

Veronica Brady: A Fringe of Leaves: Civilization by the Skin of Our Own Teeth

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Patrick white set the terms of the debate over his work when in his essay "Prodigal Son" he declared his hope that he might "be helping the people of a barely inhabited country to become a race possessed of understanding".¹ In other words, he sees his work as providing a kind of gnosis. Critical debate therefore has quite properly turned on the quality, and in particular, on the implications of this gnosis. Leonie Kramer's attack was only the spearhead, though perhaps the most lucid, energetic and telling account of a fairly general feeling amongst a group of critics, a sense of uneasiness.² As John Barnes put it, they saw White "increasingly [retreating] more and more from the complexities of normal humanity ... and [asserting] with increasing directness his conviction that it is only in the transcendental experience of extraordinary people that meaning can be found".³ Quite apart from objection to this tendency on general humanitarian grounds and the conviction that whatever values Australian culture may possess tend to be egalitarian not élitist, many critics felt that White's preoccupation with metaphysics ran counter to the true nature of his genius. Leonie Kramer argued that White's intellectual commitment was to humanism and to scepticism of the transcendental, despite the fact that increasingly in the work of his middle period, from *Voss* to *The Vivisector*, that is, the novels rested on metaphysical, even mystical, values and sanctions. My own feeling, for what it is worth, is that in this middle group of novels, White was creating a personal mythology and was in some danger of becoming a resident in the "Grand Hotel Abyss", the state of mind of the modish novelist described by Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel* as "a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort on the edge of an abyss of nothingness, of absurdity, [where] the daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts offered".⁴ *The Eye of the Storm*, however, appeared to mark a new departure, a movement away from the visionary and back to that emphasis upon the physical, above all on observable social fact which is, traditionally, the basis of the novelist's art. Now, in *A Fringe of Leaves*, White seems to have given the lie to those critics, myself included, who would convict him of what Johnson called the "dangerous prevalence of the imagination", the preference for the imaginary, or at least the non-empirical over what is present and pressing. In this novel, I believe White has at last got right the terms in which "the people of a barely inhabited country [may] become a race possessed of understanding". In this discussion I would like to look at these terms and also to relate the success of this novel to what I see as his comparative failure in his earlier works.

In the first place, *A Fringe of Leaves* is, as usual, about the problem of being Australian, not it is true in any narrow nationalistic fashion, as if Australians were a special sort of people, but in the sense that our special kind of environment and history offers its own kind of test to the humanity we hold in common with all other peoples. True, what the protagonist of this novel, Ellen Roxburgh, endures is not perhaps typical, even in nineteenth-century Australia, though it is based on an actual story, that of Elizabeth Fraser. She endures shipwreck, loses her child, born when they are still adrift in the lifeboat, sees her husband speared by the natives, is herself made their prisoner, enslaved by them and escapes, making an exhausting trek back to civilization in the company of an escaped convict who has been convicted of murder. What she learns is, however, typical, even universal. She learns how to survive, how to come to terms with that savagery which, White suggests, is not just a feature of life in so-called primitive societies but is endemic to the human condition even to "highly civilized" Australia. For all its local historical setting, her story is not just a digression from the task of understanding our humanity which most of us would see as the novelist's work. More importantly, in the light of current achievement and experimentation in the novel, *A Fringe of Leaves* is not, as works like *Riders in the Chariot* or even *Voss* might have seemed, the product of a merely personal style and of concerns now obsolete or irrelevant. Rather it is an attempt to get at the story which

will survive the dynasty of all that is merely opportunistic or fashionable, a story about the echo locked up within our culture, about the savagery implicit not only in the individual but in society, a savagery which is today perhaps less a matter of memory than of anticipation and must be tamed if we are to survive humanly.

