

Dennis Haskell: "A Lady Only by Adoption" — Civilization in A Fringe of Leaves

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IN TESTING the concept of "civilization" Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* deals with perhaps the major concern of all his work: the gap between instinctive thought or action and socially acceptable, "civilized" behaviour. However, critical discussions suggest uncertainty about the value set on "civilization" in the novel. On the one hand Leonie Kramer has seen *A Fringe of Leaves* presenting: "a theory that self-realization may be achieved through liberation from civilized constraints into a life of instinctive physical passion (even though experienced in circumstances of the utmost degradation)".¹ On the other hand Veronica Brady, in her first analysis of the novel, found that "the destructiveness of life in the wilderness" means that Ellen Roxburgh gratefully re-enters "the rational world of civilized beings", for only there may she find "those brief moments of companionship, kindness and self-knowledge which give life purpose and dignity".² Thus a fringe of leaves is "all we may have ...to protect us from savagery but this protection is necessary, even vital".³

Both these views need qualification, and Veronica Brady has gone on to qualify hers. Leonie Kramer's theory of Ellen's "self-realization" away from civilized society must be conditioned by awareness of a number of factors: the "utmost degradation" which Professor Kramer mentions; the exhausting physical difficulties which are rendered in compelling detail; and the psychological barriers between Ellen and Jack Chance, or between Ellen and the Aborigines, which are apparent from beginning to end. Veronica Brady's valuing of Ellen's fringe of leaves as representing the essence of civilization must be qualified by its description: the fringe is "the vine she had been wearing as a gesture to propriety".⁴ Sister Brady claimed that when Ellen re-enters civilized society "What misgivings she entertains are occasioned not by the demands of this world but by failure to meet them."⁵ However, when Ellen rejoins society at Moreton Bay she finds the barbaric "justice" meted out to the convicts more disturbing than any personal failure to cope with the acceptance of such demands. In her 1977 article Sister Brady declared that Ellen "triumphs not in the desert, but in prosaic domestic surroundings after her return",⁶ but terms such as "triumphs" or Leonie Kramer's "self-realization" sound too stridently Romantic for Ellen at any stage of her experience. Writing of the novel in 1983, Sister Brady had come to this point of view: "even when she returns to 'civilization' she is all but overwhelmed by the brutalities she sees all around her in the convict settlement of Moreton Bay".⁷ Furthermore, "For White there is little difference between 'civilization' and 'savagery'."⁸ The extent to which Veronica Brady's views have changed is a sign of the complexity of *A Fringe of Leaves*. In the novel neither life in civilized society nor life in primitive conditions represents an ideal, and Ellen's continuing guilt is evidence that she has never fully realized herself in either life.

Ellen's guilt stems from the gap between her instinctive thoughts and actions and her notions, engendered by society, of what her thoughts and actions should be. Ellen's image of her "civilized" self accuses her actual self throughout her life, just as she appears "their accuser" (p. 336) to the women convicts and to Pilcher at Moreton Bay. Ellen is a woman "drawn to nature" (p. 45) who can declare, "I shall only ever know what my instinct tells me" (p. 31). Ellen's statement is not quite true. Austin Roxburgh sees her as uniting the instinctive, emotional life found in the child Garnet with the consciously organized life of his mother: "As he saw it, his mother and his brother were the opposite poles of his existence. He believed he found them united in his wife, whose sense of duty did not prevent her lips tasting of warm pears" (p. 132).

Ellen is one for whom instincts always remain strong, telling Jack Chance that " 'I dun't believe a person is ever really cured of what they was born with' " (pp. 298-9). On the whole this openness to instinct

is a positive side to her character: it makes her recoil from any “premonition of a complacent, cosseted middle-age” (p. 86); it makes her open to a wide range of experience; and it consequently enables her to survive the ordeal in the bush. “The spirit of Ellen Gluyas” comes “to Mrs. Roxburgh’s rescue” (p. 236) not just because Ellen Gluyas has a physical ability to deal with the land but also because she is a sensuous figure. However, instinct also leads her to sexual intercourse with the brutal Garnet, and to the wish that the diseased Aboriginal child die. Ellen’s desires, and actions such as the murderous fight between the two black girls, show clearly that White’s novel never fully endorses “a life of instinctive physical passion”.

