

PATRICK WHITE: NOVELIST AS PROPHET

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20th Century Modernism and the Search for God

"Prophets with Honour"; "...Yearning for Sainthood"; "...Confessions of St Patrick", "Glabrous Shaman or Centennial Park's Very Own Saint...?"¹ - all extracts from journal titles about Patrick White, the very terms of which are out of kilter with most definitions of literary modernism.² According to popular perception in Academe, Western literature apparently ceased to bother about God, faith or transcendence after 1900. This is not true of White.

White as Chosen One

Though perhaps without the clarity of purpose of the Old Testament prophet, he still cannot be ruled out of the prophet club. He sometimes confuses being critical with his role as inspired teacher, and shower of the way, but what makes him a difficult prophet to describe is this: "How can I speak for God when I have trouble knowing what He is, though I do know what he is not". He is often a prophet through and of negation.

While White believes, he refuses to be explicit about this belief - I am, he quips with intention to confuse, "a lapsed Anglican egotist agnostic pantheist occultist existentialist would be failed Christian Australian...".³ Veronica Brady argues that his work is Christian at heart.⁴ Others write of him as a Jungian first and as a Christian incidentally,⁵ or as a philosopher-novelist who "extols Christian values of humility and love" but is essentially "not ... a Christian".⁶

He describes himself as a chosen one - a fringe dweller on the edge of a religious system. "Lacking flamboyance, cursed with reserve, I chose fiction, or more likely it was chosen for me..." (*Flaws* p.20).

"Lucky the man who can choose an idyll for his old age. I wish I could, but my life continues to be chosen for me". Writing for this chosen one, though "a disease for which there is no cure", is paradoxically a "saving occupation" (*Flaws* p.190).

The Asbestos Church in the Desert of Progress

White often sounds like the modern equivalent of an Old Testament prophet preaching against the lost state of his contemporary world, much like Jeremiah or Isaiah who begin with a vision of corruption. "Sodom", writes White as Himmelfarb rides through Sydney, "had not been softer, silkier at night than the sea gardens of Sydney ... The waters of Babylon had not sounded sadder than the sea, ending on a crumpled beach, in a scum of French letters". The lost Australians who inhabit this nightmarish, seductive world are usually described through their empty obsession with the icons of the Great Australian Dream: house - ("brick warrens" where the unfeeling "burrow into safety" (*Riders* p.308); car (in which habitual motion on the Sunday drive becomes "an expression of truth, the only true permanence" (*Riders* p.487); and other domestic trivia from the Hills Hoist to the flight of ducks to electrical appliances. Like the diabolic Mrs Jolley too many cannot see "beyond texture brick and plastic" (*Riders* p.300) in this suburban "desert of progress".⁸

As a child, White embarrassed his mother by escaping from the little asbestos church at Mt Wilson, near the White family summer retreat. Ruth White actually despised the plain church for aesthetic reasons, so would, according to her son, "have got some satisfaction from reading that we are being poisoned by asbestos" (*Flaws* pp.16-17). The asbestos church - the church that poisons - is an apt symbol for that which White attacks in his satire as he describes religion misused as the theological equivalent of the suburban house - a place to hide. When told he is a man of faith, Himmelfarb the Jew responds:

"I am the eternal beetle, who finds daily that he has slipped back ... I would only like to think I am the beetle of faith, not of habit" (*Riders* p.163).

White wallops beetles of habit and beetles of social pragmatism in *Riders in the Chariot*. Himmelfarb's father becomes a Christian

because "advantages of this kind are obvious" (*Riders* p.115). Mrs Chalmers-Robinson considers "going over to Rome" but "could not have faced" her friends (*Riders* p.244). Shirl and Harry Rosetree (formerly Shulamith & Haim Rosenbaum) encourage both White's scorn and pity for they inhabit both the apricot brick suburban prison in Paradise East and the asbestos church. They regret their assimilative hurry to convert to Catholicism. Shirl: "Arch and Marge arc Methoes"-that's "what people are, it seems" (*Riders* p.208). By the close of the novel Shirl is Anglican but wonders when the highly desirable Mrs Chalmers-Robinson mentions Christian Science.

