While writers and painters are engaged in distinct creativities, they occasionally use their creative media—words and paint—for a shared purpose, as they do when trying to create a modernist artefact as opposed to a realist or naturalist one. As we watch them do this, it’s useful to remember what can happen when we pass judgment on a reference convention or express a preference for one aesthetic movement over another. For example, the controversy around William Dobell winning the Archibald Prize in 1943 for his portrait of Joshua Smith involved a distinction between portraiture and caricature, and became an unfortunate debate about what art is and isn’t. While that controversy belongs to a parochial past, there are still critics—including academics—who believe judging a creative work is an acceptable substitute for conveying what a writer or painter is doing with it. There are two books on Patrick White, by Hilary Heltay and Helen Verity Hewitt, that don’t pass judgment on White’s work and instead do their best to explain it; the first, from a linguistics perspective; the second, from a visual arts perspective.

Thus, increased demands made upon the expressive potential of language are coupled with envious side-glances at other systems, whose structures are appealing to a relative outsider, and whose grammar and syntax appear easier and more rewarding to handle than his own. At the same time, all attempts to break through the limitations of his medium in order to enrich his own resources by lessons learned from other modes, are rewarded with a scorn and a sense of outrage that can only double his frustrations. It is the classic situation of the unbidden, unpopular, disruptive innovator. And yet it is precisely this need to push against the limitations of language, to force the barriers of tradition and convention that it sets against him, in short to make language do what it has not done before and perhaps does not willingly do, that defines what an “author”, in the original sense of the word, should really be.

In defining what an author should really be, Heltay quotes from Paul Goodman’s Speaking and Language: Defence of Poetry (1972):

Powerful writers are not normative—indeed they are often “incorrect”—but they add to meaning, they are authors (from augere, “to augment”). They keep the language alive, just as the drive to slang, “bad English”, keeps the language alive. Inventive speakers, colloquial or literary, make the language say what it has not adequately said. What kills language is dull, stereotyped, lazy, or correct speech. There is a tendency of mass speech to degenerate.

In Goodman’s definition, Heltay finds an approach to authorship surprisingly close to that of Wilhelm von Humbolt (1767–1835), whose views on the creativity of language are an important aspect of his contribution to philosophy. The way Humbolt positions Aristotle’s energeia (potency) in relation to ergon (act), his distinction between an inner-form
and an outer-form of language, and his insistence that language isn’t static but is always involved in the process of becoming, provides her with a way of understanding what White does with words and can make words do. In short, Humbolt allows her to articulate a “reasoned answer” to those who criticise White for mishandling the English language.

According to Heltay, Humbolt evaluates every individual act of speech as a creative mental act, the innovations of which don’t necessarily modify the grammatical structures of language. The debate among linguists is how far these innovations can or ought to be pushed. Some linguists, such as Noam Chomsky, believe a creative writer can and should modify the character of language in a way that modifies its grammatical structure. Others, such as Jutta Leppin, agree with Chomsky but believe this modification is more difficult when the grammatical structure of a language is firmly developed (and of course firmly entrenched). The problem here, as Heltay sees it, is that neither Chomsky nor Leppin provide examples of what they mean, and further, using examples taken from Saussure, she argues that neither of them has in mind “the kind of innovation by which the plural of fōt stopped being fāti and became fēt and the plural of gōs stopped being gōsi and became gōsi”.

At this point, Heltay returns to White and the possibility that, while these linguists may be helpful in describing approaches to what he does with words and can make words do, he provides a way of clarifying some of the issues they have been guilty of leaving rather vague. Also, whether or not we agree that his innovations with language ought to be adopted universally, and whether or not they may have a lasting effect on the structure of English, we can at least agree that he had a different idea from his contemporaries of the potential of language and he was bent on exploiting this potential to the full in his novels.