“Duty”, rationality and morals — concepts which reappear throughout *A Fringe of Leaves* are devices by which instincts are curbed so as to make possible that sense of order known as “civilization”. However, in White’s work one must distinguish between “civilization” and what might be called “propriety”, a state in which these functions of the conscious intellect entirely dominate individual instinct. This is “the world of substance and respectability” (p. 121) in which the individual must service a social norm. Reason, morals and honour harden into mere conventions; prudence becomes the only acceptable form of judgement; material concern and surface reality take over from spiritual and emotional life. “Propriety”, a recurrent concern in White’s work, is the province of those who see “civilization” as little more than the sum of emotional constraints: duties then become surrogates for actual feelings. It is a state of mind which Ellen attempts to keep up in her role as “Mrs Roxburgh” in order to satisfy her husband and mother-in-law. In White’s work generally this state of mind is more prominent the higher one moves on the social scale; social norms become more rigidly enforced as one shifts from the poorer to the upper classes.

In *A Fringe of Leaves* this state is most obviously apparent in Mrs Merivale, “an adept at closing her mind to awfulness” (p. 9) who cannot be accused “of neglecting duty” (p. 7), whose lack of spontaneity shows when she “decided to appear satisfied” (p. 7), and who could simmer “because a convention had been flouted” (p. 19). Mrs Merivale, although a familiar figure to White’s readers, hardly represents one of the novel’s strengths. She is a kind of nineteenth-century, upper-class Edna Everage who is cheaply patronized by her author, then dismissed. However, she does reveal the empty boredom which results when life becomes an elaborate pretence that individual instincts running counter to socially accepted norms simply do not exist. Ellen, while living with the blacks, “incidentally...realized that most of her life at Cheltenham had been a bore” (p. 257). The characteristic mood of her marriage is one of “faint melancholy nourished by tenderness and resignation” (p. 39).

A Fringe of Leaves gains depth from Ellen’s appearance in a wide range of class roles, from primitive, quasi-aboriginal lubra, to poverty-bound farm girl at Zennor, to aristocratic lady. Ellen’s shifts between class roles are vividly apparent in her dialogue, and class attitudes towards degrees of propriety manifest themselves in the speech of all the characters, from the snobbish, upper-class Mrs Merivale to the “no gentleman” (p. 296) Jack Chance and the sailors. Broadly speaking, those characters who maintain allegiance to an expectation of socially acceptable behaviour speak in formal, rounded sentences full of abstract concepts and generalizations; the speech of those inclined to expect instinctive behaviour is pithy, abrupt, grammatically incorrect. Amongst the novel’s most impressive features are the range in the types of language encompassed, and the power of dialogue to portray character succinctly and dramatically.

In an earlier novel this dichotomy of instinct and propriety might have become absolute, with characters being allied to one or the other: it happens, for example, to Arthur and Waldo Brown. For so rounded a novel as *A Fringe of Leaves*, in which the presentation of even incidental characters is utterly convincing, the characters’ acceptance of instinctual life or propriety is a matter of degree. As interesting figures, one might point to the conventionally civilized, but warmly human Mr Merivale and Mrs Lovell, or to Mrs Oakes, whose compassionate sense of “duty” (p. 304) sharply contrasts with that of Mrs Merivale; or to the superficially civilized adult Garnet Roxburgh, who exhibits “not...the instinctive brutality of the human beast, but the considered evil of a calculating mind” (p. 122). The whole settlement at Moreton Bay represents civilization in some degree, but “propriety” is never really apparent there, if only because the Bay’s existence as an isolated penal settlement makes propriety impossible. There the barbaric convict system — through which “rampant hatred and despair...distinguished the male prisoners from human beings” (p. 335), and the female convicts’ faces “showed every sign of hopelessness, brazen defiance, or passive depravity” (p. 336) — has become so familiar that the system is simply accepted by the free populace as if it constituted a necessary convention.

