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FOUR APPROACHES TO PATRICK WHITE



THE SO-CALLED history wars are part of a broader conflict of interpretation within the humanities. The variety of academic approaches to Patrick White's fiction is an example of that conflict. The first generation of White academics noticed an interrogation being conducted within his novels and short stories, and they used first-level evidence to demonstrate that interrogation. First-level evidence—by which I mean data from the primary texts of White's fiction—is no longer in fashion. Now the tendency is to focus on literary and cultural theory or on opinions about White's personality.

One of the many ironies of this tendency is that, not long after psychiatry ceased to regard homosexuality as pathological, academics began pathologising White's homosexuality in their critical framing. This is particularly noticeable in Australia, where the legend of our great literary giant has been lost to the myth of our nasty old queen. White's importance is more widely recognised overseas, where academics feel less of a need to cut him down to size.

Below are four academic approaches that trace the evolution in White studies. At the end of each is an essay topic that tries to engage the student with that approach. They ask for first-level evidence from White's novels rather than from literary or cultural theory. This is a tactic to see whether first-level evidence exists for each approach.

THE RELIGIOUS AUTHOR

WHITE'S LITERARY intentions were different from the conventions of Australian literature as he saw it. His primary intention was to interrogate the varieties of religious experience hidden in the unconscious of secular and materialistic Australia. Through the autobiographical character of Alex Gray, in *Memoirs of Many in One*, he confessed this intention wouldn't be recognised in his

lifetime.

White's ideology and aesthetic are late-modernist. His milieu is post-metaphysical, which means it conducts an interrogation of classical metaphysics. This is why philosophers and theologians such as Gadamer, Habermas, Ricoeur and Derrida are so important to understanding his work. Particularly in his early years, he did what all emerging literary authors of the period were expected to do: frame the human condition and explore its existential dilemma.

LITERATURE

This framing and exploration are no longer in vogue and if literary authors still want to use them they are careful about how they rework the formulas of their forebears. Against symbolic backgrounds and among significant dialogues, post-metaphysical authors make use of similar tropes as they explore the relationship between imagination and reality, *logos* and *mythos*, and freedom and contingency. This literary landscape isn't narrow and has proven broad enough to accommodate a wide range of styles. In Britain White can be compared to Golding and Murdoch and Spark; in Canada he can be compared to Davies and Atwood; in Australia he was peerless but he created the space in which his literary descendants move.

Post-metaphysical fiction has always interrogated classical metaphysics. That's why it's called post-metaphysical. For example, in *Middlemarch*, which falls within the genre of literary realism but is also a form of early modernism, George Eliot is aware of classical metaphysics as a paradigm with destructive potential. In this, her most interpreted novel, one of her major intentions is to shepherd Dorothea Brooke through her thralldom to the "dead leaves" of Casaubon's Scholasticism and allow her some happiness in a second marriage to Ladislaw, even though Ladislaw is insouciant and insubstantial and through that second marriage Dorothea forfeits Casaubon's wealth, becomes much poorer financially, and descends to a lower class.

Nearly a century later something comparable happens

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in *The Bell*, which falls within the genre of late-modernism. Iris Murdoch gives her heroine a similar name to Dorothea Brooke, Dora Greenfield, and *The Bell* is in many ways a reworking of *Middlemarch* although its apparently realistic style prefigures the magic realism of Murdoch's later work. Unlike Eliot, who lived in the pre-Freudian period, Murdoch invested her heroine with all the pathologies Freud invested his Dora with, and takes her Dora to a place called Imber (a play on "umber" or "shades") where her development as a person depends on the way in which she is able to recognise and come to terms with the shadows of classical metaphysics that oppress her pagan spirit.

White stood wholly within this literary tradition and, as David Marr's biography reminds us, he was also influenced by Spengler. *The Decline of the West* gave him "the gooseflesh" in his youth and left him with a lifelong belief that Western civilisation was in its death throes:

One of the fundamental assumptions in White's work is that all we value—society, relationships, even fortunes—is sliding into decay. The familiar situation of most of his novels is the lone figure seeking fulfilment in a world drifting towards ugliness and violence, loneliness and poverty.

The hallmark of this kind of post-metaphysical fiction is its hermeneutical quality but the hermeneutical author moves among philosophy and theology, not psychoanalysis and sociology. While there's been much debate over the meta-historical character of this hermeneutical literature, and the ways in which it represents the evolution of the individual and collective Western mind, the debate shouldn't lose sight of the fact that literary tropes are not human subjects and the discursive propositions of the novelist are fictive constructions, not psychoanalytical cases studies or sociological experiments.