White also has an obvious abhorrence of a God reduced to the sentimental. According to Schillebeeckx: "...Christians only have the right to use the word "God" where they find their identity in identification with that part of life which is still unreconciled, and in effective action towards reconciliation and liberation".⁹ The struggle to find reconciliation is the act of faith which if not an affray, suggests White, is not faith at all, but mere sentimentality. In several of White's works this sentimentality takes the form of the pink Christ.

In this scene Miss Hare's refusal to name her belief has upset the self-righteous Mrs Jolley who is plainly C of E and "would batter someone to prove it" (*Riders* p.58). She therapeutically:

... rushed at the oven, to bake a cake, although it was not a cake of celebration, but she liked to bake, a pink cake for choice ... With the Mothers' Union and the Ladies' Guild, with the Fellowships, Senior and Junior, pink was always popular, and what is popular is safe...

She loved the Jesus Christ of long pink face and languid curls, in words and windows. All was right then ... All was sanctified by cake (*Riders* p.60).

This Christ is also discovered by Rosie Rosetree at her church school: "I'm gunna be a Nun, Mum. I'm gunna be a saint, and have visions of roses and things" (*Riders* p.210). Amy Parker in *The Tree of Man* also inherits this "sad, pale Christ" hoping at one stage to "find grace in her hands, suddenly, like a plaster dove" (*Tree* p.33).

This image of God is unchanging, hackneyed, is completely recognisable and makes no allowance for the unreconciled. Furthermore, according to Brady these:

Pseudo-religious people ... are a long way from the

overwhelming vision of Isaiah: "I am Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe...".¹⁰

Faith and the sheer overwhelming complexity of God has nothing to do with the pink God. For White there needs to be a lifelong lack of reconciliation in his "own clumsy wrestling with what he sees as religious faith" (*Flaws* p.188). It is difficult because he tries to describe "a grandeur too overwhelming to express" (*Flaws* p.70). Like many prophets, then, he has trouble with the Word.

Trouble with the Word

In *Riders in the Chariot* White goes to great lengths to invent four characters, the riders in the chariot, whose spiritual links with God and each other is almost supra-lingual.

All four who achieve a state of grace or illumination - those who can comprehend the chariot - are fringe dwellers on the very edge of several religious traditions: Mordecai Himmelfarb, an orthodox Cabbalistic Jew without a congregation who has survived the extermination camp; Mrs Godbold, a God-fearing evangelical mother of many who brings up her girls in a shed and, taking in washing to survive--she finds God more in a clean sheet and good works than in church; Alf Dubbo, a half-Anglican, half-Aboriginal, fully-alcoholic artist with venereal disease; Miss Hare an unconsciously semi-Franciscan pantheistic spinster living in Xanadu, her huge crumbling mansion which represents the decadence and decline of Western materialism. Miss Hare personifies the kind of character Deleuze and Guattari describe as luckily possessing no ego because she has "simply ceased being afraid of becoming mad".¹¹ Through each, White both fragments his various personal approaches to God through four alter egos, and makes a specific linguistic and spiritual point through all four - people can be closer to each other and God without speech. They avoid dogma and systems which reduce spirit to regulation. "Clever people ... are the victims of words" (*Riders* p.302) says White through one of Miss Hare's miniature philosophic insights. It seems in White's world the greater your vocabulary the less chance you have of finding salvation - though being inarticulate is no guarantee of grace. Too many words in White's world is equivalent to too much money in the

Gospel of Luke.

Here Miss Hare and Alf Dubbo meet:

... she had entered through his eyes, and at first glance recognised familiar furniture, and once again she had entered in, and their souls had stroked each other with reassuring feathers... (*Riders* pp.62-3).

