

THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

A NOTE ON PATRICK WHITE

In Patrick White's novels the characters are placed according as they join the living or the dead. Among those who eventually opt for living, some may hesitate or be momentarily prevented from committing themselves, but those to whom it is given to see and to feel are inescapably involved in a painful process of destruction, which is a necessary ordeal if they are to experience real life. 'The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming' (*Voss*, p. 289). This is the key-note of his novels; it brings to light the particular meaning of 'living' in his work. In his second novel ⁽¹⁾, White characterizes the living by opposing them to the dead, i.e. to the people who are unaware, remote from humanity, who 'build a cocoon of experience away from the noises of the street' (p. 19), who shroud themselves deliberately and take refuge in the private shell of their personality. To the living, pleasure and pain are the means of discovering order and happiness in the moral world ⁽²⁾, although it is obvious that, on the whole, living is a painful business, so that most people find it easier to be indifferent — or dead. The novel describes the dilemma of Elyot Standish, who wavers between the living and the dead, witnesses without interfering the self-destruction of his mother in her attempt to live, and the departure of his sister Eden for Spain after the death of her lover on the side of the Republicans. Elyot shuns passion and emotional commitment, and consciously chooses death, 'the dictatorship of the mind', because he is afraid of life, because 'soberly, by daylight, you lived a life of segregation, recovered the instinctive defences, the compartment of a face' (p. 334). Eden and her lover are the only living characters in the novel. But in the dead and loveless world of the thirties, the only way of opposing the 'stultifying, the living dead' is self-destruction. This is also what Theodora Goodman, the heroine of White's third novel, experiences; with *The Aunt's Story* ⁽³⁾ Patrick White starts his quest for the infinite in the particular setting of Australia. The novel opens with the death

(1) *The Living and the Dead*, first published in 1941; Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1962, 335 pp.

Patrick White's first novel, *Happy Valley*, is out of print.

(2) The clue to the novel is given in the epigraph from Helvetius: 'Je te mets sous la garde du plaisir et de la douleur; l'un et l'autre... te découvriront un jour les principes simples, au développement desquels sont attachés l'ordre et le bonheur du monde moral'.

(3) *The Aunt's Story*, first published in 1948; Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1958, 303 pp.

of Theodora's mother and her accession to a long-awaited freedom. Theodora recalls her youth as an ugly, sensitive child and remembers how she fulfilled the unspoken prophecy of her headmistress :

" You will see clearly beyond the bone. You will grow up probably ugly, and walk through life in sensible shoes. Because you are honest, and because you are barren, you will be both honoured and despised. You will never make a statue, nor write a poem. Although you will be torn by all the agonies of music, you are not creative... But there will be moments of passing affection, through which the opaque world will become transparent, and of such a moment you will be able to say — my dear child " (p. 64).

Because she sees through other people's weakness and cannot approve of their flight from themselves, because she is honest and refuses to compromise, she finds herself at 45 completely isolated but free to pursue the reality of her dreams. Her quest in Europe and in America leads her to a state of illusion which she will not be left to enjoy in peace. The epigraph of the third part of the novel is fulfilled, 'when your life is most real, to me you are mad', so that her escape from ordinary life into a world of her own creating leads her to another prison, symbolized by the doctor. Theodora's understanding, her intuition of the mystery of life, have made her an outsider, marked for destruction from the beginning of her life as a conscious individual. She is aware of her isolation and because she finds no one to whom to communicate her vision, whether in insensitive Australia or in the confused Europe of the thirties, she turns inward and attempts to find release through her own mind. The hopelessness of her fate is a cruel comment on a society which condemns to inexorable loneliness the individual who aspires to real life.

