

# Patrick White and the Great Code of Hellenism

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## I: The problematic of the Great Code

This study deals with three questions; first with Patrick White as a writer, with his aesthetic vision and meta-aesthetical conclusions. Second, with the art of the Great Code as the regulating aesthetic principle of self-awareness within a given culture. Finally, with the idea of Hellenism, as a historical tradition articulating a corpus of meanings, employed in this case by Patrick White in order to make his artistic universe coherent, as both an intra-textual and extra-textual experience at a specific historical situation. All three questions are intertwined within the overarching cultural *epoch* which White belonged to and by the social energy he was permeated by. As part of the post-war re-building process, White's artistic project was to create a "prismatic" mythology out of the historical memory and the social realities of Australia, especially after 1955, a mythology able to offer, in ideational forms and patterns of discourse, symbols of existential identification and cultural emancipation for his Australian readers.

In this, White was not alone. The Australian quest, going back to 1890s, for a distinct cultural identity, however, took a different orientation after White established a microcosm of literary personae with universal relevance starting especially with *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*. White universalised Australia, by transposing the episodic and re-configuring the specific so that they became parts of a grand mythopoetic synthesis in his attempt to answer crucial problems of human life and thought from within the Australian experience. At the same period Manning Clark attempted something equivalent; in one of his *Occasional Writings* Clark defined his attempts in historiography as follows: "I want to show that knowledge of the history of Australia can help a person to find the answers to the great problems of life"<sup>1</sup>. In his apology also for his historiographic synthesis Clark stated that "I hoped and believed I had something to say about the human situation in Australia"<sup>2</sup> and indicated that his "meta-historical" model for structuring his vision was that of tragedy and was based mainly

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<sup>1</sup> Manning Clark, *Occasional Writings and Speeches*, Fontana/Collins, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Manning Clark, *A Discovery of Australia*, ABC Books, 1991, p. 55

on novelistic patterns established by Dostoevsky and Tolstoy or on the tragic vision of life articulated by historians who monumentalised major catastrophes in history.

White's ambition to construct a similar mythopoetic synthesis must be seen within its historical specificities. After the War, many artists realised that the need for collective symbols and the necessity for a new perception of "rootedness" within the Australian landscape were matters of urgency since society was undergoing a rapid change and, in the process, gaining new self-awareness. This process of "enracination" created an implicit confrontation with the great codes of the European past, codes that comforted and empowered previous artists, such as Henry Handel Richardson, to see European in their essence characters in the new landscapes of Australia. It is crucial to understand White's ambiguous relationship with Hellenism as a conscious effort to build his fictional reality with reference to the cultural poetics of Europeans and produce a coherent world of meanings valorised by a privileged tradition of the past. Hellenism was part of White's education and cultural self-awareness and as such it encapsulated the existential tension and psychological ambivalence of a code that explains and dominates at the same time. Hellenism was one such building material of White's artistic universe; a pattern, which empowered him to create his Great Code of meanings, incorporating the peculiarities of his character, the idiosyncrasies of his social mentality and finally his own dichotomy towards such privileged and sacred codifications. In White the admiration of the sublime was always coupled by its parody.

Recently, White's idiosyncrasies were overstressed, at the expense of his solid mythopoetic achievement, by Simon During's superficially deconstructive reading of his work (During, 1996)<sup>3</sup>; yet White's work is extremely complex to be reduced to a few pseudo-moralistic principles attributed to cultural studies. On the contrary, the uneven character of his works delineates the antinomian character of his myth-making poetics and the structural tension in his aesthetics; both of them can be attributed to his attempt to articulate the "newness" of the Australian experience by employing as structural skeleton the morphology of cultural poetics from previous existential adventures in Europe. The understanding of such antinomian aesthetics is probably the key to White's imaginative contradictions and accounts for the interest in his work. The colliding signifiers of his poetics manifest the gradual differentiation within his own aesthetic project leading to the dissolution of the European subject in

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<sup>3</sup> Simon During, *Patrick White*. Oxford University Press, 1996, *passim*.

Australia (as articulated in his last novels) and the establishment of a polycentric and constantly anomic individuality. In White's novels the realm of interiority presents its chaotic and un-masterable unpredictability. White's novels map out a universe of moral dilemmas in the grey areas of situational ethics. Without moral absolutes, his fictional world explores the ethical asymmetry between intentions and actions, together with the inability of human conscience to gain self-awareness and therefore become an autonomous agent for moral activity. But in the failure of his characters White found the essential humanising process in human conscience. The awareness of fallibility makes his characters universal symbols. Unfortunately, the persistent interpretation of his work through the timeless iconography of C.G. Jung's archetypes has deprived his characters from their essential human fallibility and chaotic specificity. The patterns under White's stories refer to the adventure within human interiority and not to any collective archetypes that precede or supersede their specific conditions. White's novels deal with the immanent and not with the transcendental, with the in-worldly instead of the other-worldly. Yet in order to crystallise the chaotic multiplicity of human experience, White adopted certain modes of articulating lived temporality from the traditions that have shaped the European mentality or have created the "emplotment" forms of the novel as a literary genre.