This type of supra-lingual communication is repeated between Dubbo and Himmelfarb, both of whom work on the assembly bench of the Brighta Bicycle Lamps, a lovely touch in a novel about spiritual illumination. "How they began to communicate, the blackfellow could not have explained. But the state of trust became established by subtler than human means" (*Riders* pp.371-2). This is particularly important to the Aboriginal Dubbo who senses that "words had always been the natural weapons of the whites" (*Riders* p.342). Alf Dubbo becomes the personification of the suffering artist who "could not have explained his vision, any more than declared his secret love" (*Riders* p.437).

Mrs Godbold too is more likely to sing at her ironing board than talk. "Discreet by nature, she was also uncommunicative." Her good deeds remained private acts of devotion "because Mrs Godbold did not talk". She is asked by Mrs Chalmers-Robinson to state her belief: "Oh dear, madam ... a person cannot tell what she believes!" (*Riders* p.267). And to Alf: "Are you a Christian?" Mrs Godbold asked quickly to get it over. Even so she was mortified, knowing that the word did not represent what it was intended to" (*Riders* p.285).

The men in the novel find a state of grace harder to achieve than the women, especially Himmelfarb whose position as Professor of Literature would for White be the linguistic equivalent of the tax collector of the Gospels. Himmelfarb spends a lifetime cleansing himself of intellect. After witnessing the horrors of the Holocaust, then finding himself as an outsider in the new Zion Himmelfarb concludes that "intellect has failed us". Rodney Edgecombe looks at the picture from Himmelfarb's perspective: "The Nazis have made racial murder bureaucratic, applied "reasonable" structures and procedures to the most unreasonable, the most meaningless event in human history".¹² White would agree with Nietzsche "The will to a system is a lack of integrity".¹³ Which is why he would follow Schillebeeckx' suggestion that one's theology ought to arise out of one's experience.

The God Who Appears through Experience

Mrs Pask, sister to the Anglican rector who both adopted and raped Alf, prefers to avoid nature in its bleaker more passionate forms. When the thirteen year old Dubbo paints his darker Christ surrounded by blatant sexual imagery it is a shock:

"...Things are not like this," she said. "It is downright madness ... Oh dear! It is dirty! When there is so much that is beautiful and holy!" (*Riders* p.326)

Her brother the Rector however longs for an unrealised "more virile expression of faith which a damp nature and family opinion had never allowed him to profess" (*Riders* p.318). His hope is not for the muscular Christianity of the late 19th Century - what it is is the desire for the interplay between his sexuality and his search for faith and meaning. In other words he wishes to start from experience and work towards a system from it. But he is as doomed as is his sister.

Again Schillebeeckx will be helpful here in clarifying White's direction: "He insists that Christianity did not come about with doctrine but with the experience of Jesus which then, over a period of time, took on certain forms ...".¹⁴ Unlike Schillebeeckx, White did not have to find a synthesis between ecclesiastic authority and the authority of individual experience, so he let the latter take preeminence. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the final scene of *The Tree of Man*.

As a young man, Stan Parker "... would have liked to subscribe to ... [the] gospel of the stationary, but he could not" (*Tree* p.91). As an old man approaching death he sits outside still struggling with the uncertainty of his individual unreconciled faith--he is approached by a young evangelist, a "steam roller of faith":

"Don't you believe in God, perhaps?" asked the evangelist...
 "Then the old man, who had been cornered long enough, saw, through perversity perhaps, but with his own eyes. He was illuminated.
 He pointed with his stick to a glob of spittle.
 "That is God," he said.
 As it lay glittering intensely and personally on the ground.
 The young man frowned rather. You met all kinds. (*Tree* p.476)

Schillebeeckx makes it quite clear that it is impossible to express authority from experience without first perceiving it through "a certain interpretive framework" which must precede the sanctification of new thought...." a "competence arising *out of* experience and *for* new experiences".¹⁵ Stan's perception of God in spittle would only make sense to us if we knew that this was not included in other definitions of God. Likewise White's cry for an unorthodox belief is partially self-deflating, for a God of individuality can only be recognised beside the God of myth, orthodoxy and religious institution, or else he has no being at all. It is odd too that this "grandeur too overwhelming to express" is in fact expressed quite lucidly though mystically in almost all of White's opera.

Language might well be limited but White's language does contain the mythopoic essence of what he experiences as God.