Like Murdoch, White gave his protagonists particular horizons that reflect the varieties of Western religious experience—Primitive (Celtic or Dionysian), Classical (or Apollonian), Jewish and Christian—and the horizon of each protagonist, as a category of trope, is a proxy for the ways in which they relate to self and other and world. Each protagonist's life is lived out according to the myth that underpins their horizon, and this myth determines their self-understanding as well as their ability to engage with the horizons of other protagonists. This kind of interrogation is hermeneutical, not psychoanalytical or sociological.

An essay topic that tries to engage the student with the approach of White as religious author might look like:

*In **The Solid Mandala** White gives his four protago-*

nists horizons that reflect the varieties of Western religious experience hidden in the unconscious of secular and materialistic Australia. Through a close reading of the novel, identify the horizons of Waldo and Arthur Brown, Dulcie Feinstein, and Mrs Poulter and discuss how they relate, or fail to relate, to each other.

THE FAILED VISIONARY

WHITE CLAIMED to be non-theoretical, as many theoretical authors do, but his work suggests otherwise. As Kirpal Singh has noted:

White is not only very intellectual, he is shrewdly so, and his works reveal a familiarity with an extraordinary range of philosophic, mystic, literary and theological systems, schools and traditions. To be faithful to all that is alluded to in his writings and suggested either directly or obliquely in the various metaphysical or other propositions put forward is no less than to journey through the whole morass of Western man's cultural history.

White alludes to this himself, again through the autobiographical character of Alex Gray:

I was sitting writing in what I am vain enough to call my study, though I have studied practically nothing beyond my own intuition—oh, and by fits and starts, the Bible, the Talmud, the Jewish mystics, the Bhagavad Gita, various Zen masters, and dear old Father Jung who, I am told, I misinterpret.

White stood firmly in an interdisciplinary tradition that embraces literature and philosophy and theology. This last point has been a problem for most academics, whether secular or religious, who assume White must be beyond the pale of theology.

White's vision of humanity is a theological vision. He lived outside the institutional church but never abandoned the Judeo-Christian worldview, and what's unpalatable to many academics is his theological orthodoxy. Secular academics tend to not move beyond noting his criticism of organised religion. Religious academics tend to recognise something in his work central to the Western religious tradition.

What then are we to make of Singh's observation, made a few years after White was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, at an international conference about his work: "I want to insist that one of White's most notable tasks has been to attempt and convert an apparent moral void into a sustained vision of life. The tragedy is that so far White has failed in his attempt."

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These are strong words that beg questions. First, why hold an international conference on a failed author? Second, did the author really fail? Third, if the author really did fail can the academic provide evidence to demonstrate that failure? Fourth, is it the academic who has failed rather than the author?

Before one goes too far down the path of proclaiming White's failure, it's useful to recall White was a late modernist and, as Frank Kermode observes, modernism's sense of an ending, in literature and in life, is immanent rather than imminent: that is, the end is within rather than without. The whole theological edifice of Christianity is built on a similar premise; theology being how Christians explain why the Second Coming keeps receding into the future and how the God who is in Christ remains in the world through the Holy Spirit. White wasn't a Jewish or Christian apologist as such but his literary vision was based on sound theology as well as sound philosophy and he consistently presented that vision over a long and distinguished career.

Leaving aside the discussion of tragedy as a genre and whether the genre fails simply because it's tragic, behind Singh's observation lurks an assumption that in order to be successful a sustained vision of life must be positive rather than negative and that the *via negativa* isn't a valid spiritual journey. Why read a story in which the protagonist apparently wanders forever in the wilderness and never seems to reach a promised land, or where the protagonist apparently journeys inexorably towards crucifixion and never seems to be allowed a resurrection? These biblical analogies are relevant because if academics really want to be serious about White, and about the varieties of modernism in the Western literary tradition, they need to study his fiction with the same exegetical rigour that seminarians approach biblical studies. I hasten to add that this is a matter of academic standards, not an attitude of religious faith.

The God of the Jews and Christians isn't a God of the Gaps, and the measure of great literature isn't whether it reflects an optimistic vision of what a society wants to believe about itself. Those who wrote the Bible left in all the unflattering parts because those parts were integral to their story. That's why the Bible has a lot to offer history as well as literature. The official canonical story of the Promised Land was constructed long after settlement and much of the canonical story is neither wholesome nor edifying. The official canonical story of the Empty Tomb was also constructed long after the disciples experienced its emptiness and if the messy aspects of the story are left out the meaning of the Cross is robbed of its full significance.