In their own way *The Living and the Dead* and *The Aunt's Story* foreshadow the theme of Patrick White's later novels : the search for life and for permanence in Australia. *The Living and the Dead* defines life as awareness, understanding, acute receptivity, while *The Aunt's Story* reveals the Australians' fear of the mystery of the soul, their hatred for what they do not understand and their readiness to kill it. Henceforward, the author, who has returned to his native country, will try to come to terms with it and to elucidate what in *Voss* he calls 'our inherent mediocrity as a people' (p. 476). He does not condemn it but genuinely tries to account for it. He does so first in *The Tree of Man* (4), the life story of simple people who settle in the

(4) *The Tree of Man*, first published in 1956 ; Penguin Modern Classics, 1956, 480 pp.

bush and build up a small estate which is eventually merged in a Sydney suburb. The novel recounts the genesis of the Australian way of being, and is in many ways comparable to Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, as a chronicle of civilization and an analysis of human relationships through several generations. Stan Parker leaves for the bush 'in search of permanence', but to the end of his life he remains inarticulate and unable to define what he is after.

" He had not learned to think far and in what progress he had made had reached the conclusion he was a prisoner in his human mind, as in the mystery of the natural world. Only sometimes the touch of hands, the lifting of a silence, the sudden shape of a tree or presence of a first star, hinted at eventual release" (p. 49).

Neither his closeness to the earth nor the simple acts of ordinary existence express his dream-life 'as a word might, like lightning'. The flood and the fire which lay waste the country, his unavowed desire to escape the possessiveness of his wife, his suffering when she deceives him, the degeneration of his son or the lifelessness of his daughter, neither of these brings him any closer to the mystery of life. After the first years of physical fulfilment, both he and his wife remain unsatisfied ; she is restless and aware of her insufficiency, while he gropes for an order which he doesn't apprehend. They seldom communicate because they do not know how to do it and, on the whole, they are isolated from their neighbours, who respect their honesty but are suspicious of depths beyond their ken. However, before he dies, Stan has a moment of understanding and illumination during which he asserts his belief in the physical world and perceives with clarity that 'One is the answer to all sums' (p. 477). His grandson walking among the trees, which are a symbol of permanence, imagines the poem of life which Stan was never able to write.

Whereas *The Tree of Man* explores the attitude of a simple and humble man towards Australia, *Voss* (5) is the story of an intellectual who approaches it in pride. He is a German explorer who in the 1840's decides to cross Australia. He is accompanied spiritually by Laura Trevelyan, the niece of his sponsor, who in the end helps him to accept his failure with humility, and comes the closer to him in thought as they are more widely separated in body. The avowed aim of Voss is 'to discard the inessential and to attempt the infinite' (p. 38). His progress in the Australian immensity is a progress in pride and worship

(5) *Voss*, first published in 1957 ; Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1962, 478 pp.

of the self. He is isolated because he feels he is complete and has no need of others. Even his God is above humility, although a Moravian brother tells him that he feels contempt for God because He is not in his own image (p. 54). Until the terrible emptiness of the land and physical suffering at last get the better of him. Then he acknowledges the gap between his aspirations and the limitations of human nature. When in a state of agony he recognizes his failure and acknowledges to his last follower that he is not God, he appeals to Christ whom he had thought too humble. Before his martyrdom, Voss, who has learned humility, is entranced by a luminous vision. 'When man is truly humbled, when he has learnt that he is not God, then he is nearest to becoming so. In the end, he may ascend' (p. 411).