The concept of the "Great Code" is an allusion to William Blake's statement that "*The Old & New Testaments are the Great Codes of Art*"<sup>4</sup>. The statement was elaborated by Northrop Frye, who tried to study the effects of the Bible on literary writing, and on English Literature in particular; such effects were manifested mainly by the establishment of "an imaginative framework -a mythological universe, as I call it- within which Western Literature had operated down to the eighteenth century and is to a large extent still operating"<sup>5</sup>. "*Great Code*" therefore denotes the *codified body of images and symbols with a specific referential significance employed by an artist to construct a framework in which individual differentiation can exist in a relationship and a relatedness of connotations*. Such a mythological universe implies a cosmos of words and things, which coexist as extensions and sometimes presuppositions of social and intellectual realities. Within the mythological universe of such Great Code the individual and the society regain a new sense of "home" as organic parts of the surrounding space and perceive themselves as expressions of a commonly shared value-system. The all-inclusiveness of

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<sup>4</sup>William Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes, Oxford University press, 1979, p.777.

<sup>5</sup>Northrop Frye, *The Great Code, The Bible and Literature*, Ark Paperbacks, 1983, p. IX.

such Great Codes secures the imaginary unity of their world and defines the stability of their coherence, in a psychological and cultural level.

Certainly, Great Codes are always social creations, constructed from both collective experience and individual sensitivity and based on the openness of society to embrace the other and the universal. The Bible or the epics of Homer were products of intense social interaction articulating the dynamics of conflict and redemption permeating their societies; the accumulated experience of a society and the unfolding self-awareness of individuals in union or conflict were expressed through them. In that respect all personal literature is to a certain extent a collective creation since the act of writing presupposes an audience. The artist always has in mind the specific audience of a particular era and the problematic that forges their intellectual horizon or the expectations of their social conditioning. The problematics of any society frame the artistic vision of writers in their implied dialogue with their encompassing reality. Indeed cultural production is a series of individual proposals, within the reality and the "selfhood" of each social group, in constant interaction with each other. Through such a process of questioning each tradition adjusts itself to any probable or even accomplished developments and changes, creating simultaneously a diversified stratification of meanings. The strength and resistance of each culture depends mainly on the variety and the assimilative power of similar questions. At the same time within this framework emerge symbols of identity as places of convergence. As long as the members of a society recognise each other as bearers of the same or similar symbolic references, expressed primarily through pictorial language and then by specific patterns of social interaction, the certainty of a specific selfhood and identity arises and establishes the "mythopoetics" of the social reality as seen through the eyes of the specific artist. (How such symbols are used by state education and political ideology is another story to be pursued elsewhere). This approach liberates the text from the confines of biographism and the strictures of factual reductionism, which can be clearly seen in Derrida's interpretation of White's novels.

Furthermore, the concept of the Great Code is appropriate in framing the experience felt in the new countries which were established after the age of Discovery. The United States, Canada, the multifariousness of the Latin American countries, and finally Australia from the first day of their creation, together with their administrative infrastructure, struggled to establish codes that would offer a sense of identity and an ontological justification to their members, as it can be seen in the American quest for the "Supreme American Fiction". Speaking about the similar case of Mexico, Octavio Paz noted that "the history of Mexico is the history of a

man seeking his parentage, his origins. [...] He wants to go back beyond the catastrophe he suffered: he wants to be a sun again, to return to the centre of that life from which was separated one day. (Was that day the Conquest? Independence?). Our solitude has the same roots as religious feelings. It is a form of orphanhood, an obscure awareness that we have been torn from the All, and an ardent search: a flight and a return, an effort to re-establish the bonds that unite us with the universe"<sup>6</sup>. All new countries tried to define themselves based not only on their sense of history but on the dichotomy of their past and their present: the past in another country and the present in a different landscape. And the landscape became the symbol of both their nostalgia and hope defining thus the contradictions and the antinomies of their very presence in that specific situation. C.P. Cavafy recapitulates the ambiguous feelings towards cultural hybridisation born out of such dilemma:

*It's time we admitted the truth:  
we're Greeks also -what else are we?  
but with Asiatic tastes and feelings,  
tastes and feelings  
sometimes alien to Hellenism*<sup>7</sup>.

All cultures are submitted to what Robert Hughes called, in his book about Australia, "the Geographical Unconscious"<sup>8</sup>. Their attempt to tame and domesticate the natural landscape leads to analogous forms of cultural poetics; it also leads to the enrichment of their traditional patterns of thinking and behaving with new types and even systems of talking about themselves. Cavafy encapsulated this process in one of the densest verses of modern poetry, as he tried to explain the success of the Hellenistic culture in becoming a universal code of communication:

*"with our far-flung lands,  
our flexible action of judicious adjustments"*<sup>9</sup>

The survival of a socio-cultural community depends completely on such flexible actions of judicious adjustments; otherwise social structure remains crippled by a sense of loss or incapacitated by the inability to see the phenomenology of its presence in the specific situation.

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<sup>6</sup>Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude, Life and Thought in Mexico*, trans.. Lysander Kemp, Penguin Books, 1961, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup>C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, trans. by Ed. Keely & Ph. Sherrard, ed. by G. Savidis, Chatto & Windus, London, 1975, p.145.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore, A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia 1787-1868*, Pan Books, 1988, p. 43-83.

<sup>9</sup>C.P. Cavafy, *ibidem*, p. 127.