Most of White's novels depend upon a similar sense of the terror which underlies normal existence. Indeed, his preoccupation with Australia stems from the fact that the land itself tends to provide an image of this terror. This is clear even in his first novel, *Happy Valley* (1939). In it, the central character, Oliver Halliday, contrasts Australia with the landscape of France from which he has just returned. Australia, he senses, "was old, older than the forest at Fontainebleau, there was an underlying bitterness that had been scored deep and deep by time, with a furrow here and there and pockmarks in the face of black stone. Over everything there was a hot air of dormant passion, of inner war, that nobody seemed to be conscious of. In Sydney, you went to parties. In Happy Valley you fornicated or drank. You swung the rattle for all you were worth. You did not know you were sitting on a volcano that might not be extinct" (p. 19). In *Voss*, which is White's most explicit attempt to use the land as a metaphor for certain reaches of human experience, the novelist takes the easy way out, turning to the land as an image of the divine, of what is totally other than man. In *A Fringe of Leaves*, however, it is clear that what Australia represents is the dark side of ourselves and of our culture. "A country of thorns, whips, murderers, thieves, shipwrecks and adulteresses" (p. 311), it is a kind of mirror which gives back the reflection of our own human and social evil. At first, Ellen Roxburgh, the farm girl who has married a gentleman and experienced the comforts of power and consolations of success, is appalled by the sight of the convicts in Van Diemen's Land and disgusted by the coarseness of her brother-in-law Garnet, who lives there. But when her own sensuality has betrayed her with Garnet and she has been forced to the depths, tempted to cannibalism to survive after the shipwreck, she learns "the country by heart", as Pilcher, the second mate predicts for her (p. 151). Here, the protection of civilization slips away and she must act out the "darker myths of place" (p. 111) of which she has an inkling as a girl in Cornwall in a "presentiment of an evil she would have to face sooner or later" (p. 110). Even earlier, at dinner with Garnet Roxburgh, she has been led to wonder: "how much of a miscreant ... is in Garnet Roxburgh? Or in myself for that matter?" (p. 89). At that stage, she comforts herself with the thought that she is "not excessively bad"; making love with Garnet is, after all, more a surprise to her than anything else. But later, she is exposed to the land and its inhabitants and realizes fully what is in herself. Instead of destroying her as it does *Voss* or alienating her from others as it does the Riders in the Chariot this realization on the contrary enables her for life in society. Miss Scrimshaw, the paradigm of modish civility, is deficient in comparison with Ellen whose mentor she is supposed to be after her return. Although they live in a convict society, "Miss Scrimshaw did not care to recall ... the screaming of the man they had strung up to the triangle in the gateway of the prisoners' barracks. She must banish it from her memory, along with anything else too naked or too cutting, which her upbringing and her defined social position had taught her to ignore." (p. 388). In this, she resembles the Bonners in *Voss*. But White indicts them for moral cowardice, finding something demonic in the social values which provide the excuse for this evasion, accusing them of what Lukács, to cite him again, refers to as the "demonism of the narrowing soul". Here, however, it seems that the novelist wants to rescue Miss Scrimshaw and the social values she represents as her reflection concludes with the hope that "her friend Mrs Roxburgh would not make it too difficult for her" (p. 388).

In this way White is at last able to strike a note that is truly epic, for Ellen Roxburgh's fate is bound up with that of her own community. Her achievement, in fact, derives not from her eccentricity but her ability to cope with the common destiny, coping with it being sufficient here for the spirit's demands for greatness. And where White's other protagonists can achieve this greatness only at the point of death or in some excess of suffering and isolation, Ellen manages it by surviving, even by what a romantic might regard as surrender. She triumphs not in the desert, but in prosaic domestic surroundings after her return. Prepared to take pleasure in clothes, conversation and the attentions of others, "she accepted once more the fate or chains that human beings were imposing on her. It was not altogether weakness on her part [the narrator goes on to insist]: surely her survival alone proved her to be possessed of a certain strength?" (p. 383)

White has at last exorcized the Romantic demon, the self-indulgence which tempts the writer to create a world according to the demands of his own ego. Instead of seeking from them some meaning, some form beyond the phenomena, he makes the terrors his protagonist undergoes lead to a new appreciation of civilization. Having experienced the destructiveness of life in the wilderness, she has fewer qualms for her re-entry into the rational world of civilized beings (p. 400). What misgivings she entertains are occasioned

not by the demands of this world but by failure to meet them, Miss Scrimshaw's uncharacteristic treatment of her in her meeting with the merchant, Mr Jevons, for example.

In the past, White's distrust of social reality tended to disable him as a novelist. It pointed also to a more serious problem of trust, a distaste for his own society which seemed to derive from a feeling that social reality no longer offered proper material for art. But *A Fringe of Leaves* is in the best sense a worldly book. The novelist no longer appeals away from social forms and ordinary people to the closed world of his own personal mythology. Instead he affords full value to the ways of sense and to the desire for possessions and security, suggesting that in the house of the self there are many mansions, some fair, some foul, but all related to and dependent upon one another. As Miss Scrimshaw, "professional pythoness", remarks early in the novel, "every woman has secret depths with which even she, perhaps, is unacquainted, and which sooner or later must be troubled" (p. 20), and Ellen Roxburgh's task as protagonist is to trouble and be troubled by them. Yet, paradoxically, what these depths reveal is not so much about the solitary self as about the need for society. True, as in earlier works, White sees social injustice as the product of individual evil. But in *A Fringe of Leaves* he also sees social forms as the only defence against this evil within the self. In contrast with Theodora Goodman to whom White applies the epigram "when your life is most real, to me you are mad", Ellen finds only in society those brief moments of companionship, kindness and self-knowledge which give life purpose and dignity. Being Australian, this novel implies, may offer an insight into the general human condition as threatened but for that reason in need of others.