An analysis of selected passages of White’s prose—particularly the beginnings and endings of novels, which may be presumed to represent highly finished and conscious (and therefore representative) examples of his writing—yields a number of areas of grammatical structure where his usage deviates from the habitual and conventional. The most immediately obvious to Heltay are: word order, inquits, restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses, of-geatives, prepositions, continuous aspect, emphatic do-aspects, and the articles. His usage in these areas, she argues, places him in a Humboltian context of linguistic worldviews, and how they are maintained, and how they can be transformed, and also in a Saussurean context, among a series of semiotic relationships: between sign, signifier and signified; between la langue and la parole; between synchrony and diachrony; between anaphoric reference and cataphoric reference.

Heltay suggests White’s usage in each of these areas is consistent and each area could be profitably investigated as an example of how he extends the inherent possibilities of language. However, to delimit what would otherwise be a vast study, she focuses on his use of the articles, because they are interesting in themselves, as markers of definite or indefinite reference, and because they control areas of information basic to the relationship between humans and their real and imagined environments, and because as grammatical structures they are firmly fixed in conventions which produce automatic and unreflective responses in the native speaker. In other words, the idiosyncratic way White uses the articles is designed to stimulate and challenge the reader’s linguistic worldview.

In the real world, any reference we make to an object in our environment—provided no demonstrative, quantifier or possessive is required—involves a choice between the definite and the indefinite article: “There’s the table to the right of the door” is different from “There’s a table to the right of the door.” Because this choice isn’t usually a free one, the articles play an important role in establishing precise communication between speaker and listener. However, while their responses are automatic and unreflective, if they don’t understand what’s being said to them the listener has access to or can request additional contextual information, which helps them understand what the speaker is referring to.

In a fictional world, the reader (as interlocutor) has no recourse to additional contextual information. They are therefore susceptible to being manipulated by the author in ways that speakers cannot manipulate listeners: for example, in being assigned a physical location in relation to the narrative, or in being directed to a psychological standpoint in relation to the characters’ inner worlds. This manipulation isn’t a bad thing, as White relies on or takes advantage of the reader’s automatic and unreflective responses when attempting to connect them with the vertical and horizontal structures of his narrative. To show how this manipulation occurs, Heltay provides many examples of how White uses the definite article to instruct the reader to recognise something as familiar and uses the indefinite article to instruct the reader to perceive something as new.

Heltay doesn’t believe White has made the kind of innovation, in his use of article reference, which might conceivably lead to a modification in the grammatical structure of English. Whatever he has done with the articles, or has made the articles do, remains within the range of possibilities allowed
by the linguistic system of English. He simply had
the originality to exert an action on the linguistic
system, to push against the language user's natural
resistance to innovation, until linguistic conventions
yielded something other than usual. In a word, he
preferred the improbable to the probable without
ever breaking through the barrier of the impossible.

White has shown language to be energy rather
than finished product, generative rather than static,
becoming rather than being. In this regard, he's sim-
ply a kind of modernist in a similar way that authors
such as Lawrence, Joyce and Woolf are kinds of
modernists, in testing the boundaries of language,
and furthering the cause of process philosophy (and
process theology). He invested the narrative tradi-
tion with an energy—an originality of thought and
expression—which hasn't imposed a new order and
structure on language but has created a new way of
looking at language, and set new standards for judg-
ing what language is capable of.

Helen Verity Hewitt’s *Patrick White, Painter
Manqué* (2002) is an original work with the
potential to change the landscape of White studies.
As Heltay does with linguistics, Hewitt furthers our
understanding of White’s reaction against realism
and naturalism and his relationship with roman-
ticism and modernism. While the subject is not new,
no one has framed it as she has, and she provides
us with a new way of approaching the influential
role of painting in his literary development. “White
read the modernist writers,” she says, “but it was
modernist painters whom he observed and lived
with, and with whom he discussed modern art.”
She begins with a comprehensive description of the
early years in London and the powerful influence of
Roy de Maistre, who persuaded him to rework the
manuscript of what would become his first novel,
*Happy Valley* (1939), transform its naturalistic arma-
ture, and experiment with modernist techniques.