## II: The case for Australian mythopoetics

For White, Australia was the perfect model of how all such adjustments operated simultaneously in order to produce a new social structure and its cultural poetics, based on the latent emotions of guilt, redemption and hope. First the guilt about the genocide of the indigenous people which followed the white settlement in the country and then of the shame that tormented the settlers because of their past. The primal guilt of the White Australian is his feeling of displacement as an outcast, a criminal by definition and then a murderer by position; such unsettling feelings lurking in the unknown landscape were hidden by the official versions of Australian history under the disguise of a country without problems, of a country in perpetual historical innocence. The paradigm lasted as long as Australia was a monophonic, white dominated colony; however, when the “secret countries” under the Australian flag emerged, particularly after the Second World War, then all the variety, differentiation and complexity of the Australian history appeared as the sharpest indication of a growing self-awareness. Patrick White’s return to Australia (1948) coincided with that major change in the Australian society, and it seems that such unsettling feelings exist as underlying currents in all his novel, after *The Tree of Man*, the first literary creation of Australia, which made feasible the creation of a symbolic universe out of the redemption achieved by suffering ordinary settlers in a landscape without memories or symbols for self-recognition. White’s novel expresses the first painful awareness that Australian society had entered an “epoch of absolute sinfulness”, which Georg Lukacs, following Fichte, suggested made the novel the dominant form of expression of modernity. But furthermore, “the novel tells of the adventure of interiority; the content of the novel is the story of the soul that goes to find itself, that seeks adventures in order to be proved and tested by them and by proving itself, to find its own essence”<sup>10</sup>.

As P.R. Stephensen had stated in 1936, “a nation or the idea of a nation, is inseparable from its literature. A nation, in fact, without a literature, is incomplete. Australia without a literature remains a colony, no nation”<sup>11</sup>. This postulate remained for decades the main quest of the Australian intelligentsia since “literature is the memory of a society which provides it with its continuity and its enduring personality”<sup>12</sup>, as Dorothy Green observed. White therefore had to act in his novels as the focusing

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<sup>10</sup> Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel*, transl. Anna Bostock, Merlin Press, 1963, p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> P.R. Stephensen, *The Foundations of Culture in Australia, An Essay towards national Self respect*, with a new introduction by Craig Munro, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986, p.16.

<sup>12</sup> Dorothy Green, *Writer Reader Critic*, Primavera Press, Sydney MCMXC, p. 14.

point of previous literary development by adding the sense of lost certainties about the present. Despite his frequent negative comments about previous novelists, his work consciously synthesises the past, the present and the future of his society in the unified body of concrete myths of fluidity and disorientation forming a new Australian mythology, or even an Australian mythopoetic code, expressing the liminal and the peripheral, as he saw Australia to be.

Such synthesis can only emerge as a need within a social formation when the central self-image of that society is confronted with the otherness of alien traditions. White's return to Australia coincided with a growing dichotomy within the country: "the oscillation between two worlds", as Manning Clark called the post war period, came to an end with the influx of immigrants who changed radically Australian society. The rapidity of change was so surprising that the establishment of a local mythology able to offer some common themes of questioning and shared patterns of symbolic behaviour become a condition *sine qua non* of the Australian intelligentsia in all forms of artistic expression. White understood that the need for the Australian Great Code was the central prerequisite for any Australian writer, since in his country tradition was quite short or even worse imported from elsewhere based on the conformity and complacency of the English middle-class. Furthermore, there was a mythological void in the urban society of the country which made the vast open spaces of the inland frightful and unbearable. The emptiness of nature, as elaborated first by D.H. Lawrence, was extended onto the blank pages of the unarticulated repository of meanings and symbols.

The need for such a mythology was felt already long before White's return to Australia. Before that Bernard O' Dowd announced in his rather rhetorical poetic exercise:

*Where is Australia, singer, do you know?  
These sordid farms and joyless factories,  
Mephitic mines and lanes of pallid woe?  
Those ugly towns and cities such as these  
With incense sick to all unworthy power,  
And all old sin in full malignant flower?  
No! to her bourn her children still are faring:  
She is a Temple that we are to build:  
For her the ages have been long preparing:  
She is a prophecy to be fulfilled!  
(.....)  
She is the scroll on which we are to write  
Mythologies our own and epic new:*

*She is the port of our propitious flight  
From Ur idolatrous and Pharaoh's crew.(...)*<sup>13</sup>

From such a loud and monotonous poem, it is sufficient to extract the notion of Australia as *a scroll for new mythologies*, an image that will serve our purpose for understanding the attempts by many artists to compile a distinct body of symbols appropriate for such a new mythology. However the epic of the Australian adventure won't be written not even with the *Jindyworobaks*, the group of poets and essayists who tried to unite, as that aboriginal word signifies, the memories and the practices of the two Australias. Rex Ingamells the leader of the movement, in his long and unjustly rejected epic poem *The Great South Land* (1951) elaborated a complex and sometimes extremely interesting mythopoetic iconography of Australia, in verses not completely unsuccessful. (We may remember here of a similar attempt in Chile, South America, by Pablo Neruda in his great epic and lyric poem *Canto General*). The geography of a place inscribes the iconographic potential in the people who live in it. History confirms this potential and the adventure of being adjusted to new natural habitat gives birth to the emergence of an "art-speech which contains an alien quality"<sup>14</sup>, according to D.H. Lawrence. The articulation of such *alien quality* is the proper quest of all artists of any given place.

Moreover, it seems that after the disaster of the Second World War, new countries emancipated themselves from the bonds that fastened them to the history and the influence of the old Continent. Together with the movements of independence and decolonisation a deep ferment took place so that political emancipation would become an emancipation of thought as well. On the other hand most of these countries participated in such a disastrous war and sacrificed thousands of their young people for the cause against totalitarianism. We may say that the fact of such a conscious sacrifice inaugurated the new self-awareness of the newly independent countries and contributed to the emergence of new forms of ethno-nationalism, which was founded on the "blood" of their own people. The feeling of pain and loss generated the certainty of self-confidence and that led to the feeling of being something unique, not a replica or an imitation of the old nations of Europe, but a new promise for the entire world. In another poem by Ian Mudie, *The Australian Dream* (1944), written after the bombardment of Darwin by the Japanese air force, the poet sees that the blood of Australians, who died there, on Australian soil, gave birth to the new era of Australia history:

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<sup>13</sup>The Poems of Bernard O' O' Dowd, Collected Edition, Lothian Publishing Co, 1941, p. 208.