By a roundabout way, then, White has come to confirm a basic premise of our culture, coming closer in *A Fringe of Leaves* to its pragmatism, its sceptical attitude to metaphysics. This is not to say that he has renounced the quest for God, for some kind of absolute, which has so long preoccupied him. But it is to say that he no longer envisages an answer of a unitary kind. Indeed, he seems to despair of an answer being possible, though he would have his characters go on looking for it. Thus if Ellen Roxburgh is an epic protagonist, then hers is an epic of a world without God, or rather, one in which he remains silent. The irony of the novel's conclusion witnesses at best to a kind of negative mysticism. Whatever she may have thought earlier when she was able to make such claims as that to her husband which sums up their stay in Van Diemen's Land in the confident words: "I discovered another world which will remain with me for life, I expect" (p. 31), by the end of the novel she no longer thinks in terms of meaning, still less of totality. This is the point of her ironic interchange with Miss Scrimshaw in which the writer mocks Miss Scrimshaw's Promethean longings:

"To soar!" Miss Scrimshaw wheezed. "To reach the heights! To breathe! Perch on the crags and look down on everything that lies beneath one! Elevated and at last free!"

Mrs Roxburgh felt dazed by the sudden rush of rhetoric. Once launched, Miss Scrimshaw was prepared to reveal still more. "Have you never noticed that I am a woman only in my form, not in the essential part of me?"

Somewhat to her own surprise, Mrs Roxburgh remained ineluctably earthbound. "I was slashed and gashed too often," she tried to explain. "Oh no, the crags are not for me. ... A woman, as I see, is more like moss or lichen that takes to some tree or rock as she takes to her husband." (p. 402)

True, taken out of context, this reads more like self-parody, more particularly like a parody of *Voss*, than a seriously held insight. In the light of Ellen Roxburgh's life and sufferings, however, it is an important affirmation, the more important because of the comic sense from which it derives. Granted that, as White goes on to remark, this "was not the moment to proselytize" since the two ladies are aboard ship, "between the stars and the swell of canvas" which render all human claims insignificant, nevertheless Mrs Roxburgh's position is clearly endorsed. "A human form ... emerged out of the companionway and was bearing down, large and black, ominous but for the voice of Mr Jevons" (p. 402), who is "large and dark, well-fleshed, but solid in his fleshiness" (p. 395) and a merchant "of substantial means", the kind of man at whom White was once inclined to sneer, is now designated as Ellen Roxburgh's protector, the rock, in effect, to her lichen. As one of the epigraphs to the novel, from Louis Aragon, has it: "Love is your last chance. There is really nothing else on earth to keep you there". So, Mr Jevons, awkward but kindly, offers Ellen her chance, giving as he does "an impression of solid worth" (p. 403) and kindness. The fact that White turns their relationship into comedy only confirms his acceptance of it, since in comparison with the constrictions of spirit which

Ellen's sufferings have entailed, the new note of expansiveness, even of playfulness, invests the last pages of the novel with an appealing humanity.

Mr Jevons was advancing, all manly authority and calm [bringing Ellen a cup of tea and a slice of cake] when by some incredible mischance, he stumbled, whether against child or chair-leg, or over ruck in the carpet, nobody saw. Or was it by infernal intervention? Whatever the cause of his downfall, Mr Jevons saw the cake flying off its plate, the cup shooting out of its saucer. (p. 404)

Yet, it is this embarrassment which draws them together. Down on his knees, trying to mop up the tea-stain on her dress, he becomes “a troubled bull-frog of a man”. And this calls forth Ellen's compassion—the source, White implies, of whatever relationship we can achieve. The awkward farm girl she once was reaches out to console him and together they share a secret, their common humanity, their vulnerability and ridiculousness. There is thus a certain pathos but also certain dignity about their acceptance of each other with which the action concludes.

The fact that Mr Jevons has been propelled against her as it were intensifies the significance of the scene, reminding us of the earlier occasion on which Ellen felt herself propelled towards Garnet Roxburgh, “swept onward by the wind, her skirt blown in a tumult before her” (p. 134). Then, in ignorance, she had appealed to the thought of her husband who “supported a belief in her own free will”. If, even then, she was nevertheless aware that “she had been blown as passively against the one as against the other” (p. 134), here, after plumbing the depths of her helplessness, it is clear that she will submit gratefully to him and take what she is given. She has learned that the inner life is no longer all important and that, given the comparative insignificance and frailty of the individual and the mysterious nature of the forces at work upon her, “there was nothing she could do but submit” (p. 215).

