

Patrick White's Hungarian Connection

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1. Introduction

Patrick White's last novel, *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986), is quite different from his earlier, better known works. Although considerably shorter, it displays as wide a canvas as *Riders in The Chariot* (1961) and as deep a psychological insight as in *Voss* (1957) or *The Vivisector* (1970). Yet as opposed to the more conventional narrative format of his previous novels, *Memoirs of Many in One* is fashioned as a haphazard collection of fragmentary episodes, representing the memoirs of its old and probably senile protagonist.

Memoirs of Many in One doubtlessly deserves a thorough investigation, endeavored elsewhere¹ to truly appreciate its complexity. Within the present limitations, I would like to focus on one of the novel's many, ostensibly marginal, details which can nonetheless disclose the novel's underlying main structure, upon which White has constructed his unusual masterpiece.

The repetition of an unrelated and seemingly insignificant phrase, *The Tragedy of Man*—a phrase that appears both at the beginning of the novel and again towards its end, drew my attention. The phrase is written in italics, and one can thus conclude that it refers to a text. Since nothing in White's writing can be taken to be incidental or arbitrary, the very repetition of this phrase merited an inquiry. Indeed, *The Tragedy of Man* is the title of a dramatic poem published in 1861 by the Hungarian writer Imre Madách. White actually mentions Madách's name, alongside that of Goethe's, in close proximity to the title of the poem. Like a piece of a puzzle that suddenly clicks into place, the discovery allowed me to formulate a more comprehensive reading of the novel than was possible up to that point. In what follows, I would like to suggest that White used Madách's poem as the frame upon which he carefully constructed the novel. His allusion to this poem is made to reverberate both in the fashioning of his main protagonist and in the deployment of a double narrative structure within which this protagonist is made to function and is debunked at one and the same time.

2. Patrick White's Late Style

On many counts, *Memoirs of Many in One* fits within the concept of 'Late Style,' a style which Edward Said found prevailed in great artists' works during the 'last or late period of life, [when] the decay of the body, the onset of ill health or other factors . . . even in a younger person bring on the possibility of an untimely end' (Said 6).

When *Memoirs of Many in One* was published Patrick White was 74, and already very sick. He admitted he should really have spent years writing this novel (White, *Letters* 598), yet he knew his health was getting worse, and that is perhaps why he decided to be content with only two drafts of the novel before handing it over to his publisher (Marr, *Life* 624). White's achievement in writing *Memoirs of Many in One* is spectacular when one takes this fact into account, for he must have held the novel in his mind in its entirety to be able to put it down on paper in as short a time as he did. White said as much regarding *The Hanging Garden*, a novel

After they are chased from heaven, Madách's Adam and Eve are led by Satan along the centuries, from Ancient Egypt to the 19th century. In each period they 'act out Humanity's tragic destiny in their struggle with Lucifer,'⁴ as Adam endorses one historical figure after another, such as the Greek Miltiades, Tancred, Kepler or Danton. Adam thereby becomes vividly aware of man's achievements but also of man's folly. Eve appears at the end of each period and refreshes Adam's gradually weakening body and spirit. The penultimate scene is a futuristic ice-age, where an old and hopeless Adam declares he wishes to kill himself. In the last scene, Adam is awakened from his dream, a young man once more. Eve announces she is pregnant, restoring Adam's hope but also making him fall to his knees and proclaim that God has vanquished him. The poem ends with God's words of encouragement to Adam and Eve, and with his admonition of Satan and a reminder that his every deed follows God's intention:

And you too, Lucifer, you are a link
 Within my universe—and so continue:
 Your icy intellect and fond denial
 Will be the leaven to foment rebellion
 And to mislead—if momentarily—
 The mind of man, which will return to me. (scene 15)

White redirects these words at Alex, whose thirst for freedom is like that of Prometheus, the self-reliant artist. Yet while he was bound to a rock as a punishment for giving light to humans, she is the prisoner of her own aspirations, and only seeks self-enlightenment. As implied by White's allusion to the poem, artists are never as free as they imagine: Madách proves to Adam that in his various future existences he will have to follow in his ancestors' steps, reenacting history's glorious moments as well as its defeats. Similarly, White reminds Alex and her fellow theatrical 'urban guerilla' revolutionaries (White: *Memoirs* 158–59) that they could benefit from their cultural heritage, rather than flee from it or presume to reinvent it. Moreover, not only are they incapable of detaching themselves from society but through their rebellion itself they constitute another link to it.

10 Fragments and Unison

Two kinds of fragmentation that White exposes play a major role in the text: the fragmentary philosophy of modern society, and the fragments of older traditions which emerge in the modern plotline. As Sanford Budick points out, 'although we are accustomed to thinking of the phenomenon called tradition as a handing down of an integral whole of meaning . . . it is far more accurate to say that, on the personal as well as the public levels of our experience, cultural tradition exists only as a participation in a constellation of fragments' (Budick 225). White's novel is a clear example of the fragmentary inheritance modern culture must be content with: the older, morality plot is apparent in fragmented form within the text of the modern plot, itself a mere collection of fragments. The artist, according to White, is the agent who can convey the fragments he feels he is made of himself: White claimed that he became a novelist since he was composed of many characters (White, *Letters* 39), an option that 'would not work if the writer's own character is not sufficiently fragmented,' (Marr, *Life* 151). Writing *The Vivisector*, another novel in which White examined the creative processes of an artist, this time a painter, could only be accomplished once White 'discovered ways of achieving the kind of fragmentation by which I convey reality' (White, *Letters* 319). Thus reality for White is not only made of fragments but in turn can only be portrayed by using fragmentation as an aesthetic method. In this sense too, his particular late style is similar to Beethoven's, whose late works, according to Said 'cannot be reconciled or resolved, since