<sup>14</sup>D.H. Lawrence, "The Spirit of Place", in Selected Literary Criticism, ed. by Anthony Beal, Mercury Books, London, 1956, p. 296.

*No more shall we a race of phantoms be,  
peopling a cold geographer's design,  
but one folk of Australian flesh and blood,  
untiring, riding through your reddened dust,  
or speeding in lit trains through clattering nights,  
or speeding through the air on silver wings,  
a nation that has felt its strength of flight  
and seeks to soar from all its alien night.*<sup>15</sup>

White himself, as we know, participated in the Second World War, in the Middle East and Egypt and there he experienced the pain and the suffering hidden beneath the rhetoric of heroism and bravery. On the other hand his private life and mental structure almost forced him to become, as himself said, “an outsider”, or even the “Prodigal Son”; someone that is who did not see life and literature from within mainstream culture and through its eyes but through the eyes of someone who suffers as the outcast. The vision of life from the margins of society became the optics of White’s writing: only from the margins of the society and away from all accepted mainstream cultural values, the artist can preserve integrity of vision and look at society with the disinterested eye of artistic sublimation. Otherwise within the confinements of legality and lawfulness his discourse becomes a repeated motif, a re-affirmation of the existing order of things.

In that respect White’s artistic vision must be seen under the light of the words of Gandhi used as an epigraph for his first novel *Happy Valley* (1939): “it is impossible, Gandhi said, “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”. Only under this perspective all elements analysed until now become meaningful. White saw the “Lucky Country”, not as a place without history of suffering and pain, but as a culture suppressing its own “felt time” and submerging itself to the art of self-oblivion. Yet the trauma of the Aboriginal genocide felt by all in the country hadn’t found its artistic form with its own patterns of sacrifice and martyrdom. Only Aborigines could have such a temporality of human suffering. European settlers on the contrary, after ruling over the country, transformed it into the land of oblivion: trying to forget their convict past and extinguish traces of their crimes, they deleted any sense of tradition as the successive experience of a social group, or reverted to the infantile reverence of “home” through an occluding nostalgia for an organic community that never existed.

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<sup>15</sup>Ian Mudie, *The Australian Dream*, A Jindyworobak Publication, Adelaide, 1944, p.9.

In his novels and essays White expressed through his literary personae that unconscious absence of human passion in his country - absence that inevitably led to the perception of a Great Australian Emptiness and the fear in front of the open spaces of the hinterland. White felt immediately what D.H. Lawrence called "the strange, as it were, invisible beauty of Australia, which is undeniably there, but which seems to lurk just beyond the range of our white vision"<sup>16</sup>; his efforts were focused on the conscious and persistent project to exorcise the emptiness of the place by giving Australia, as a literary landscape at least, a history of its sanctifying deaths and bringing thus the "invisible beauty" within the range of European visibility. The people who died in Australia consecrated the place by infusing its soil with the essence of their existence. Blood and sacrifice, death and agony, love and hate, passions that are transformed to a redeeming and liberating passion articulate White's novelistic concerns; not simply the invasion and the conquest of 1788 but the continuous human adventure that enveloped the place and infused it with the collective memory of all individuals who were buried in it. "Australia" is the lived temporality of all people who suffered in it, of the vital force that was embodied by each one of them, and was dissolved into the cultural continuum of their descendants. At this point White returned to the historical adventure of Hellenism as one of the most obvious examples of suffering and redemption in Western European history.

### **III: The case of Hellenism**

Hellenism is a complex and not a very innocent concept to be understood within its actual historical dimensions without suspicion. In literary studies Hellenism means images of Greece created, invented or idealised by the German, French, Italian and English poets, novelists and aestheticians of the 17th and 18th centuries. The concept of Hellenism is a perfect example of an indirect and mediated interpretation of a past culture; most frequently Ancient Greece is perceived through the hermeneutics of Winkelmann, Goethe, P. B. Shelley or W. B. Yeats. As a result the concept of ancient Hellas is a highly elaborate, sophisticated and multi-layered "chronotype" of the last five centuries, starting from Renaissance art and concluding with James Joyce's ambition, expressed in *Ulysses* to "Hellenise" Ireland and create a "new paganism".

Consequently, literary Hellenism means the invented formalist conventions about ancient Greece articulating an archetypal achronicity, which on many occasions becomes the conscious and ideologically driven

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<sup>16</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, Heinemann, 1963, p. 73

attempt for de-historisation. The problem about literary Hellenism remains to this day, since with its connotations of colonialism, racism and even Nazism, Hellenism has been used in order to dominate and dis-articulate human temporality in countries under European colonial hegemony. The visual language and the conceptual frameworks implied in Hellenism privilege the rational or the rationalised against the illogicality and the invisibility of a mental landscape where the dark presence of indigenous mental cartography was created. Early artists employed “Hellenised” iconographies in order to comprehend the “newness” of the Australian other in the presence of the aboriginal self-conscience. Hellenic iconography became a basic structural edifice in order to domesticate the threatening and haunted Australian landscape, a landscape populated by the projected phobias of the white settlers, manifestations of a guilty conscience. Bernard Smith indicated that “the Greek revival in Europe is conveniently contemporaneous with the European pre-colonisation period in the Pacific, so that it is tempting to explore the role that the memory of Greece played in making the Pacific known to Europeans”<sup>17</sup>.

