

Patrick White: Twyborn Moments of Grace

By the end of the 1970s it was clear that critics were deeply divided over the nature of Patrick White's work and his achievement. At that time, I attempted to identify their fundamental differences by asking whether White was to be seen as a traditional novelist with a religious or theosophical view of life, or as a sophisticated, ironical modern—mistrustful of language and sceptical of ever being able to express what might lie beyond words?¹

Since then, literary criticism has registered some changes, and shocks. Indeed that term, 'literary criticism', has come to suggest the kind, or kinds, of exegesis and evaluation that prevailed in the ages that preceded our own brave new theoretical world. (I speak in general terms but have contemporary Australian academia specifically in mind.) How, I wonder, would a new reader, one coming to White for the first time through his most recent novel, *The Twyborn Affair* (1979), perceive him?

In imagining this 'new' reader I have in mind a younger generation, particularly of students, who need not have encountered White's earlier novels and criticisms of them, and for whom the terms and concerns of Anglo-American New Criticism which affected the academic reception of White's work from at least the 1960s on are likely to be less immediate than those of Continental and North American theorists who have been influential during the last decade or more; for instance, Mikhail Bakhtin, who looms large on the program for this conference and in the October 1984 issue of *PMLA*.

Knowing such readers, especially among graduate students, I begin

1 In my *Patrick White* (Macmillan, London, 1980; St Martin, New York, 1980).

A paper presented at the Modern Language Association Conference, Washington, D.C., 1984; 'the Twyborn moment of grace' is the concluding phrase of White's autobiography, *Flaws in the Glass* (1981).

to speculate on how White's most recent novel might answer to their interests.

My imagined new readers would be suspicious of such enshrined concepts as 'the novel', or even 'literature'. They would see these as 'privileging' and 'valorising' assumptions which should be subjected to sceptical reappraisal. Their interests would be in 'writing': in 'texts', their 'discourses', their 'strategies', and their 'intertextual' relationships with other writings. Their reading of 'Theory' would encourage them not to attempt to construct a single, stable interpretation of a text but to 'deconstruct' it: to search for the paradoxes embedded in its discourses and concealed gaps or 'absences', and to celebrate the 'play' of diverse meanings these reveal.

Such readers coming to *The Twyborn Affair* innocently—that is, approaching it as a contemporary fiction and not as the latest (and a very late) step in White's long and much discussed development—would, I conjecture, discover a text that demands 'decoding', in that it explicitly plays with contradictory possibilities of significance, and deconstructs itself in its unfolding.

The opening of the novel invites us to recognise its mode as that of comedy of manners *à la* Edith Wharton, whom Mrs E. Boyd ('Joanie') Golson is reading. It invites us to read it as a study of repressed sexual attraction between wealthy married women holidaying on the French Riviera before the first World War, as a period comedy in which New World naivety and insecurity encounter Old World sophistication, and decadence. This mode is sustained through Joanie's voyeuristic point of view while at the same time being ironised by the reader's 'modern' awareness that the object of Joanie's infatuation, Madame Eudoxia Vatatzes, is 'male'. This drag-show comedy culminates in the Vatatzes 'entertaining' the Golsons with a Chabrier piano duet (or duel) and M. Vatatzes's appalling display of bad manners—a scene exquisitely embarrassing for the Golsons, and farcical for the reader because a disruption of the social and literary conventions lovingly evoked in the establishment scenes.

Clearly, linguistic as well as literary play is being indulged in. The comedian as the letter 'E' confuses signifiers and signifieds, names and genders, and relationships within the Twyborn family. Admittedly, these confusions may pose only initial difficulties for readers, who either struggle to sort them out for themselves or wait for the narrative to

clarify them (unless they have already lost their innocence through reading reviews). However, that readers cannot be sure, initially at least, which 'E.' is being referred to (and desired) nor of his or her gender signals a deliberate playing against the conventions that the opening has lead them to expect. And even though the innocent reader discovers in Part Two that Eudoxia is 'really' Eddie Twyborn, who becomes Edith Trist in Part Three, the radical indeterminacy of signifiers, linguistic and sexual, and the indeterminacy of gender itself, continue throughout as the novel passes into, and mixes, other modes.

