

PATRICK WHITE, UN INTENTO DE EPICA AUSTRALIANA

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When we come to contemplate the extensive panorama of World Literature in English now being produced outside Great Britain and the United States, one of the first names to come to mind must surely be the Australian Nobel Prize winner, Patrick White. Apart from the status which this award has given him, White has for many years enjoyed a certain advantage over many of his fellow Australian writers in that all his books have been published in England and have, therefore been easily accessible to European readers who have thus been able to follow the steady output of ten major novels, starting with *Happy Valley*, published in 1939 and ending, for the moment, with *A Fringe of Leaves*, which appeared in 1976.

For European readers, apart from the other interesting elements to be found in the work of this powerful writer, White's books have served as an introduction to that little known and remote continent that few of us have visited. For White has used the Australian scene constantly as a setting both as a background and as a touchstone whereby all human values may be tested and proved. The Australia he has shown us has covered past and present. We have seen the early colonial life of the Sydney of the 1840s and the fearful adventure of exploring the vast emptiness of the bush vividly described in *Voss* (1959), the arduous and lonely struggle of a young couple hewing out a homestead in the early twentieth century in *The Tree of Man* (1955) bringing us up to more recent moments of Sydney life in such other outstanding novels as *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), *The Solid Mandala* (1966), *The Vivisector* and *The Eye of the Storm* (1973).

But what is perhaps more interesting in White's books is his analysis of the meaning Australia can have for the people who encounter it, of the ways in which it affects them. In a way, of course, most, -not to say all- of his books deal with the same question, what it is to be Australian, the conditions which Australian life and society impose upon life. Naturally the features of White's characters and situations are not exclusively Australian; such is the case with his concern for the essential loneliness of human beings, a subject matter present in most of his characters and which underlies the structure of *The Tree of Man*. Also his believe in the intrinsic evil of the particular kind of society described in *Riders in the Chariot* or in *The Aunt's Story* cannot be characterized as strictly

Australian though both his analysis of loneliness and of human evil are inseparable from their Australian background. Stan and Amy Parker's isolation from society and from other is dealt with at a different scale from what would be the case in a European or even an American setting. Their lives and feelings are organically determined by the vastness, the emptiness, the hardness of the landscape in which they live. Also the evil displayed by the inhabitants of Sarsaparrilla, his invented Sydney suburb, is of a particular kind, having to do with fundamentally Australian values.

In this paper we want to deal basically with White's latest novel *A Fringe of Leaves*, where, like in *Voss*, Australia is not an element among others to determine character and plot, but a central element to them. Johann Ulrich Voss needs to find out the mystery of the new continent to achieve the Kind of wisdom he is after, and to Ellen Roxburgh in *A Fringe of Leaves*, her endurance of the Australian wilderness provides her with the self knowledge she had so far lacked. In this novel White tries to enter the realm of the epic by identifying the Australian experience with the only mean of achieving real wisdom. But the kind of knowledge Ellen arrives at something we may consider of general concern? Does it achieve epic stature?

A brief look into the structure of the novel might be of some help in deciding these questions. In this book White has turned once more to the past, to an even earlier stage of Australian history than in his earlier books, using as a basis the true and terrible adventure of Elisabeth Fraser who in White's version becomes Ellen Roxburgh. Originally Ellen Gluyas, a country girl from a poor farm in Cornwall, she marries a gentleman whose sickness has made it necessary for him to leave his city and spend some time at the Gluyas farm. Ellen is reeducated by her strict mother-in-law and forced to give up the crude, sensual part of herself conforming to standard middle-class patterns. There are thus two distinct persons in her, corresponding to two antagonistic sides in her nature and her two names which White uses according to which part of Ellen he wants to emphasize at the time. The same two sides can also be recognized in her husband, only that in his case the darker uncivilized element has been totally controlled by the former one. Like Waldo in *The Solid Mandala* he persist in his one-sided rational attitude and is consequently consumed by his repressed darker self. His death at the hands of the aborigenes may be regarded as a final victory of this side of his nature. After some years of peaceful but passionless marriage, the Roxburgh's decide to travel to Australia and the second half of the book deals with their experiences there and with the tragic shipwreck which takes them to the violence of the continent. Only Ellen survives and is saved by a runaway convict who, after becoming her lover, leads her back to civilization.

If the personal conflicts of the Roxgurghs are typified for the purposes of the story, the journey they undergo to Van Diemen's Land to visit Austin's brother is in every respect

symbolic. In going to see Garnet, the black sheep of the family, they are forced to encounter a difficult and unknown country like the part of themselves they have failed to recognize. It would be long to recall all the symbolic journeys in literature which go from the myth of Orpheus, Homer and Virgil to more modern examples such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Australia is here used as a metaphor and only by overcoming the hardships the new land imposes will Ellen achieve knowledge of herself and of reality.