In Patrick White’s works the image of European classicist Hellenism is completely absent. With the exception of very few hasty comments of praise and admiration about the monuments on the Acropolis we can hardly find any sort of idealised worship of the classical culture: “I saw the Parthenon”, he says in his memoirs, “as the symbol of everything I or any other solitary artist aspired to before we were brought down into the sewage and plastic of the late Twentieth Century”<sup>18</sup>. In his letters, White is extremely frugal in praising the grandeur of one of the most important monuments of European history; just once he mentions that “I shall not try to describe the Acropolis, which is an experience beyond words”<sup>19</sup>. White ignores almost completely the “glory that was Greece”, and with the exception of scattered allusions in his second novel *The Living and the Dead* (1941) and several mythological allusions later on in *The Vivisector*, classical imagery is simply not there. What interested him were the presence of Byzantium and the guiding ritualistic energy of the Orthodox Church<sup>20</sup>.

Overall, White left a considerable body of letters written during his three or four visits to Greece throughout the years, until his last one in 1983. Then there is a unique poem about the fall of Athens to the

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<sup>17</sup> Bernard Smith, *Imagining the Pacific. In the Wake of the Cook Voyages*, Melbourne University Press, 1992, p. 213

<sup>18</sup> Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass, A Self-Portrait*, Jonathan Cape, 1981, p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> Patrick White, *Letters*, ed. by David Marr, Random House, 1994, p.60.

<sup>20</sup> Rudolf Bader, *The Visitable Past. Images of Europe in Anglo-Australian Literature*, Peter Lang, Berne, 1992, p. 299-304.

Germans, many references to Greece in his most complex novel *The Aunt's Story*, his neo-realist Greek stories in *The Burnt-ones* (1964), one story from *The Cockatoos* (1974), many characters such as Hero Pavlousi in *The Vivisector*, Eudoxia and Angelos Vatatzes in *The Twyborn Affair*, the complex reincarnations of the main narrator of the *Memoirs of many in One* and numerous Greek characters appearing in all his other novels and plays. Even in his experimental script of the film *The Night the Prowler* (1976) we find a group of young Greeks singing about a heart of stone<sup>21</sup>. Finally, White dedicated to Greece many pages in his autobiography *Flaws in the Glass* and in his short essays and speeches, now brought together under the title *Patrick White Speaks*.

What is important in all these references is that they were mainly written after his friendship with Manoly Lascaris, the “small Greek of immense moral strength who became the central mandala in my life’s hitherto messy design”<sup>22</sup>. His relationship with Lascaris gave to White’s “pointless and often desperate existence”, a direction and orientation in life, together with a strong sense of the past and of the religious element in everyday life. White was from a tradition still in the making; in England he was a colonial, in Australia a foreigner. On the contrary, Lascaris was the descendant of one of the oldest and most famous aristocratic families of Byzantium, the grand Lascaris family, who offered two emperors and numerous officers and men of letters to the empire especially during the dark period after the capture of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204. Lascaris also descended from some of the oldest centres of Hellenic culture, namely Smyrna, Alexandria and Constantinople, which were the exclusive places of Greek culture for over fifteen centuries. Lascaris never lived in the Greek state and its new capital Athens. But in these cities he experienced a deep sense of the continuity of the Greek cultural heritage and an unequivocal attachment to the Patriarchate of Constantinople as the religious centre of Hellenic culture.

White met Lascaris in 1941 after the break of the Great War and experienced with him the bitterness and the humiliation of the Greek surrender to the Germans. One of his earliest references to Greece as the place of immense suffering and pain is the poem he wrote in 1941, published in the Sydney based magazine *Australia* in September of the same year, about the fall of Greece. It is the earliest specimen of how White perceived Hellenism at that moment and yet perceiving that moment as the recapitulation of the past:

*The Goths have sat on the Acropolis*

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<sup>21</sup>Patrick White, *The Night the Prowler*, Penguin Australia Books, 1976, p. 157.

<sup>22</sup>Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass*, ib. p. 100.

*Eating synthetic food, talking of mottled wives.  
The Poison-flower has dropped on Crete, and is  
Spreading its sickly, if defiant, roots in blood.  
But all these symptoms, like the fall of kings,  
And bricks and plaster and the sound of broken glass,  
Are less substantial than remaining things,  
Events at most that serve to cauterise the soul.*

*I have heard voices praising under fire,  
And death; the lovely sensual act of living,  
And guns are more spasmodic than desire,  
Or bread or earth or wind or hands upheld for these.  
Much will remain when all the agonies  
Receive in time a shape and past. This is the way for pain  
Carving and leaving the moments like a frieze,  
That half depicts a Persian massacre<sup>23</sup>.*

For White, Greek heritage is made of agonies and pain, immortalised by the art, which renders them timeless and eternal to the human soul: a Persian massacre is the German conquest and vice versa. The tragedy of war idealised Greece to such an extent so that after 1945, White seriously considered living there permanently: "From what I see of the landscape through the window in the hospital, the country is all that I desire. I feel that if it weren't for the War I would be here for ever"<sup>24</sup>, he wrote to a friend in 1945 from Athens. "Of course", he added, "conditions are still chaotic -fantastic prices, poverty, everyone very shaken by the Civil War on top of everything else. But the charm comes out on top of it all"<sup>25</sup>. White seemed determined to live in Greece after the war. He planned to start a business there in order to provide the starving population with medicine –something that can be interpreted as a messianic call in his mentality. In February 1945, he sent a letter to the Prime Minister of Australia trying to convince him to "to present the Government of Greece with a small experimental flock of merino sheep. Greece", he added, "was badly depleted of stock by the Germans. It will take her some time to build up her resources and particularly to revive her agricultural and pastoral life, which for Greece as for Australia is of the utmost importance. Greece's output of wool before the War was comparatively small. An increase and improvement of this output, if the introduction of merino sheep were to prove a success, would be a considerable economic asset to

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<sup>23</sup>Reprinted in David Marr's Patrick White, A Life. Random House, 1991, p. 219.