In critical discussions of the novel sufficient attention has been given to the central adventure story of Ellen's experiences with the blacks and with Jack Chance for these details to be omitted here. Simplified views of the novel's concern with "civilization" partly derive from abstracting these experiences from the framework in which they are placed — in particular from the novel's crucial last chapter. The convict system seen in that chapter enshrines a division of people into the civilized free and the human beast of burden. Here Ellen emotionally suffers as much as she does in the bush, and must "submit herself to humiliation" (p. 335) before the convicts in order to appease "the sense of guilt which was only too ready to plague her" (p. 343). In her bush ordeal, Ellen has lived through emotions which even she wants to suppress; thus she has come to recognize her own (and everyone else's) potential for the convicts' acts, and has been made aware of the helplessness of human beings, often helpless to control their own instinctive actions. " 'No one is to blame, and everybody, for whatever happens' " (p. 327), and Ellen must struggle alone to understand "why the good and the bad are in the same boat — and the difference between killing and murder. Until we know, we shan't have justice — only God's mutton for Sunday dinner — those of us who are lucky enough" (pp. 308-9).

Ellen has become aware of the relativity of moral values, of the fact that moral standards are relative to the circumstances in which acts are committed. Morality, like "truth", is "often many-sided and difficult to see from every angle" (p. 341), and such awareness provides the only basis for any truly civilized sense of justice. Figures of authority — Lt Cunningham, the chaplain, Mr Cottle, even a fairly "humanitarian" (p. 308) figure like Commander Lovell, who is "what the world holds to be just" (p. 356) — so obviously lack the self-knowledge which this awareness entails. The comparatively rigid and largely socially determined moral code which Commander Lovell serves cannot take into account the fact that people such as Jack Chance, like Spurgeon, " 'weren't born into the moral classes' " (p. 187). Ellen is a frightening figure to Cunningham, Cottle and Lovell — she disturbs the Commandant "more perhaps than domesticity and his official position warranted" (p. 361) — because she hints at an instinctive primitiveness that lies within themselves, and which official roles, Christian philosophy and conventional "justice" cannot encompass.

It is characteristic of the novel that Ellen's disturbance of these characters involves no conscious triumph on her part. Quite the contrary, these moments contribute to her becoming "re-acquainted with some of the stations of purgatory" (p. 333). The succession of private meetings which befall Mrs Roxburgh in the last pages of *A Fringe of Leaves* are crucial for understanding the book as a whole. In each of these Ellen attempts to shake off "the false impression it seemed her fate in life to give" (p. 170). During the first meeting she recalls that she has sung "Go, deceiver, go!" to Jack Chance, and delivers the confessional narrative from which an uncertain Commander Lovell makes "judicious notes" (p. 327). But this "confession" is a matter of words, in official hands the utensils of a curbed, rational life. Throughout the interview "Mrs Roxburgh suspected that what she understood had little to do with words" (p. 328). Her expiation of guilt requires a physical act, so that she wills her collision with the male convicts, appeased more by a convict's "spittle trickling down her cheek" (p. 335) than by any verbal contact. All the convicts are surrogates for Jack Chance, and her prostration before them is partly sexual: "she was united in one terrible spasm with this rabble of men", but "no passion or tenderness of hers" could "exorcize" their "distrust" (p. 334). (As a woman, "passion or tenderness" is all she can offer them.)

Immediately Ellen places herself before the female convicts, a meeting which "could prove more disturbing than her brush with the men, since women...are more resentful of another woman's intercepting their thoughts and mingling with their fantasies" (p. 336). Mrs Roxburgh has previously recorded in her journal, "Women on the whole are stronger because more knowing than men... We also learn to numb ourselves against suffering" (p. 67). Ellen wishes to suffer in atonement for being one of " 'the criminals... [who] was never found out' " (p. 135); she also wishes to break, if only momentarily, that numbness to organized suffering inculcated at Moreton Bay. Ellen's degree of identification is greater with the female convicts, and after Jack's Irishwoman has spoken, "Mrs. Roxburgh ... would have liked ... to have ... after some fashion conveyed to her, how they had both aspired and lost" (p. 336). Women are more knowing than men: rather than conveying resentment, the Irishwoman's "last glance, bereft, yet curiously consolatory, suggested that they might have understood each other" (p. 336).

This non-verbal message of forgiveness provides Ellen with a certain peace, which she maintains throughout her next meeting, with Pilcher. Mutual awareness that "no one is to blame, and everybody, for

whatever happens” allows this meeting to be carefully uneventful, Mrs Roxburgh refusing to be Pilcher's accuser, and not permitting Pilcher to be hers.