It is this realization which underlies what I have called the negative mysticism of the novel. While on the one hand, Ellen's attitude here at the end of her story may seem a worldly one and her acceptance of Mr Jevons mere opportunism, it may also be seen as the *docta ignorantia* of the mystics. She may have been delighted by a first glimpse of herself dressed up again after her months in rags, caressing herself in front of the mirror “while uttering little, barely audible cries of joy and sorrow”. But even these cries were “not for her own sinuous body, but for those whose shared embraces had been a shared and loving delight” (p. 349). Just as she rejects the Promethean heights to which Miss Scrimshaw aspires in order to cling to what a relationship with Mr Jevons offers, so here, too, what matters are memories of personal tenderness.

Here again a comparison with *Voss*, particularly its conclusion, is helpful. The apotheosis *Voss* achieved is of a literary kind; his spirit lives on in the land and in the reverent memory of its inhabitants. But Ellen Roxburgh survives, living on very much in this world, her ability being to accommodate herself to rather than defy these sufferings. In this she is closer to Laura than to *Voss*. But the picture White furnishes in her of the

*perfect Woman, nobly planned,
To warm, to comfort and command*

of the epigraph (borrowed from Wordsworth) is much more disturbing than the one he gives us in *Laura*. For *Laura*'s is a triumph of self-possession. Poised and cool, with a clear intellectual superiority about her, she is nearly always in command of herself and her situation. But Ellen is not. Brought up on a farm, she is never entirely at ease in society. Then when she comes to Australia, she finds that the nature on which she depended as a girl “for sustenance, for legend and for hope” (p. 80) confronts her with more than she bargained for. It is all very well for the adolescent to dream “that she might eventually be sent a god. Out of Ireland, according to legend” (p. 50). True, she is sent a gentleman for husband, Austin Roxburgh, who is tender and loving and translates her into his world. But he is an invalid, himself a victim of nature. “If a storm burst upon them”, she realizes very early in their relationship, “she was strong and jubilant enough to steady the reeling earth, while he, poor man, would most probably break, scattering a dust of dictionary words and useless knowledge” (p. 57). When he brings her with him to Australia, he is unable to protect her from the savagery they experience there, the savagery first of all of the sensuality Garnet Roxburgh awakens in her and then of the cruelty she first glimpses in the treatment of the convicts and then experiences herself

at the hands of her aboriginal captors. Beyond that lies the sheer indifference of the natural world and the force of the sea which wrecks their ship and takes the life of the child and of the young steward, Oswald, as he is gathering food for her on the island and the harsh land which reduces her to the depths of hunger and human squalor. Yet, to recur to the point made earlier, hers is not a special situation. Rather, we are all at risk before forces within ourselves which society conceals and tames but cannot destroy. The second of the novel's four epigraphs insists on this insight, reminding us that we are as deluded as Ibsen's Almers replying to the Rat Wife if we claim that we have no "gnawing things in [our] house".

Therefore, although this is a humane novel and argues for tolerance, compassion and an acceptance of our human limitations, it is not a comfortable one. The presiding genius, if there is one, is Simone Weil, and the mood that of the epigraph quoted from her work; "if there is some good in a man, it can only be unknown to himself". Nevertheless, it is clear that there is good in man and that it belongs to him, not, as in most of White's other novels, to some force beyond himself which may or may not bestow on him an illumination which translates him beyond the common human misery. What Ellen Roxburgh achieves finally is nothing exotic but eminently civilized, a cool and measured existence the more impressive in face of the sense of life as "nasty, brutish and short" which prevails around her in this convict colony at the world's end. Moreover, she has achieved this by a process of diminishment, rather than expansion. Where Laura, whom she resembles in so many ways, comes increasingly to glimpse a beatitude beyond her, Ellen is progressively stripped, not only of her clothes and all the other accoutrements of civilization when she is captured by the aborigines, but more crucially, of her symbols.