At the beginning of the novel, Laura defines the relationship between the average Australian and his country: 'Everyone is still afraid, or most of us, of this country, and will not say it. We are not yet possessed of understanding' (p. 31). Even the conceited colonel who years later goes in search of Voss, is made to look ridiculous by that 'most irrational country', and his human dignity is gradually broken down. Lack of humility is the source of the Australians' soullessness. They show the same insensitiveness towards life as they do towards their country. Because they are not humble enough to acknowledge their vastness and complexity and their own incomprehension, they turn their backs on life and on Australia and seek refuge in a lifeless materialism and in the safety of conformity. This may be due to their fear of the unknown, which makes them carefully avoid what they do not understand, and makes them uneasy whenever they are forced to witness the unusual. They shrink from the mystery of the soul which is also an unexplored immensity. Most disheartening is their refusal to try and understand, the pride they take in their ignorance and insensitiveness as a means of defence against the unknown. They resent intelligence, culture, excess of knowledge, as exceptional and therefore suspect. Their lack of compassion and their negation of all that suggests sensibility drive to isolation the conscious and responsive individual who thereby becomes an outsider and is therefore doomed to destruction. With the exception of Stan Parker, who cannot give expression to his aspiration, all the characters in Patrick White's novels who attempt to give their life a deeper significance, reach their vision but are annihilated in the process. Their destruction is self-imposed and necessary. Indeed, the individual who finds himself alone and unable to communicate with other beings seeks compensation in a supra-human reality. Their search for permanence or for the infinite, leads them to a belief in nature, in the physical universe, or in God. But the state of pure being, of perfect simplicity, which they must attain in order to apprehend their vision, can only

be reached through the destruction of the many layers of personality which play a part in ordinary human intercourse. This is what Voss means when he says that 'to make yourself it is also necessary to destroy yourself' (p. 38), or Theodora when she exclaims 'I shall continue to destroy myself right down to the last of my several lives' (pp. 73-4). The destruction of the self is a desperate solution, for if the outsider is reduced to it, it is because he is severed from his environment and must turn towards that part of himself which is free from social pressure. That is why pureness of being is attained in humility, when the individual has abandoned all the material and intellectual claims which ordinarily ensure his position among his fellow-beings.

All these themes reappear in *Riders in the Chariot* ⁽⁶⁾, Patrick White's latest novel. As in his other works, redemption is bought at a terrible price through suffering and humility, but there is more serenity in the characters who apprehend the vision, a happier balance in the 'outsiders' between strength and weakness, which makes them more human than either Theodora or Voss. Also, the distinction between the living and the dead is more clearly a distinction between good and evil. The four main characters are united by a vision of a chariot which is an intimation of the infinite, of supreme goodness, of a bliss which they are not to know in this life. The past lives of the characters are skilfully inserted in the narrative and throw light on their present humility and on the state of isolation they have reached. Miss Hare, a poor ugly spinster who is 'quite mad, quite contemptible by standards of human reason', lives alone in a huge decaying house 'Xanadu', the 'pleasure-dome' of her father's folly and to her a symbol of glory. What she best understands is the life of nature and of animals; she does not believe in a personal god but in the earth. Her visions come at sunset in an aura of terror preceding what seem to be fits of epilepsy. In her garden, she meets the Jew Mordecai Himmelfarb, once a university professor in Germany, now a humble worker in a near-by factory. His acquaintances and his wife used to look upon him as a saviour, but once he took fright and sought refuge at a friend's. In his absence the nazis took his wife. Ever since Himmelfarb has tried to atone for his failure to redeem those who were dear to him and for the former arrogance of his intellect. His work at the factory is a form of self-discipline. He first read of the chariot in the Jewish mystics; his visions of it precede moments of intense suffering but the concept of the chariot as a symbol of atonement is a constant preoccupation with him. Mrs. Godbold's vision of the

(6) *Riders in the Chariot*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1961, 552 pp.

chariot is conveyed to her through a Christian hymn which expresses her faith and her love. She is a poor washerwoman who after an unhappy childhood in England came to Sydney as a servant and married Tom Godbold, whom she oppresses with her love. She takes care of Miss Hare and of Himmelfarb when they are ill and is the first white woman to show real compassion to the half-caste aboriginal, Alf Dubbo. The latter has been raised as an 'experiment' by a parson who seduced him and by the parson's sister who taught him the rudiments of painting. He works in the same factory as Himmelfarb, but Dubbo, who has always been betrayed in his relations with white men, is reluctant to communicate with the Jew. His ambition is to paint the chariot, which he first saw represented by a French painter, then read of in the Bible.