Restraint from expected accusation creates a special relationship between Kate Lovell and Mrs Roxburgh. In “the incident of the mutilated fledgeling” (pp. 364–5), Mrs Roxburgh approached the young Kate, “the exquisite child's purity rousing in her the sense of guilt which was only too ready to plague her” (p. 343). The irony created by Ellen's overworking guilt is clearly apparent here, but she and Kate become united through a tacit recognition that the world's norm is cruelty. The incident, and the relationship that emerges from it, highlights the contrast between Pilcher's “GOD IS LOVE” (p. 352) and the Roxburghs' “LORD GOD OF HOSTS” (p. 353) which tramples the words Ellen contemplates inside Pilcher's folly of a church. A genuine church may be an unconsecrated clumsily built shelter; a conventional church may be only a social structure.

Meeting Kate “carrying the corpse of a fluffy chick” (p. 344) lessens Ellen's self-disgust, but that relative calm explodes during the meeting with Cottle. Ellen's honesty is enough to disturb the slightly comic, meekly pious chaplain. However, the limpness of his conventional religion, as much social nicety as belief, is most starkly demonstrated by the simultaneity of his prayer to spare Ellen's soul “its torments real or imagined” (p. 349) and Ellen's hearing the unquestionably real torments of a convict being flogged outside.

However, Ellen's hysteria in response to the flogging passes quickly. Much to Miss Scrimshaw's relief, Mrs Roxburgh appears to choose “Reason as her mentor” (p. 351), and spends “a fairly cheerful evening” (p. 351) upholding her social position. Having undergone humiliation before the convicts, she seems more willing to become, again, a lady, despite a continuing sense of “her own discreditable passions” (p. 364). Ellen seems to have moved on from the stage at which “self-knowledge might remain a source of embarrassment, even danger” (p. 307). She is now truly Ellen Roxburgh, not Ellen Gluyas, and not the *Mrs* Roxburgh who keeps reminding herself that she has merely “learned to obey accepted moral precepts and social rules... incongruous to her nature” (p. 71).

This state of mind remains with her during the novel's last important meeting, when Mr Jevons spills tea “in the folds of Mrs. Roxburgh's skirt” (p. 365). In a novel with an extensive use of parallels (to pick clear examples, the fringed shawl and the fringe of leaves; the scars whipped on to the convicts' backs and the scars formally carved into the Aborigines' backs) Ellen, in a sense, lives her life twice: she grows from a rough farmgirl to become Mrs Roxburgh, then from a primitive lubra to become the prospective Mrs Jevons. The difference between the two “lives” is that the second involves a greater maturity. The parallel to the tea-spilling incident lies in the interview with Mrs Aspinall. Then, trying to deny her sexual involvement with Garnet, “Mrs. Roxburgh was aware that her hand shook, and what was worse, that a drop of Madeira lay trembling in her lap” (p. 116). Both incidents involve sexuality, but in one Mrs Roxburgh is uncomfortable, denying the truth, in the other, uncomfortable, exercising compassion. When Jevons spills the tea over Ellen's lap, their secretly shared change in speech is important:

*“But I spoiled yer dress!” the bull-frog croaked wretchedly.
“ ’Tisn't mine, and ’tisn't spoiled,” she insisted. (p. 365)*

Just as a part of Mrs Roxburgh will always be the instinctive Ellen Gluyas, Mr Jevons is not just “the substantial merchant” (p. 365) of bourgeois propriety. The tea-spilling incident is a small-scale illustration of compassion deriving from awareness of human frailty, a frailty that, for Ellen, the Australian continent has made so obvious. The human condition, like the Australian teasel flower and the “dry cynical cackle” (p. 275) of the kookaburra, is “more strange than beautiful” (p. 30).

Suffering is everywhere apparent in White's novels, and Ellen's suffering is fruitful, but not in obvious ways — she is not an artist, and never wins through to any transcendental meaning. Ellen never reaches Tintagel, but her acute awareness of her own failings leads to a quiet (even though tortured) dignity, an understanding of her own ignorance and a compassionate awareness of others. She shares with her author a sense of how small and feeble is the human in a universe never created especially for human beings, perhaps “a clueless maze” (p. 226) never created with any purpose or order at all — or, at the very least, a “maze” so complex and so tortuous that instinct and compassion are all any individual has to go on.