<sup>24</sup>P. White Letters, ib. p. 59.

<sup>25</sup>P. White, Letters, ib. p. 60.

a small and poor country"<sup>26</sup>. Neither of his plans were realised as Greece entered a devastating civil war (1945-1949), which lasted for four years and exhausted completely what was left after the departure of the Germans.

Just a few months before he left Greece, at Lascaris' insistence, White recapitulated his feelings about Greece: "I feel I ought to tell you something about Greece, but I don't know where to begin. It is an absorbing country. Difficult to know why. But it is an increasing obsession, in spite of the fact that the people are frequently maddening and that one sees no real hope for them or ultimate solution to their problem. They have this terrible innate desire to destroy themselves, just as they have destroyed or attempted to destroy so many of their great men from Socrates down. But one continues to want to do all one can for them. I can't say more than I have already said -I want to stay here the rest of my life"<sup>27</sup>. Yet, eight months later in Sydney, White confided in a friend: "I had not realised how Australian I am underneath until I came back and saw it and smelled it again. An ugly corner pub with iron-lace balconies was quite an emotional experience when I caught sight of it on landing at Fremantle"<sup>28</sup>. Soon Manoly Lascaris joined him in Sydney and they lived together for over forty five years in a relationship of which White said "I dare believe it will outlast the two of us"<sup>29</sup>. From then, Greece was to be seen through the memories of the war and the genealogies of Lascaris' ancestors. Yet, the Greek landscape, which had so deeply impressed him, appeared in *The Aunt's Story*:

*"Greece, you see, is a bare country. It is all bones"<sup>30</sup>.*

And again:

*"You see, I am a peasant", said Moraitis. I am very conscious of the shape of the country. I come from the Peloponnese. It is rich, fat, purple country, but underneath you can feel the bones. Many people were killed there. Greeks die often.*

*All the time he was thinking with his hands, feeling his way from object to object, and his hands struggled together to contain the mystery of death.*

*"Greeks are happiest dying", smiled Moraitis. "Their memorials do not reflect their fatality. All the Greek monuments suggest a*

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<sup>26</sup>p. White, Letters, ib. p. 61.

<sup>27</sup>p. White, Letters, ib. p. 64.

<sup>28</sup>p. White, Letters, ib. p. 65.

<sup>29</sup>p. White, Flaws in the Glass, ib. p. 100.

<sup>30</sup>p. White *The Aunt's Story*, Penguin, p. 112.

*continuity of life. The theatre at Epidaurus, you have seen it, and Sounion? Pure life. But the Greeks are born to die*<sup>31</sup>.

White described Greek landscape as a symbolic series of death, sacrifice and blood: the identity of its inhabitants was shaped in suffering and pain. In many of his writings refers to the “fatality” of the Greeks, meaning a kind of surrender to the upheavals of life, fatality indicating the civilising effect of suffering and trust in the power of communal survival. “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 resisting the arms of the chair in which he is seated, Manoly is the Greek archetype<sup>32</sup>. But for him even such fatality was his own, a kind of a selective affinity, which drew him “to Greece from a distance, and one Greek in particular<sup>33</sup>”.

What was constantly referred to in his writing as the essence of his own Hellenism was the Byzantine history and Orthodox tradition, to the extent that his biographer talks about White’s absorption of “the superstitions of the Orthodox faith<sup>34</sup>”. In his self-portrait White refers on many occasions to the family of Lascarids and their stories of persecution and fear. Through them, his Greece was a culture under constant siege and the archetype of human perseverance, the tradition that survived against all odds thanks to the faith-world established around the Orthodox Church. His appreciation of the Orthodox Church is indeed persistent; without idealising it (it is very interesting to remember his scathing remarks about the bastion of Orthodoxy, Mt Athos), White stressed repeatedly that “the Greeks have survived through their Orthodox faith, professed or submerged<sup>35</sup>”. And in many other instances he pointed out the feeling of security experienced by Lascaris within the liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church in contrast to his own agnostic and mystical attitude. In that respect he saw modern Hellenism as a religious community bound together by faith and liturgical time, or by the iconology of Byzantine hagiography. White perceived Orthodox faith as a source of strength for the ordinary Greek and as an efficient defence mechanism, which empowered them against the challenges of changing historical realities. Hellenism for him was a continuing unfolding of collective suffering and redemption by the people who recognise themselves through the symbols of the Hellenic culture and partake in the Orthodox Church; through their

<sup>31</sup>P. White, *The Aunt’ Story*, Penguin Books, p. 113.

<sup>32</sup>P. White, *Flaws in the Glass*, *ibid.* p. 101.

<sup>33</sup>P. White, *Flaws in the Glass*, *ib.* p. 118.

<sup>34</sup>David Marr, *Patrick White A Life*, *ibid.* p. 358.

<sup>35</sup>P. White, *Flaws in the Glass*, *ib.* p. 102.

historical experience Greeks developed a sense of fatality and serenity: the same qualities that White will infuse his masterful *The Solid Mandala*, as he himself indicated<sup>36</sup>.