At the time of their meeting the four characters are left with one interest: for Miss Hare, it is nature, for Himmelfarb religion, for Dubbo painting, and for Mrs. Godbold love and compassion. Evil is embodied in Mrs. Jolley, who comes to Xanadu as a housekeeper and leaves it in order to live with Mrs. Flack. The two women are the instruments of destruction. Miss Hare warns Himmelfarb that people 'will torture almost to death someone who has seen into them' (p. 342) and that 'the most devilish ideas will enter the heads of some women as they sit together in a house at dusk and listen to their stomach rumble' (p. 343). But Himmelfarb is convinced that it is not for man to decide whether or not he will be destroyed. On Good Friday, Mrs. Flack's son, Blue, and his friends torture the Jew in a mock-crucifixion. The worst of it is that although the witnesses of the crucifixion make the Jew the scapegoat for all their grievances, they turn it afterwards into a joke. 'Because Blue the vindicator was also Blue the mate. It was possible to practise all manners of cruelties provided the majority might laugh them off as practical jokes. And there is almost no tragedy which cannot be given a red nose' (p. 458). It is not given the Jew to atone for the sins of the world during the crucifixion. At night the hooligans burn down his house but he is rescued by Mrs. Godbold in whose shed he dies with Mary Hare at his feet. Dubbo, who has betrayed the Jew by watching the crucifixion without daring to interfere, witnesses the scene through the window. He goes home and paints first the Deposition with the Jew as Christ and Miss Hare as Mary, then the Riders in the Chariot. Exhausted by illness and the strain of the last few days, he also dies. While watching over Himmelfarb, Miss Hare enters a state of union and ecstasy. After his death, she disappears, presumably into nature. As to the agents of evil, they are 'consumed by their own sins'. As Miss Hare had explained to Himmelfarb, 'evil burns itself out. Some are even

destroyed as it does' (p. 172). Mrs. Godbold is the only visionary who survives, trusting God and life itself with unquestioning simplicity. She walks past Xanadu, which has now been pulled down and replaced by a settlement of brickhouses, and she recalls the experiences of her past life, relating them to her present vision of eternity and splendour. She is one of the Living Creatures and will eventually become one of the Riders in the Chariot. Meanwhile, she remains with 'her feet still planted firmly on the earth' (p. 552).

The death of Himmelfarb at the hands of Australians after his miraculous escape from a German concentration camp points to a cruel irony and shows that destruction out of boredom or stupidity can be as ruthless as willed and systematic extermination. However, White suggests that we also carry destruction within ourselves. After the severest trial she experiences Miss Hare asserts: 'I shall discover what is at the center if enough of me is peeled away'. Himmelfarb maddens the crowd by accepting his fate and makes them the more eager to destroy him. Each disappointing experience with white men brings Dubbo a little nearer to self-destruction, and Mrs. Godbold destroys what happiness she gets from her husband by forcing her love on him. However, they accept their fate because they recognize what they are, and the reader comes to accept the fact that they cannot be redeemed without this final consummation. In Patrick White's novels redemption consists in a capacity to see, but since it entails suffering and destruction, it seems that only those who are possessed of understanding and have sufficient humility to bear their fate, are likely to be saved. Thus salvation is confined to outsiders whose destiny is necessarily a tragic one: The ordinary human being, who is fulfilled in the routine of every-day life, but who, for Patrick White, does not see 'beyond texture brick and plastic' (pp. 338), is usually dismissed with his mediocrity as part of the malicious crowd, and condemned to remain in the prison of his soulless materialism. Even the Parkers, who are simple enough people, are not ordinary because of their humility and because they plant the seeds of understanding in Australia.

Patrick White is not exclusively censorious towards his country. His attitude is one of love and hate 'which are alternate breaths falling from the same breast' (7). He resents the shallowness, the ignorance, the casualness of the Australians, the cruelty beneath the humour — 'no offence can be taken where a joke is intended' (8) —, and the noisy mateyness of which they are so proud and which seems so empty to the out-

(7) *The Aunt's Story*, p. 127.

(8) *Riders in the Chariot*, p. 468.