Other discordant elements, other kinds of writing, also enter early to upset the readers' expectations. Angelo Vatatzes's obsession with Byzantine history seems calculated to perplex in that it introduces, through his confused consciousness, highly specific but, for most of us, unfamiliar reference. Helpfully, in a traditional humanist reading of the novel, A. P. Riemer has elaborated the arcane textuality and etymological play ('bugger' is derived from 'Bulgar', *OED*) behind these lengthy passages.²

I'd like to suggest further that the 'subversive strategy' behind them is that they 'defamiliarise' our, admittedly stereotyped, literary expectations of how European culture will be presented, à la Edith Wharton or the early Henry James, in a novel opening in the Edwardian period and presenting the comedy of New World manners encountering those of the Old. White's Australian variation on this by now time-honoured 'international theme' intercuts Vatatzes's Levantine memories and Byzantine fantasies with Joanie's equally 'untypical' reveries over her personal, and homoerotic, past in the New World.

Another early example of discordance is that odd, seemingly excrescent interlude with M. Pelletier, the sour keeper of the beach kiosk who masturbates over the distant, androgynous, Hellenic figure of Eudoxia in the sea. Is this a disgusted Flaubertian parody of Romantic afflatus, with the *petit bourgeois* voyeur presuming to imagine that he has glimpsed the transcendent. Or is it, having in mind another voyeur masturbating on the strand, a blurring of Joycean epiphanies, high and low? (In *Ulysses*, Cissy, object of Mr Bloom's desire, herself ejaculates, 'Oh, will you ever forget the evening she dressed up in her father's suit

2 A. P. Riemer, 'Some Observations on *The Twyborn Affair*', *Southerly* 40 (1980), 12–29.

and hat and the burned cork moustache and walked down Tritonsville Road, smoking a cigarette?'—which is not unlike Joanie's obsessive memory of Eadith ('E.') Twyborn's cross-dressing prank.)³

M. Pelletier's moment of 'tremulous abstraction' may seem no more than the result of a 'sordid ejaculation', as inconsequential as those other 'expostulatory ejaculations' of the coffee pot as it boils over on the rickety little spirit lamp. But for him, as he returns to this world and the damp newspapers presaging the coming war, it remains 'a triumphant leap into the world of light and colour' which he craves, into the poetry he has never written and the love he has never expressed for (and note the gender mix) 'Simone or Violette—or Mireille, Fernandel Zizi Jacques Louise Jeanne Jacques Jaccques ...'.⁴

This incident, we might say, oozes semiosis. Yet its counterpoising of Romantic and anti-Romantic attitudes and styles is so diffused with ironies that it seems pointless to ask whether M. Pelletier has truly glimpsed transcendence or only, laughably, presumed he has. Assuming readers 'know' by this stage that Eudoxia is 'male', they might feel they are joining with the author in relishing the dramatic irony at Pelletier's expense. But any sense of shared superiority is then undercut by the play on 'ejaculation' (Pelletier's and the coffee pot's), which insists that any 'significance' is merely coincidental, an etymological accident, an empty effect of writing.

This brings us directly, if uncertainly, to what seemed the issue in White criticism throughout the 1970s. What was it precisely that his characters' perceptions of 'pure being' signified? Discussions then focused on such epiphanic moments as M. Pelletier feels he has experienced. Whether or not the majority of commentators saw White as successful—and those that didn't found something like 'tremulous abstraction'—they agreed on seeing him as attempting to 'realise' in language what new readers would now recognise, and knowingly dismiss, as the 'transcendental signified'. If, however, M. Pelletier seems too peripheral a character and this episode excrescent, we might consider a moment of transcendence for Eddie himself in the central section of *The Twyborn Affair*.

3 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, (Bodley Head, London, 1937), p.337.

4 Patrick White, *The Twyborn Affair* (Cape, London, 1979), p.76. Subsequent page references, included in the text in parentheses, refer to this edition.