In *Happy Valley* White begins with a realistic
scene then abstracts it, breaking up the surface pic-
ture. He uses line like de Maistre, to make unseen
or unconscious connections between the geometric
webs that characterise the novel. He employs these
modernist techniques to create images analogous
with de Maistre’s, in which line is used to provide
different perspectives, to indicate connection or di-
vision, confinement or freedom, sometimes linking
these opposites within a variable network of moral
dilemmas, desires and doubts. Halfway through
the novel, the geometric webs of various characters
begin to shift, from intense involvement to resigned
resolve, from lust to indifference, from jealousy to
violence, when the imperatives of their various pas-
sions begin to emerge. White used line to illuminate
this transition, and de Maistre understood line in
this way, as did Blake, who said: “Leave out this
line, and you leave out life itself; all is chaos again.”

In *The Living and the Dead* (1941), the dissolu-
tion of the central character, Catherine Standish,
is intimated in a wavering, unfocused line: “She
deliberately chose a cloud, which took possession
in middle age, transferred its cloudiness to her, and
helped her blur the too emphatic line.” Although
White eventually left de Maistre’s geometric analy-
sis behind, geometric cubism continues to shape his
craft in this novel, but there are other influences.
Sickert gave him a feeling for London, the novel’s
“look” is Sickertian, and Catherine is more at home
in Sickert’s Edwardian era:

The dominant motif is box-like rooms, and
boxes within boxes, recalling Sickert’s paintings
of figures suspended in time and space, waiting
or inert, with the Sickertian accoutrements of
mantelpiece, chipped china, framed pictures,
and rather shabby furniture and unmade beds.
White’s characters are in a state of quiescent
decay like that so tenderly and comprehensively
chronicled by Sickert.

Then the war changed everything. As White had
lived in London during the Blitz—and served in
Royal Air Force Intelligence for five years in North
Africa, Palestine and Greece—he had an intimate
knowledge of how the war blew apart familiar con-
structions of reality. He found de Maistre’s firm
moral line insufficient, as he began *The Aunt’s Story*
(1948), a month after being demobbed. “There is no
life-line to other lives,” Theodora Goodman says.
While there are roads,” she could not take the direct
road. Roads did not lead through the infinite land-
scape in which she hesitated.”

For White, Paul Klee was a way of understand-
ing that infinite landscape and how to live within it.
Visually, the novel is a kind of Klee, especially the
dazzling central section:

Common to Klee and “Jardin Exotique” are a
quirky, fey wit; an intensely private sensibility
and vision which eschew the grand and insistent
in favour of the small and reticent, the inner
rather than the outer world; an absence of
traditional perspective whether in matters
of space or time; hieroglyphic, fantastic or
skeletal plant forms, mandalic suns and moons,
whimsical or odd human representations,
mathematical allusions, a line which is
sometimes wandering, angular or hesitant but
always exploratory and open; and shimmering,
iridescent colour.
Klee’s strange magical worlds, which vibrate and twitter, and which possess their own logic and humour, are evoked in such imagery. General Sokolnikov has a counterpart in Klee’s A Wild Man, which White would have seen in a postwar exhibition at the Tate. The Demoiselles Bloch could be a Klee drawing, with their unfinished doilies hanging from cactus branches like spider webs. Katina Pavlou follows her kitten through a cactus garden with “little cries of love, unwinding like a ball of white thread, infinite, but failing”, echoing the charm of Klee’s gentle curlicues.