What we are really left with in both White and Schillebeeckx is really a warning about the despotic potentialities of all institutions, for "institutionalised violence - as well as a one-track, purely technical-scientific civilisation, which under societal pressure is appraised as the single dominant cultural value - can make people in that culture experience-poor and manipulate all their experiences".¹⁶

But probably aware of the pomposity of any amateur prophetic voice, White is not above reducing all prophets satirically - probably including himself. In the following scene at the close of World War II Alf Dubbo is sitting musing on a bench. A prophet of sorts approaches:

And the evil ones ... would be trodden under foot, as would the lesser evil, who betrayed the Lord through pure ignorance and vanity whenever the opportunity occurred. That included the concubines, and sodomites, the black marketeers, and reckless taxi-drivers - all those who in any way had betrayed a trust....

"You'll see," said the man, in the voice in which it was his habit to prophesy. "And the price of eggs will fall. And the price of sardines" (*Riders* p.364).

REFERENCES

1. John Thompson, "Prophets with Honour", National Library of Australia News March 1992 (pp.7-10); Patricia Morley, "Under the Carpet: Vanity, Anger and a Yearning for Sainthood", Antipodes 6, 1 June 1992 (pp.45-47); Penny Gay, "Flaws in the Glass: The Confessions of St Patrick", Southerly 4 Dec 1987 (pp.403-8); Veronica Brady, "Glabrous Shaman or Centennial Park's Very Own Saint? Patrick White's Apocalypse", Westerly 31.3 September 1986 (pp.71-78).
2. See, for instance the definition of Modernism in C. High Holman and William Harmon A Handbook to Literature (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986), pp.308-9. The solipsistic modern mind supposedly can only explore "historical discontinuity, a sense of alienation, loss and despair". I maintain that many great Modernists - Yeats, Eliot, Faulkner, Green and Waugh to name but a few - share a quest for God, faith and belief.
3. Patrick White, Flaws in the Glass (Melbourne: Penguin, 1981), p.102. Hereafter page references from this edition will be marked in the body of the text.
4. For a representative sample of Brady's fine work see the following: "A Grandeur Too Overwhelming to Express: Patrick White's Vision of God", Faith and Freedom 2:1 (March 1993), pp.3-7; "Patrick White and the Difficult God: Veronica Brady Interviewed by Frank Sheehan", Compass 26:2 (Winter 1992), pp.10-16; "Glabrous Shaman or Centennial Park's Very Own Saint? Patrick White's Apocalypse", Westerly 31:3 (September 1986), pp.71-78; "Theology and the Test of Experience: Patrick White's A Fringe of Leaves & Ernst Kasemann", Colloquium 12 (1979), pp.33-39; "Sin and Redemption in the Work of Patrick White", Colloquium 11:1 (October 1978), pp.32-40.
5. For a representative Jungian view of White see Edgar L. Chapman, "The Mandala Design of Patrick White", Texas Studies in Literature and Language 21:2 (Summer 1979), pp.186-199, and Cynthia vanden Driesen, "The Artist and Society: Jung and Patrick White", St. Mark's Review 119 (September 1984), pp.22-31.
6. Anne McCulloch, "Patrick White's Novels and Nietzsche", Australian Literary Studies 9:3 (May 1980), p.309.
7. Patrick White, Riders in the Chariot (Melbourne: Penguin, 1961), p.392. Hereafter all quotations from this edition will be marked on the body of the text.
8. Patrick White, The Tree of Man (Melbourne: Penguin, 1961), p.394.
9. Robert Schreiter (ed), The Schillebeeckx Reader (New York: Crossroad, 1985), p.175.
10. Veronica Brady, "A Grandeur Too Overwhelming to Express" p.5.
11. Quoted in Madan Sarup, An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), p.104.
12. Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, "The Weeds and Gardens in Riders in the Chariot", Antipodes 6.1 (June 1992), pp.25-31.
13. Sarup p.97.
14. Schreiter p.13.
15. Quoted in Schreiter p.44.
16. Quoted in Schreiter 44.