This section rings satiric changes on the conventions of the Australian novel rural life—conventions which White has returned to intermittently since his first published novel, *Happy Valley* (as *The Twyborn Affair* also returns to the London of *The Living and the Dead* and the southern France of *The Aunt's Story*). The moment occurs when his feeble-minded workmate Denny invites Eddie home for a beer and to meet his wife Dot and their baby. Once there, within a setting that is one of White's familiar moral landscape, where rocks suggest an irreducible core of reality and life is stripped to its essentials, Denny dandles the infant that, unsuspected by him, is the issue of Dot and her father, Dick the rabbitier.

As she contemplates her husband blissfully salivating over the baby, the frazzled, feral Dot is momentarily touched, we are told, by a 'revelation'. But then there occurs a 'violation of grace' when Dick, father both of Dot and her daughter (and, as a rabbit-skinner, another kind of *pelletier*?), approaches on horseback. Denny drives 'Dadda' away with oaths and gunshots. As Eddie rides away he wonders 'whether he wasn't leaving the best of all possible worlds' (pp.276–78).

This scene is so encoded lexically and conventionally that it can be read as both low satiric, but not unsentimental, rustic farce and as an ostensibly blasphemous allegory of the Holy Family and the Incarnation. Again, it is parodic and portentous at the same time; and for White's 'old' readers, what it is parodying would have to include all those much discussed 'epiphanies' in his own the earlier novels. A frequent criticism of those earlier 'revelations' was that they were granted only to an elite and denied to the caricatured 'normal' members of a society from which these visionaries were alienated. Here, Eddie's Panglossian but provisional epiphany is bodied forth by the caricatures, as though White were revisiting ironically not only his own earlier texts but that wider text that by this time constituted 'Patrick White'.

Yet another example occurs towards the end of Part Three, in which other modes and conventions are operating. Eadith recalls an Australian captain having told her/him during the first World War of his furtive coupling with a 'Frog' woman in her farm-house, and how he felt they had been enfolded by giant wings. While the captain, a caricature of crude Australian maleness, insists he believes in 'nothun', what he recounts could be interpreted as an experience of the Holy Spirit, despite the lowness of his diction and the iconographically incongruous imagery

(cockatoos rather than doves). Remembering this towards the end of her life, Madame Eadith Trist reflects that 'In certain circumstances, lust can become an epiphany' (pp.417–19). While yet again an 'old' reader might ask whether this is a portentous gesturing towards a deeper, religious significance, or a parody (and self-parody?) of literary pretensions to incarnate the transcendent through language, 'new' readers, rather than agonising over White's precise 'tone' or 'stance', might less problematically see him as his maximising the play, and clash, of disparate signifying codes.

The Christian lexicon—so often the stabilising element for 'old' readers of White's previous novels—continues to pervade *The Twyborn Affair*. It enters in Part One with Eudoxia seeing Joanie Golson's appearance as a 'Visitation' and dreading her 'Second Coming' (p.33), and becomes most pronounced in Part Three. Like the play with the letter 'E' in the first section, the play on the brothel-as-nunnery/nunnery-as-brothel in the final section foregrounds a radical ambiguity. Is it elevating prostitution by equating it with the religious vocation, or degrading that vocation to an institutionalisation, and therefore a profanation, of divine love (as prostitution is of human love)? Or is it freely, 'irresponsibly' indulging in the elaboration of a given trope which turns the conventional world upside down?

The latter would be my answer: the brothel/nunnery is a classic catachresis in the pornographic tradition (Diderot and Sade readily come to mind) invoked here to play with, and against, readers' expectations of decorum, of clear and proper distinctions, fictional, social, and sexual. Another level of literary style (but problematically 'literary' for 'old' readers?), that of pornography, is being added to the predominant mode of international comedy of manners in Part One and, in Part Two, White's return to Australian topoi and his own local moral landscapes. Behind White's texts there have always been (inescapably the Barthesian would mutter) other texts; here they include his own, and fictional parallels with his now widely known life-history, the extended text that is 'Patrick White', in an act of flamboyant auto-intertextuality.