Like a cubist painting or collage, “Jardin Exotique” creates its own reality, a constantly shifting pattern where images appear and disappear, constructed of arbitrarily fragmented blocks or passages with no regard to logic or smooth transition. In one sentence, Theodora might be conversing with another guest at the Hôtel du Midi; in the next she’s on a black island awaiting an earthquake, or in a brick house in Birmingham, or Epaphroditus rising from the sea, so “there is sometimes little to choose between the reality of illusion and the illusion of reality”. As the cubists jettisoned linear perspective, which had prevailed in European painting since the Renaissance, Theodora moves freely in and out of quotidian time and character, slipping into the minds of her interlocutors and their relations, living or dead or imaginary. In this way White’s jettisoning of the linear perspective builds a turbulent, whirling, cubist portrait of the hollow shell of Europe on the eve of war. Mrs Rapallo represents this hollow Europe, as does the Hôtel du Midi, which the transcendentally-aware Lieselotte sets fire to, thus destroying the hotel, most of its inhabitants, and everything it represents. “This revolutionary apocalyptic romanticism recurs in White’s work,” Hewitt admits, “But that is never the end of the story.”

In The Tree of Man (1955), White used Van Gogh—a paradigm of the romantic artist as outsider, ecstatic visionary, and one who saw God in everything, whose intensity embarrassed or offended those around him—as an influence for Mr Gage, whose paintings are only understood many years after he’s hounded to suicide. The novel is about the farmer, Stan Parker, and his wife Amy. As a young woman, Amy’s God is Stan. She exists through him, especially through their physical relationship. Gage divines her vulnerable passionate sensuality, and, unknown to her, paints her portrait, which she sees just after he hangs himself from a tree. In the painting, she’s a half-aware elemental creature, in thrall to and animated by the powers of nature or passion. In this way, Gage reveals Amy to herself in a painting—just as Lieselotte revealed Theodora to herself in a painting—thus foreshadowing her own personal apocalypse.

White endows all his visionary painters with the same power of revelation; a revelation growing from a twentieth-century romanticism obsessed with apocalypse and regeneration, and terrible but purifying immolations. Since Freud, the tensions in such paintings have often been interpreted as the conflict between Eros and Thanatos—awakening sexuality with the accompanying danger of personal annihilation—and Jung believed that unconscious or repressed spiritual needs could create just as much havoc. Gage’s portrait of Amy disturbs her deeply, at which point her surroundings begin to resonate with her own emotional state, as in a Van Gogh painting. Powerful and disruptive energies are released within her, and their consequence, in her arbitrary adultery, is expressed in apocalyptic terms. Lust doesn’t solve her spiritual confusion, though, and she still feels that “some mystery was withheld from her”. White gives Gage the power to record the revelation of this mystery in paint; a mystery like Stan’s sense of God in the gob of spittle.

In Voss (1957) we see Blake and Delacroix, opposites within the romantic spectrum. Blake is chaste, gothic, mystical, shuns the world, and relies on the inner eye. Delacroix is passionate, operatic, highly animated, and master of the dramatic gesture and richly coloured crescendo. While White uses both in this novel, his preference for Blake accords with his preference for the art of the solitary romantic outsider who aspires to things unseen, which are eternal. The extended scene of the departure of Voss’s exploration party from Circular Quay is in the style of Delacroix, full of animated groupings, ships and little boats, and both painterly details and theatrical gestures catch the reader’s eye. In contrast with the drama and display of this worldly scene are the exchanges between Voss and Laura Trevelyan, when they move into Blake’s realm of the soul, where vision comes from the inner eye. As well as these European artists, Sidney Nolan begins to assert an important influence in White’s work for the first time in Voss. Both men were fascinated by the history of, and the mythology surrounding, the Australian explorers, and both interpreted these, drawing partly on traditional and modern European elements and partly on their own Australian experience. The correspondence between them was no coincidence. White’s appreciation for modern painting had been fostered by de Maistre, Douglas Cooper and Herbert Read. Nolan’s association with the Angry Penguins (especially John and Sunday Reed and Max Harris) led him along the same path. This shared cultural background allowed
them to speak the same language when they finally met. Also, both were consciously engaged in creating new Australian art.

