of these aspects embrace areas outside Australia, and they are an essential part of his identity as a novelist who was always oriented towards a wider world. That is why I have entitled this book *Patrick White within the Western Literary Tradition*. In a recent essay on Voss, the German critic Henrike Wenzel wrote

Whites Verbindung zu europäischer Literaturtradition wird ... in der Konzeption seines Protagonisten [Voss] deutlich. In seinem Verlangen nach Erkenntnis gleicht er dem Faust, der die Grenzen des Menschlichen durch Erkenntnis überwinden will; in der Rast- und scheinbaren Ziellosigkeit seiner Wanderung dem Odysseus, dessen Schicksal die Suche ist.²

² [White's connection to European literature is ... made clear in his conception of his protagonist (Voss). In his ardent desire for knowledge and understanding he resembles both Faust, who would overstep the limits of humankind, and

My overall approach in this collection is twofold in its emphasis. On the one hand I am concerned with White's evocation of dimensions other than material reality (in my essays on *Voss*, White and Cather, and his preoccupation with epiphanies and mythmaking). And on the other hand I offer a series of analytical studies of his themes and characters in his major novels (in my essays on *The Aunt's Story*, *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*), and even of the man himself (in my discussion of the importance of White's oedipal relationship to his mother in my essay on White and Rimbaud). It has been said that if Freud is rarely found in the analyst's rooms today, he is everywhere in literary criticism, and he frequently helps to illuminate it.

Odysseus, who in the restlessness and apparently undefined goal of his wandering is fated to quest forever.]