During her imprisonment, she clings to her wedding ring, concealing it in the "fringe of leaves" with which she clothes her nakedness, convinced that, as she tells Jack, the convict who rescues her, "if I lose it, I am lost". (p. 299). But gradually it becomes clear that this is not the source of her strength at all: no mere object can be. Even as she protests to Jack the importance of the ring, White tells us, "she knew it was this man on whom she depended to save her (p. 299). People, not symbols, matter. Hence the leit-motif of jewellery which runs through the action is, for once, an integral part of the novel's development, not a mere decoration. Suggesting wealth, beauty and security, the jewels mean a great deal to Ellen at first, and indeed to most other people in the novel. Pilcher, the aggressive first mate, seizes one of her rings from her after the shipwreck and even the aborigines are fascinated by her jewels—White entertains no notions of the noble savage. True, the aborigines are not as acquisitive as the white man, for while they are excited at first by the jewels, "their possessive lust was quickly appeased, or else their minds had flitted on in a search of further stimulus" (pp. 243–4). In contrast, Pilcher holds on to the ring he has taken until, purified by his sufferings, he returns it to Ellen when they meet again at Moreton Bay. "There it was, glittering in the half-light, the nest of all but black garnets" (p. 379). But now neither of them has any use for it and they throw it away. For it is clear to them now that nothing external can be a substitute for real value which is created by living with integrity and truthfulness.

Art is no substitute either. In the early days of their marriage, Austin Roxburgh is so delighted by the sight of "his wife descending the stairs in a topaz collar which had been his mother's" that he commissions a portrait of her. But he "remained disappointed with the result, knowing that this was not the ultimate in revelation" (p. 146). Nor does the natural world provide this ultimate. White insists on this as he has Ellen catch a glimpse of a "jewellery of stars" (p. 401) as she sails back to Sydney and reflects that she may "be seeing [them] for the last time before a lid closed" (p. 402). But what they represent is much simpler, more enduring, than she thinks. In the last scene Mr Jevons brings her "a slice of cake so moist with fruit it might have been studded with precious stones" (p. 404). The fact that this piece of cake is involved in his comic debacle before her only underlines the point White is making, the point made by the title, *A Fringe of Leaves*: all we may have is a fringe of leaves to protect us from savagery but this protection is necessary, even vital.

The note here, then, is agnostic but firm. There is little question of rescue by God or the gods. On the contrary, whatever gods rule here in this harsh country, they are cruel ones. Thus, after the shipwreck "for one blasphemous instant there arose in [Ellen's] mind the vision of a fish the Almighty was playing, the distended lip in which the hook was caught, her own" (p. 203). Above all, there is no sense here of the God of the Enlightenment, the God of Reason. Even on the infrequent occasions in which she catches a glimpse of something beautiful, as in the aboriginal camp when the "evening light coaxed nobler forms out of black

bodies and introduced a visual design into what had been a dusty hugger-mugger camp”, Ellen cannot find any “evidence of a spiritual design ... any more than she could believe in a merciful power shaping her own destiny” (p. 247). Hence she is sceptical. “If she had ever worshipped a supreme being”, she comes to realize, “it was by rote, and the Roxburgh's Lord God of Hosts, to whom her mother also had paid no more than lip service” (p. 248) was not the Christian God at all. “A silent girl”, growing up on a farm, “rocks had been her altars and spring-water her sacrament” (p. 248). Realizing this, however, “did but increase heartache in a country designed for human torment, where even beauty flaunted a hostile radiance, and the spirits of the place were not hers to conjure up” (p. 248).

So White expresses the dangers of that impulse to Romanticism so strong in his own work and in Australian culture. Of all countries, he implies, Australia is perhaps most dangerous to those who would worship nature. In *Voss* the land becomes a means to transcendence and offers an image of divinity. In *A Fringe of Leaves*, however, values centre on people. The nearest approach here to an ecstatic moment is the moment in the crude church which Pilcher has built. It is an apology for a church. “Above the altar a sky-blue riband painted on the wall provided a background to the legend God Is Love, in the wretchedest lettering, in dribbled ochre. Nothing more, but the doorless doorway through which she had entered, and two narrow, unglazed windows piercing the side walls of the chapel” (p. 390). One is reminded here of the words of Dostoevsky, used as an epigraph to *The Solid Mandala*: “it was an old and rather poor church ... but such churches are the best for praying in”, and the God she glimpses here is similarly a manifestation of poverty:

Mrs Roxburgh felt so weak at the knees she plumped down on the uneven bench, so helpless in her self that the tears were running down her cheeks, her own name again mumbled, or rather, tolled, through her numbed ears.
All this by bright sunlight in the white chapel. Birds flew, first one, then a second, in at a window and out the opposite. There was little to obstruct, whether flight, thought or vision. If she could have stayed her tears, but over these she had no control, as she sat reliving the betrayal of her earthly lovers, while the Roxburghs' LORD GOD OF HOSTS continued charging in apparent triumph, trampling the words she was contemplating. (p. 390)