Through his contact with Hellenism and Orthodoxy White formed a system of religious beliefs that focused “in prayer more than Church dogma”<sup>37</sup>. Through prayer, probably a reference to the spiritual prayer of the Orthodox monastic tradition, reality may be “spiritualised” and the writer might become a prophet, announcing to his contemporaries not the future but the hidden “spiritual” element of their everyday existence. As in Greece, the historical adventure itself was the Great Code of the Hellenic culture; such Code implied a multi-faceted and complex totality of symbols, consecrating practices and sacred sites, which by blood and death created a spiritual reality, superimposing an imaginary veil, over the often mundane and prosaic social circumstances. Similarly, White envisaged such a Great Code for his country, a Code created out of the collective experience of his fellow people in their attempt to go beyond their very “ordinariness”. In an article about patriotism White pleaded that the “hedonistic Australians must be prepared to suffer”; and as an example of similar creative sufferings he referred again to Greece: “Look at Greece -a truly patriotic nation. Ever since their War of Independence when they threw off the Turk, then occupation by various foreign powers, the monarchies forced on them by nations greater than their own, and from which they had to divest themselves, the Greeks have suffered and risen above their suffering”<sup>38</sup>. To suffer and rise above your suffering –this is according to White the true measure of progress and civilisation. Not simply to avoid suffering, or being ashamed of it; on the contrary suffering, in the original meaning of *pathos*, gives perspective to life as the only dramatic escape from individualistic imprisonment. Suffering does not simply lead to redemption and catharsis: but it does also extend the limits of understanding and guides the individual and its society to accept the reality of the other. Only through suffering, communities build their identity on their common experience of their mortality and finitude. White tried to establish similar relations between the living and the dead within his own emerging tradition: that is to sanctify the places where the settlers suffered, loved, yearned and died. The Great Australian Code had to be based on analogous historical experiences of other traditions but had gradually to be expanded and enriched in order to articulate the presence of the Aboriginal other. In his novels, after *Riders in the Chariot*, White

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<sup>36</sup>P. White, *Flaws in the Glass*, ib. p. 146.

<sup>37</sup>Patrick White *Speaks*, Primavera Press, p. 180.

<sup>38</sup>Patrick White *Speaks*, ib. p. 142.

tried to unite European rationalist empiricism with aboriginal ecopsychology, in order to restore “spirituality” and establish universal values of understanding the other through Australian experience: “Follow the path of humility and humanity, he admonishes, and Australia might develop a civilisation worthy of the name”<sup>39</sup>.

White recapitulated his debt to Hellenism in his revealing essay “Greece -My Other Country”. In this short text planned to be read in 1983 during the memorial celebrations for the Uprising of the Polytechnic School of Athens ten years before, he encapsulated his debt to the Greek experience. First he stated that Greece is “more recognisably part of my own flawed self”. Second that he became attached to the country during the German Occupation and the Civil War. Third that he travelled extensively through its most important historical sites. Fourth that “the Greek soul was born of foreign occupation”. Fifth that “Australia has not yet suffered as Greece”. And White concluded his finally undelivered speech: “You Greeks gave the world civilisation. Since the fall of Byzantium [you] have been preserved by the Panayia [Virgin Mary] and the Saints, --as you know in your hearts, even those of you who profess not to ‘believe’. Surely we must not allow the barbarians of today to destroy by holocaust this civilisation you have created? (.....) I would ask you Greeks, who are amongst the world’s greatest survivors to meditate on this theme when your celebrations are over, and to unite with those other people of the world -ordinary people- who stand for life as opposed to the arbitrary death the super-powers wish upon our planet”<sup>40</sup>.

The speech is the product of a certain period of excitement and of disillusion. The existing text as a whole is rather uneven, slightly demagogic, or even naïve and highly un-political. Perhaps, the first years in office of a socialist government with their great expectations, ambitions and promises must have inspired White to go out of his usual down to earth realism and critical attitude. It is interesting to see how provocatively he stressed two points in his speech, in front of a communist in their majority audience; first the importance of Christian faith and second the idea that the “Greek soul was born of foreign occupation”. Both ideas were completely out of place in that particular context. But according to him, religion and tradition create civilisation and culture as spiritual realities and not simply as museum artefacts. Living with Lascaris he could see, the grandeur of humility, which is usually shown by people who suffered deeply, and developed specific methods of transforming pain into silence or creativity. On the other hand getting in touch with the historical

<sup>39</sup> Patrick White Speaks, *ib.*, p 195

<sup>40</sup>Patrick White Speaks, *ib.* p. 136.

tradition of the last ten centuries in Greece he clearly saw the permanent tenets that contributed to its survival. For him Greece, together with nations such as the Jewish and the Irish, established through martyrdom in captivity their stable and concrete codes of meaning and from them created their modern identities: and exactly there he perceived their importance for his own “untried Australia”<sup>41</sup>. From the code of modern Hellenism the Australian beauty could enter the visual range of European settlers and become a spatial category for self-definition.

#### **IV: Some concluding remarks**

Rex Ingamels in his celebrated essay “Conditional Culture” suggested that the Australian identity needed first a “suitable thought-idiom” that would release the “individuality of the race” and only then “Australian culture will exist”<sup>42</sup>. It seems that Patrick White tried to make Ingamels’ postulate reality; in order to achieve it he transplanted the rhetorical strategies from within the historical and religious experience of other European nations who migrated to Australia –and the Greek experience was only one of them. By transplanting an established rhetorical tradition, he worked creatively on its central structures and values, transforming the images, which could be grafted on to the *numinous* and sometimes ominous substratum of Aboriginal presence. In order to confront this dark underground world he adopted the imagery which would bring closer the phenomenological presence of the Aboriginal other and that of the White Australia.