White's vision of the country where Voss vanished came largely through Nolan's paintings in Central Australia. Many descriptions of the landscape in *Voss* have visual equivalents in Nolan's paintings; for example, the descriptions of Voss's party have the melancholy of Nolan’s paintings of Europeans perched alien and temporary in the ancient landscape, as in the Burke and Wills series. Both allude to the sometimes faintly comical incongruity of their brave explorers in their vast panoramas; both share a similar feeling for their explorers’ vulnerability, arrogance and courage; both dismantle the heroic statues of history and myth. White would have studied Nolan’s *The Temptation of St Anthony* (1952), which probably contributed to his portrait of the beleaguered Voss who—in his madness to possess the land himself—chooses to ignore his senses, and the intuitions of his soul, which tell him the two Aborigines accompanying him have a prior claim themselves.

In *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), it’s probable that Odilon Redon’s *Apollo’s Sun Chariot with Four White Horses*—which White may have seen in 1938 when it was exhibited in London—inspired the chariot that unites the novel’s four illuminates. Also, White’s chariot comes from Ezekiel 1:4–28, Blake’s poem “Jerusalem”, Jung’s mandala symbolism, and the merkabah (throne-chariot) from Scholem’s *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1941), which formed part of White’s Jewish research for the novel. White created Alf Dubbo, the novel’s fourth visionary, to reconcile the faiths and cultures of the Anglo-Australian animist Mary Hare, the European Jew Mordecai Himmelfarb, and the English Christian Ruth Godbold. Dubbo, who is a half-caste, is given the basics of a classical and Christian education, and is taught the traditional techniques of drawing, but from the beginning he’s not satisfied with the European traditions of realism and naturalism.

When Dubbo discovers a book of French paintings, it’s a revelation, and White’s descriptions of the paintings in the book allow us to identify Seurat’s bathers, Degas’s dancers, and Van Gogh’s lanterns which recreate the world in joyous visions. When his young eyes fall on the painting of Odilon’s Apollo chariot, he feels the artist has fallen short, and he could paint a better one himself, but he can only do so after a life of Goyesque suffering. Throughout his life, Dubbo clings tenaciously to the central icon of Christianity, the crucifixion, and paints his own deposition near the end of the novel, with the crucified Himmelfarb as Christ. Once he’s done that, he turns to his final painting, which he can finally paint; his vision of the chariot, where the four riders—Hare, Himmelfarb, Godbold, and Dubbo himself—are engaged in a sociable yet spiritual conversation in the chariot.

We are still only halfway through Hewitt’s book, as she demonstrates the ways in which White’s writing provides a literary correlative of the history of Australian modernist art. After *Riders*, she goes on to describe the transition he made, away from Christian iconography, towards other forms of religious iconography, all the while absorbing new artistic influences, which emerge in startling ways in his later novels. She also tells the riveting and little-known story of White’s relationship with the Australian art community—as a mentor and benefactor—including his large bequests.

**White** criticism has been through phases. During the first phase, his earliest critics found his novels problematic; their censures are well-known. He was criticised for disobeying the reference conventions of language, for telling rather than showing, for blurring the distinction between prose and poetry, for using an omniscient narrator, and for being experimental and obscure. During the second phase, there was a period of acceptance, when critics struggled with him. Some of them were on the right path and tried to do justice to his obviously broad and complex vision. They understood his novels were his attempt to translate his European influences— in literature, the arts, and music—into an Australian context which was partly but not wholly European. They also knew his novels were essentially metaphysical; however, because *they* couldn’t fully understand what he was doing, their response was to accuse *him* of not fully understanding what he was doing. During the third phase, critics stopped taking him seriously and went in other directions. Why? Because, critically speaking, rather than concentrate on his fiction and how it operates, they used psychoanalytical theories to portray him as a dissociated personality with a psychosocial problem, post-structural theories to focus on his supposed failures as a visionary, postmodern theories to argue he was a bad writer, and postcolonial theories to accuse him of being a dead white male who described and inscribed colonial imperialism.

For a long time now, the focus has been on White’s personality, rather than on his achievement, which is why Heltay and Hewitt provide important correctives, which allow the critical focus to return to where it ought to be.

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