What this experience leads to is no dazzling vision of divinity but “peace of mind”, and its effect is to bring her back “to the settlement in which it seemed at times she might remain permanently imprisoned” (p. 391). If there is a sense of God here, it is of that God of exigency Roger Garaudy contrasts with the God of conventional believers “whose name implies a presence ... whereas (what he experiences) is mostly an absence, a never satisfied demand for totality and absoluteness”. Moreover, Ellen has ceased to demand totality. As she tells Miss Scrimshaw, she is “ineluctably earth bound” (p. 391). Similarly, White's attitude to this demand, which is the substance of most of the earlier novels, is now ironic. The kind of heroism it generates is suspect as the conclusion of the novel makes clear. After some gentle irony at the expense of Mr Jevons, taken up with his contemplation of Mrs Roxburgh, the narrator directs her attention to Miss Scrimshaw, engrossed in her own soaring thoughts. Then the last sentence comes down gently but clearly against her. “For however much crypto-eagles aspire to soar, and do in fact, through thoughtscape and dream, their human nature cannot but grasp at any circumstantial show which may indicate an ordered universe” (p. 405).

This ironic note is not, I think, in anyway cynical. On the contrary, a real sense of human kindness prevails: Ellen's relationship with her husband is remarkable in the canon of White's work for the compassion he bestows on them. Austin Roxburgh might have been savagely treated in an earlier novel, but here he is invested with a certain frail dignity. Physically delicate, a scholar and something of a dilettante, he nevertheless engages Ellen's love and respect and there are scenes of real, if ironically presented, tenderness between them. True, White mocks at the complacency which lets him think of his wife as the work of art he is creating. Still, one is led to an admiration for them, of the relationship which is their stay against the savagery of nature in the picture White gives us of them aboard ship:

Now the world had shrunk to its core, or to the small circle of light in the middle of the ocean, in which two human souls were momentarily united, their joint fears fusing them into a force against evil. (p. 158)

White still works on the premise which underlies the other works, that, in Heidegger's words, "if you go all the way to Being, you get nothing". But now, instead of forcing his characters to the limits to confront this void, he asks them to stay within limits and explore their humanity. Thus treatment of the relationship between Austin and Ellen Roxburgh develops the understanding hinted at in *The Eye of the Storm* in the scenes between Elizabeth Hunter and her dying husband, the understanding that love which is based on mutual forgiveness and compassion is the "last chance" to make life endurable.

In effect, therefore, the novel's centre of gravity is closer to that of the traditional novel, being about education in the art of living with others. What reader and protagonist alike learn is to adjust the claims of the inner life to those of outer reality, to keep the balance. Unlike White's other protagonists, therefore, Ellen is not really a contemplative. She is a practical woman who accepts that life is not as one dreams it and that a mere glimpse of meaning may be the highest it has to offer. For her, love is not as it is for Laura, Theodora Goodman and others, a triumph over culture. Instead, it involves living within it. Reason, that is, prevails over passion.

During her captivity Ellen catches sight of the three selves she can live, "a lost soul, a woman, or a rational being" (p. 255), and it is the third which she chooses. Where "one of them accepted to be seduced by [the] beauty [of the bush], and a second fainted at the prospect of a footsore journey, the third, a sceptic" leads her back to Moreton Bay, despite its rational doubts about the possibility of escape. Such heroism as she achieves, thus arises from her refusal to take refuge in fantasy, her cool acceptance of risk. She has no illusions about Mr Jevons. Although "he gave an impression of solid worth", she is aware "that the solid is not unrelated to the complacent, and that Mr Jevons might assert rights she would not wish to grant" (p. 403).

There is thus an ironic, almost elegiac note to the conclusion. But this in no way diminishes the characters, since irony represents the triumph of reality. How robust the novelist's sense of security is, how profound his confidence in his characters' ability to survive, is testified to by the comedy of the last scene. Here, instead of retreating from the complexities of normal humanity, White embraces them, in the process proving the comic gift always implicit but often overborne elsewhere in his work. He also proves himself as a writer within the tradition of Joyce who wrote that "art is not an escape from life. It is the very opposite. On the contrary, it is the very central expression of life. An artist is not a fellow who dangles a mechanical heaven before the public, the priest does that. The artist affirms out of the fulness of his own life, he creates it."⁵ *A Fringe of Leaves* is clearly the product of that "modern spirit" Joyce was looking for, the spirit that is "vivisective". Contrasting it with what he calls the "ancient spirit [which] accepted phenomena with a bad grace" and insisted on "investigating law with the lantern of justice, morality with the lantern of revelation, art with the lantern of morality", Joyce calls for an art which dispenses with "presumptive Redeemers and Churches" and "examines its territory by the light of day" (p. 191). The realism which underlines this novel, indeed, is ferocious. Like Hobbes, White seems to find no middle ground between man as isolated, helpless and accustomed to fear before the savagery of the natural world and man, or, in this case woman, as citizen of society which is absolute in its claims. Ellen's story also implies the despair of private choice and of all private claims to define and dispense justice. What she must do and learns to do is to submit.