The ultimate goal behind his attempt was to incorporate the recent adventure of Australia to the aboriginal reality, transcending its violent beginning and stressing the continuity of human condition irrespective of the colour of the people who live in it: the fact of the human presence in the same landscape created for him a *noetic gestalt* through which the common *fundamentum* of human mortality was experienced and expressed. Undoubtedly there is a metaphysical, almost religious undercurrent in his effort; White wanted to transform European Australia to an essential part of the Australian history as a whole under the perspective of an eschatology of human life. For him, death on the way to accomplishing a mission is the transfiguring event of conscience; both Aborigines and Whites are tormented by the fear of an end to a life that hasn’t found a purpose for living; the death of such pointless life allows

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<sup>41</sup>Patrick White Speaks, ib. p. 142.

<sup>42</sup>Rex Ingamels, Conditional Culture in The Writer in Australia, a Collection of Literary documents 1856 to 1964, ed. by John Barnes, Oxford University Press Melbourne, 1969, p. 250.

the Great Emptiness of the natural landscape to take again possession of its territory by expelling human presence and eliminating traces of habitation. The dark and omnipotent Darwinian nature obliterates human presence, white or black. Culture becomes the only defence of humans against the beauty of a savage and indifferent nature. Furthermore, anxiety for religious and ritual self-transcendence simply vanishes since it indicates an absence of meaning in existence: White's characters find transcendence in the ordinary and the trivial. Their very "ordinariness" becomes the battleground for the transfiguration of existence or for spiritual silence itself. White's Hellenic (and Jewish) code of meaning relied on the concept of divine immanence, of a latent natural theology permeating landscape, history and being, and linking all together so that human presence won't become existentially anomic; this is the humanistic and spiritual element in White's work and his latent rationalist perception in the intrinsic value of human "life force".

Based on his own experience White chose the Greek historical example in order to re-produce the "Australian dreaming", in the way that such a concept was understood by the Aborigines, namely as "the spirit life, the connection with tree, rock, landscape, the totems, in more sophisticated terms, the spirituality"<sup>43</sup>. Having been emotionally involved with a Greek, who was himself a refugee and an expatriate, he became able to realise the importance of passion as the inspiring force in creating a solid and permanent personal identity; only after the creation of such self-awareness, Australian collective identity would be formed. So for him Hellenism became a thread within the labyrinth of the Great Australian Unknown –a thread that guided him steadily to create solid literary characters, images, plots and fictional realities, around which the stability and the cohesion of a symbolic community could be crystallised. "A novel", he said, "should heighten life, should give one an illuminating experience"<sup>44</sup>; and one of the sources of such an illumination was the morpho-poetics of Hellas, although not the light of the classical idealism but the adventure of ordinary people under captivity, or the trauma of displacement. Such vision offered Patrick White the notions of humility and compassion, so that Voss and Laura Trevelyan could be united in the middle of the desert: "but she continued to smile her inexorable smile, which signified they had been married an eternity, and that the stone statues will survive the years of the Turk"<sup>45</sup>. His "surreal" junctures also indicate the long battle in his writings between modernist fiction and the

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<sup>43</sup>Patrick White Speaks, *ib.* p. 154.

<sup>44</sup>Patrick White Speaks, *ib.* p. 21.

<sup>45</sup>Patrick White, Voss, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1957, p. 287.

post-modern escape from representational writing. As Susan Lever pointed out: “[His novels] move beyond the representational faith of realism, or the seeking of individual difference of modernism, to present a great sweep of disbelief and despair”<sup>46</sup>. In his gradual disillusion with the power of writing to make things happen outside the text, White returned on many occasions to the mythopoetic potentiality of a Hellenic landscape, consecrated by tradition and valorised by personal intimacy. In his novels White struggled to articulate symbols of self-recognition so that his Australian readers could overcome their prolonged identity crisis and re-imagine themselves as the potential heirs to the European civilisation fertilised by the absolute otherness of Aboriginal cultures. His struggle to reconcile or transubstantiate the contradictory forces within the Australian social imaginary is still relevant today under the perspective of post-colonial studies. The Greek *pathos* represented for him the purity and the innocence of “a Divine Presence” which “controls us but only to a certain degree: life is what we, its components, make it”<sup>47</sup>, a historical deity that exists only through agony and loss. The immanent divine emerges as praxis through ordinary life and self-conscience: it is the *haecceitas* (thisness) of individual presence that creates historical meaning and redeems human life through its own fatality. *Pathos* is the only method for redemption.

As we have seen White returned to the Hellenic code in his life, even when deep suspicions were raised about its hegemonic structure; yet by rejecting the vision of a classical Hellas, we can feel an essential ambivalence towards the old methods of codification –an ambivalence, which has been experienced by many writers in the new countries where “a new experience displaces so many old experiences. [...] It is the shifting over from the old psyche to something new, a displacement. And displacement hurts”, as D. H. Lawrence indicated about the literature of the United States<sup>48</sup>. Obviously White’s imaginative project must hurt still so that his readers can feel to this day the tensions, the ambiguities and the antinomies that have shaped it.

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<sup>46</sup> Susan Lever, “Fiction: Innovation and Ideology” in Bruce Bennett, Jennifer Strauss and Chris Wallace-Crabbe (eds.), *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p.312

<sup>47</sup> Patrick White Speaks, ib. 197

<sup>48</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Heinemann: London, 1964, p. 1-2.