Now, of course, one does not have to be a 'new' reader at all to discern such diverse discourses running through this text. With *The Twyborn Affair*, the process of 'deconstruction' is inverted. Instead of disparate literary conventions, dissonant lexical codes, and radical

ambiguities lying beneath its surface, they obtrusively are the surface. Structurally foregrounded (shades of *The Aunt's Story*) are the narrative jumps from Eudoxia to Eddie to Eadith and to Eddie again (and back and forth within these), and jumps in the fictional modes and literary styles that mirror his/her search for a life-style.

Pervasively there are the linguistic play with, and clash of, religious and psychoanalytic codes (all those oneiric passages in which the characters indulge their polymorphous perverse propensities); farcical disruptions, as when Reg and Nora Quick 'cooeee' around the country house garden in Part Three; the shifting, partial perspectives—through windows, reflections in mirrors, peepholes on the brothel of life—which turn the reader into a voyeur. All of these would frustrate any 'old' reader's attempt to reconstruct the narrative in accordance with traditional expectations of a consistent central character and situation, a single authorial point of view, and a single, stable 'meaning'.

Such an attempt would fail not because there is insufficient characterisation, situation, motif, etc. to be interpreted along conventional psychological-realist, and liberal or Christian humanist lines but because there is an excess of, and conflict among, such interpretative possibilities. This novel could be read one-dimensionally, as White's earlier novels have (variously) been read, only at the cost of repressing its often outrageous play with its readers and its transgressions of linguistic, literary and social codes.

Responding to these transgressions, my 'new' reader would almost certainly be reminded of Bakhtin's carnivalesque-grotesque tradition in fiction. The carnivalesque masquerade, in which the normal world is turned upside down or inside out, and the 'other' (the rogue, the fool, the clown—or the hetaera) becomes, in the case of *The Twyborn Affair*, queen for a day, has an obvious appropriateness, not only for the brothel-scenes but also the cross-dressing masquerades that run throughout the novel and subvert notions of a 'natural order'.

In this light, *The Twyborn Affair* could be seen as in a venerable, if subversive, tradition and its author's playfulness on so many levels simultaneously in accord with Bakhtin's summary of this mode's functions:

to concentrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to

liberate from the prevailing view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted.

And so, to offer instead, 'a new outlook on the world, to realise the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things'.⁵

We seem also to have entered a completely new order of things also for the interpretative and evaluative exercises we used to call 'literary criticism'. If *The Twyborn Affair* seems calculatedly to answer to those interests that characterise my 'new' readers, how will they read (or re-read) the earlier novels? Will they find that White changed course with this latest novel, or that, at least since *The Aunt's Story*, he has been both the 'readerly' novelist explicated and evaluated by earlier commentators and a self-consciously literary, ironically playful, 'writerly' novelist—a postmodernist in the most literal sense that he has absorbed earlier twentieth-century experiments with fiction, and also a postmodernist in our current sense of scepticism towards any of the absolutes postulated in even the recent past?

If you want (as many have wanted) to seize on White's statement that he sees himself as essentially an old-fashioned writer,⁶ and to present him as adopting such modes as the historical novel, the comedy of manners, or the *Bildungsroman* for traditional ends, then the protean nature of his work will allow this. You will focus on *The Tree of Man*, *Voss*, *The Vivisector*, *A Fringe of Leaves*, possibly *The Eye of the Storm*. If, however, you wish to present him as a proto-postmodernist, then you will stress *The Aunt's Story*, possibly *Riders in the Chariot*, *The Solid Mandala*, and—the winning card in your pack—*The Twyborn Affair*. But really, of course, he is and always has been both; and my unsurprising conclusion is that, as critical interests and emphases continue to shift, White's work will continue to answer to them, as it has answered to different, and opposed, interests in the past.

5 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswalsky, (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1969), p.34

6 Thelma Herring and G. A. Wilkes, 'A Conversation with Patrick White', *Southerly* 33 (1973), p.139.