Does this mean, then, that White now endorses that hermetic conservation, a cynical submission to the principle of might, apparent at the moment in so much of the world? I think not. In fact, earlier novels were more cynical in their attitude. In them he seemed to share Rousseau's notion of society as the product of cupidity, egoism, ambition and idle desire for status. But here, he sees it rather as the protection, as poor perhaps as the "fringe of leaves" with which Ellen clothes herself, but nevertheless the protection devised by instinct and reason against savagery. What is new and what gives the work its inspiriting quality, is this honesty and the energy with which it affirms its trust in people like Ellen and in her ability to survive and even to flourish. Notably, White might have gone on to describe the subsequent career of the historical Elizabeth Fraser, a career as an unscrupulous, unpleasant woman who made a disreputable living out of her sufferings. But he does not, since it seems that he wants to allow his readers some hope for human dignity and happiness. The last glimpse of Ellen therefore takes us back to her husband's glimpse of her as a kind of domestic divinity "whose beauty was wrapped in nothing more mystical than a cloud rising out of a dish of greasy soup" (p. 40). Unconscious of the tea-stains on her dress, caused by his clumsiness, Mr Jevons "could not give over contemplating the smouldering figure in garnet silk beside the pregnant mother [the

Commandant's lady] in her nest of drowsy roly-poly children, a breathing statuary within the same ellipse of light" (pp. 404–5). Playful as the tone is here, the novelist still, I think, endorses the vision of simple, domestic happiness.

The characters carry more weight, are more fraught with substance than they mostly are in White's other novels, because they no longer appear as the product of the novelist's designs upon the world but stand upon the ground we all know. True, there are exceptions. Pilcher, the second mate, at first a figure of aggressive ruthlessness who is tamed and humbled by his experiences, seems more an exemplum than a man. Even so, the moral he points is humane. Where in *Voss* the fate of Judd which resembles his serves to discredit the mere humanity to which he clings and glorifies Voss and his longings for the infinite, Pilcher learns humanity by his sufferings. Once, he confesses to Ellen, he regarded love as weakness. "Strength of will—*wholeness*, as I saw it—is what I was determined to cultivate. That is why I admired you, Mrs Roxburgh—the cold lady, the untouchable" (p. 379). Now, however, he thinks differently. Similarly, White's new ease with humanity allows him to credit Austin Roxburgh with a certain schoolboy heroism in his death. As the aborigines attack their party, he "ran forward, to do what only God could know. Here he was, bestirring himself at least, in the manner expected of the male sex. Into action! He felt elated, as well as frightened, and full of disbelief in his undertaking" (p. 239). Nor does the ironic tone discredit this unlikely heroism. On the contrary, I think it renders it more convincing.

In fine, then, to return to the original question of the change evident in this novel, it seems that White has at last found a way to combine his need for a metaphysic of suffering and the novelist's obligation to explore social forms. Where, earlier, his protagonists and the values which justified them were more or less homeless, did not belong in the world of commonsense, here they are very much its inhabitants. Thus prudence, the determination to survive, is Ellen Roxburgh's secret strength. Voss or the Riders in the Chariot, for example, may live by and for defiance, but she is prepared to "accept anything ... for the sake of peace in this frightening world" (p. 41). So we can believe in her, even feel with her as a human being, not a mere literary character, and there is no need to appeal elsewhere for her vindication as at the end of *Voss* we have to look to the arts to save us from "our mediocrity as a people". Paradoxically, this appeal to the actual means a release from the merely aesthetic level into what is genuinely moral, even religious resolution if "religious" is taken as the worship of the God Blake speaks of who "only Acts and Is in existing beings and things". Thus while the salvation Arthur Brown achieves in *The Solid Mandala* might appear to be religious, the salvation achieved by means of crucifixion, what the reader experiences is rather aesthetic, the satisfaction of contemplating a perfected form: Arthur has lived out the pattern implicit in his mandala, the four marbles he treasures. White's constant temptation, as Leonie Kramer has pointed out, has been to impose his vision upon experience rather than achieve it by wrestling with it. In *A Fringe of Leaves*, however, his scepticism of social values and manners gives way to a new respect for them since, looking honestly at the situation of his characters, he realizes that what they embody is all that we may have between us and savagery. Absolutists may find Ellen Roxburgh culpably flexible. She is even able to live with the thought that she has been driven to cannibalism. "In the light of Christian morality she must never think of the innocent", but "she was less disgusted in retrospect by what she had done than awed by the fact that she had been moved to do it" (p. 272). But as she sees it, in a sense, she has "partaken of a sacrament", come to terms with the darkness within her. Like Elizabeth Hunter, she learns what White now seems to regard as the great human art, the art of forgiveness, above all of self-forgiveness.