“Love”, which the epigraph from Louis Aragon describes as “your last chance”, is “a subject ... so vast that it could not be understood except by the instincts” (p. 284). “ ‘Would you not say,’ ” Miss Scrimshaw asks, “ ‘that life is a series of blunders rather than any clear design, from which we may come out whole if we are lucky?’ ” (p. 354). “Normal ... thoughts”, contrary to Austin Roxburgh's hopes, are not “rational” (p. 208); “there are conventions in truth as in anything else” (p. 66), and Christian belief, social manners, philosophical arguments and strict moral codes resemble the blacks' fear of the night: circumstantial straws clutched at because they “may indicate an ordered universe” (p. 366). By the end of the book, the presentation of Austin Roxburgh's beloved passage from Virgil — “ ‘Happy is he who has unveiled the cause of things, and who can ignore inexorable Fate and the roar of insatiate Hell’ ” (p. 30) — can be seen as utterly ironic. Order is created in the face of human experience, rather than derived logically from it. Ellen's “ultimate in experience” (p. 17) leads to the recognition, more unconscious than conscious on her part, that true civilization requires a state of mind in which the individual finds a balance between refinement and instinct, between conscious control and unconscious impulse, between “pretensions to sensibility” (p. 238) and “an animal condition” (p. 238). Crucial to civilized beings is the maintenance of a link with human primitivism. (In this, a relationship with the land, even an “unprepossessing one” [p. 8], and sexuality are seen as essential.) As “Ellen Roxburgh”, Ellen achieves an acceptance of her instincts but also of the need to discipline those instincts: her capacity for sensual life is balanced by “strength of will” (p. 342). Civilization, as presented in *A Fringe of Leaves*, can be maintained in any meaningful form only if individuals remain aware of its precariousness, even within themselves — aware of just how much irrationality “the rational world of civilized beings” (p. 361) contains. This is an awareness never vouchsafed Voss or Hurtle Duffield, and it is a state of individual and social awareness which makes their Wagnerian Romanticism and grand gestures impossible.

In these bureaucratized, urban days it has become fairly customary for literature to emphasize the value of irrational “Life” as opposed to the controls inherent in “civilization”. Such an emphasis is readily apparent in White's earlier work. However, the limited and limiting gesture of Ellen's discoveries does not constitute an aesthetic weakness; the limitations derive directly from White's vividly detailed and subtle presentation of his theme. Critics have often found the content of White's novels stronger than their form, but *A Fringe of Leaves* possesses a simplicity of structure that Brian Kiernan notes, emerges from “its close integration of narrative and thematic development”.⁹ Critics who dislike the novel, such as Leonie Kramer, see White as dealing with incidents in much the way that Austin Roxburgh considers dealing with Pilcher's statements: “He realized ... he could have continued embroidering almost without end on the few words the mate had uttered” (p. 137).

However, the integration of narrative and theme involves much less authorial straining for meaning than is often apparent in White's work. Amongst many other characteristic strengths are White's gifts for metaphor and simile and for vivid description that any poet would envy: “His [Oswald Dignam's] arms were raised several times, fists clenched, ... before the sea put a glassy stopper in his mouth” (p. 191). Such a sentence enables the form of his work to reflect its principal theme; through the immediate emotional power of such organized sentences White purposefully evokes the necessary balance between unconscious reaction and conscious control which constitutes the truly civilized mind.

Notes

1 “A Woman's Life and Love”, *Quadrant*, November 1976, p. 63.

2 *A Fringe of Leaves: Civilization by the Skin of our Teeth*, *Southerly*, XXXVII (1977), p. 127.

3 Brady, p. 132.

4 *A Fringe of Leaves* (Penguin, 1977), p. 297. Subsequent page references are to this edition.

5 Brady, p. 127.

6 Brady, p. 126.

7 “Patrick White and the Question of Woman”, in *Who Is She? Images of Woman in Australian Fiction*, ed. Shirley Walker (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983), p. 187.

8 Veronica Brady, "A Properly Appointed Humanism: Australian Culture and the Aborigines in Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*", *Westerly*, No. 2, June 1983, p. 62.

9 *Patrick White* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan [Commonwealth Writers Series], 1980), p. 125.

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