The time spent with the brother is the first step into the changes that will operate upon the Roxburghs. To Ellen her brother-in-law becomes "less the seducer than the instrument she had chosen for measuring depths she was tempted to explore"¹. The full exploration will be made possible after the shipwreck. A considerable number of images and references emphasize the author's intentions and purposes. The aborigines strip her of her clothes and at the same time release her so that she feels "entirely liberated"².

Her obsession with keeping her wedding ring and her return to her early Cornish dialect point clearly to the two antagonistic sides of her nature. Another image he uses is that of children. Though capable of conceiving children she hasn't been able to give birth to a healthy one doubtless because her relationship with her husband is not vital enough to allow the creation of a new normal being. Her maternal instincts are awakened in the bush. "You are my only friend" she tells a child, and adds in the dialect she would have never used to address her own children "I'd give 'ee a kiss if tha wudn'take fright"³. In spite of the brutality with which she is treated by the aborigines she is at all times ready to admire the beauty of the landscape to the point of ecstasy and at certain moments she even sees her captors positively. Again it is the children who inspire her, "The young children might have been hers. She was so extraordinarily content she wished it could have lasted for ever"⁴. When she returns to civilized life it is once more the children who help her overcome her self-disgust, because only by living like a savage has she been able to survive; hunger has driven her to eat eagerly of human flesh and a new awakened sensuality led her to become the lover of a convict. This relationship with the convict is the central metaphor in the description of her inward voyage, and perhaps because she has committed the original sin Ellen can now become a complete human being.

Moral complications starts to arise as Ellen and the convict approach civilization but his final fear of the white man and his consequent decision to return to the bush enable Ellen to adapt herself once again to her usual life. Of course now the ethical ground has changed considerably, a change which is expressed in her new tolerant and compassionate attitude towards the convicts and towards civilized society due to her new wisdom: "It only now occurred to Mrs. Roxburgh that selfknowledge might remain a source of embarrassment, even danger"⁵ or she will later comment to herself: "As though the rescue ever takes place"⁶

Yet so far we have not given an adequate answer to our initial question. Is Ellen's new

knowledge of real relevance? Obviously her moral struggle and her clear division into two set parts, reinforced by a large number of images, becomes a simplification of the actual ambiguities of moral life for the contemporary conscience. Since Jane Austen our literature is packed with examples of the moral difficulties social life imposes upon our secular minds so that White's duality sounds rather abstract to us.

What perhaps can be said in connection with this matter is that Ellen's kind of knowledge -though definitely not new in itself- is of relevance and novelty within White's books. In most on his previous novels his characters tend to be illuminated creatures -I am thinking of Johann Ulrich Voss, of Laura Trevelyan, Theodora Goodman, Miss Hare_ all of them in search for some mystical or metaphysical gnosis which is never provided by life in society and always drives them ultimately towards isolation. It must be said though that in all of these earlier books White introduces some secondary characters with their feet firmly planted on the ground, who may be regarded as forerunners of Ellen Roxburgh, such as Judd in *Voss*, or Mrs. Godbold in *Riders in the Chariot*. But Ellen is the first among White's main characters to be allowed to learn from human life, from Australian life, the first one to be able to accept and join a community. Her words to Miss Scrimshaw at the end of the novel are very significant: "How I wish I were an eagle; ... have you never noticed that I am a woman only in my form, not in the essential part of me?" says Miss Scrimshaw, "Somewhat to her own surprise, Mrs. Roxburgh remained ineluctably earthbound. I was slashed and gashed too often... Oh no, the crags are not for me!"⁷.

Her capacity to accept in the end the different parts of herself and the world is exemplified in her new relationship with Mr. Jevons, a common merchant whom, it is implied, she will eventually marry. In this sense *A Fringe of Leaves* is a substantial achievement. Ellen's exploration does no longer pursue utopian exaltation, as is the case in *Voss*. It conveys rather the acceptance of human nature in all its aspects and the decision to survive, in spite of the complexities which we are forced to cope with, by the mere fact of living.

NOTES

1. White, P. *A Fringe of Leaves*, J. Cape 1976, p. 117.
2. *Op. cit.*, p. 244.
3. *Op. cit.*, p. 250.
4. *Op. cit.*, p. 257.
5. *Op. cit.*, p. 341.
6. *Op. cit.*, p. 278.
7. *Op. cit.*, p. 402.