There is a mellowness, a note of acceptance of the ways of the world in this novel therefore. Not that White's sense of life is any less grim than before. He remains convinced that ours is an age of "malheur", to use the term of Simone Weil, a thinker he admires. The sense of this novel is still that flesh is frail and matter strong, strong enough to wound, even crush, the flesh and humiliate the spirit. But here there is no recourse to transcendence. On the contrary, the proper response is to know and accept one's fragility and learn to live with it. Like most of White's other characters, Ellen Roxburgh is an explorer but her goal is not some point of exaltation, but pushing through the complexities, the many facets of the self to arrive finally at that central self, the self of the Stoics

*qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,
atque metus omnes et inexorabile fatum
subjecit pedibus strepitumque Acheronti avari*

The fact that Austin Roxburgh quotes these lines from Vergil to her gives them even more weight, since in a sense they justify his tragi-comic death as well as account for the epic weight one senses but might not otherwise be able to account for in Ellen's story, above all in her survival. What weighs is this steadiness within her which enables Ellen to endure through all the changes in her physical and social condition. Indeed, in this way she becomes truly an epic character, "doctrinal to the nation", giving the lie to that counter proposition which underlies *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, "coeli, non animam, mutant qui trans mare currunt". If one of the central challenges Australia poses to its white inhabitants lies in the pressure of material circumstance upon the self, then Ellen's ability to possess her soul in patience is exemplary.

A Fringe of Leaves is not an easy nor is it a showy novel. But it represents a substantial achievement. One is reminded of Prospero, in fact, as the novelist renounces his charms and returns to the world of common humanity. Austere as the subject may be, there is nevertheless a new, relaxed tone to the novel as White recaptures and expands upon that ability to invent, to play with the paraphernalia of social life and the complexities of personality which made the social comedy in *Voss* so delightful. His concern here with the fleeting, apparently petty and ordinary as in the last scenes at Moreton Bay, for example, suggest that the novelist is at ease with himself and his world, prepared to receive and record rather than wrench what is given to his own didactic ends. Consequently the novelist no longer seems to intrude so heavily upon his story. It is as if he is at last part of the world he describes, no longer intent on sitting apart in judgement on it. This new impartiality makes for a shapeliness, a stylish ease all too often absent in the previous work. Nothing in the comparatively simple story seems extraneous, nothing insignificant. So the reader discovers a new confidence in the narrator, watching the small and the ordinary triumph over the unreality of that excess of significance White once laboured to give, for example, to a gob of spittle or an ant climbing a blade of grass. So, too, there is an unusual wealth of incident and of detail to the story. Ellen's sojourn with the aborigines is presented with documentary accuracy and the account of life in society delights in the surfaces of manners, clothes and conversations.

From the melancholy picture of an existence protected from savagery only by the fragile force of intelligence and self-interest, there nevertheless emerges an admiration not just for characters within the novel but also for the novelist who is able to know, speak and even delight in the truth. At last, it seems, White has overcome what Cleanth Brooks once suggested was the great danger facing the contemporary writer, the hubris of "the assumption that the solutions to the problems of mankind ... can be obtained through one's privileged insights or that one's own psychic disturbances are somehow continuous with the disturbances of society at large". As Brooks goes on to say, "a more modest conception of his rôle might be in the interests of everybody, including the writer himself".⁶ So, in *A Fringe of Leaves*, renouncing the utopian impulse, White may well have moved us closer to that utopia, the only one that art can provide, the ability the better to enjoy, the better to endure the vicissitudes of things.

Notes

1 *Australian Letters*, I, 3 (April 1958), p. 38.

2 "Patrick White's Götterdämmerung," *Quadrant*, XVII, 3 (May-June 1973), pp. 8–10.

3 "A Note on Patrick White's Novels," *The Literary Criterion*, VI, 3 (Winter 1964), p. 98.

4 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trs. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p. 22.

5 *Stephen Hero* (London: Cape, 1965), p. 91.

6 *A Shaping Joy* (London: Methuen, 1971), pp. 35–6.

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