White understood the unflattering parts of the big picture he portrayed in fiction, which is why the lack of

nice or neat endings isn't a measure of his literary failure any more than William Dobell's unflattering portrait of Joshua Smith is a measure of his artistic failure—except to those who neither appreciated nor understood it (and let's not forget that as Smith aged he looked more and more like Dobell's portrait of him). We cannot wish away the reality of being human. White was suspicious of those who took a "mind over matter" approach to reality, particularly those hostile to the unity of flesh and spirit, which is a very modernist as well as mainstream Christian suspicion to maintain. Examples of this are his minor characters that seek refuge in the heterodox prism of Christian Science but still have to live with the uncomfortable reality of themselves.

An essay topic that tries to engage the student with the approach of White as failed visionary might look like:

*Through characterisation, background and dialogue, a typical White novel represents an overview of Western cultural history in an attempt to convert an apparent moral void into a sustained vision of life. The tragedy is White's attempts have failed both ideologically and aesthetically. Through a close reading of **Riders in the Chariot**, demonstrate that failure.*

THE PSYCHOSEXUAL PROBLEM

NOT LONG AGO, a retired Professor of Literature confided to me over lunch, in hushed tones, that White's failure as a visionary was because of his sexuality. According to the professor, White tilted at the big picture but got mangled in the windmill because he was homosexual. No evidence was given. Of course, as we live in a robust and functioning democracy, the professor is entitled to hold such a view. After all, the idea that sexuality is a measure of a person's maturity—their ability to understand in adult terms the world and things that really matter—is deeply rooted. For much of the twentieth century it was given pseudo-scientific respectability by Freud and pseudo-religious respectability by Jung.

White was familiar with Freudianism, as Marr explains:

He accepted much that psychoanalysis had to teach but never allowed himself to be analysed. In Freudian jargon, he was a heavily defended personality. Psychoanalysis, he later remarked, "is a dark cave into which I'd never venture for fear of leaving something important behind". The loss he feared was some part of his creative self ... His dreams did not fit Freud's pattern. Dreams were important all his life. He dreamed vividly nearly every night and remembered his dreams. They fed

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his work ... But Freud's explanation of dreams seemed to White too much about sex, too systematic. White suspected all systems.

Jung proved to be a more amenable influence on White, although not a systematic one. While writing *The Solid Mandala* he read *Psychology and Alchemy*, a book in which he found all the symbols that came to him spontaneously in connection with the novel. Also, as White saw himself as a shattered personality searching for wholeness, Jung seemed to have some of the answers to his spiritual questioning. As mentioned earlier, however, White's hermeneutic isn't psychoanalysis, and when the academic dons the mantle of clinical practitioner and tries to psychoanalyse his work, or tries to psychoanalyse him by proxy, they are way off the mark.

Marr makes an important point about this tendency:

More books and essays seem to have been written about the role of Jung in his writing than any other aspect of his work, but White grew exasperated with Jungian commentators. Against one who sent him an essay in the early 1980s, White railed: "Like all such obsessed characters, he tries to tie his subject down in the straitjacket of his system and finds I don't fit."

To this it must be added that while Freud and Jung cast long and influential shadows over the twentieth century, their influence has declined, their methodologies have been questioned, and for many psychoanalysis is at best unhelpful and at worst damaging. If White saw something worth taking from Jung, as many post-metaphysical authors of his generation did, he was wise to be suspicious of attempts to systematise the unconscious. As Muriel Spark, his contemporary, once observed: "The best thing is to be conscious of everything one writes, and let the unconscious take care of itself, if it exists, which we don't know. If we knew it [existed] it wouldn't be the unconscious."

The most significant study in the Jungian genre is *Patrick White: Fiction and the Unconscious*, in which the academic David Tacey psychoanalyses White's work, and psychoanalyses the author by proxy, although Tacey denies the latter was his intention. Regardless of his intentions, the overall effect of his study is to reinforce the deeply rooted idea that White's literary failure, and his inability to achieve psychological integration, were because of his sexuality and the

way it prevented him from achieving wholeness within the Jungian system. Central to this thesis is the idea that the conscious mind is masculine, the unconscious mind is feminine, and the process of descending into the unconscious, where wholeness can be achieved, is a journey of return to the mythical womb, which of course can only be achieved through a metaphorical vagina.

As Tacey explains, this mythical and metaphorical journey into wholeness is a "perilous undertaking" that "can lead to a pattern of renewal, where the individual is revitalised by the unconscious" or "can lead to catastrophe, the individual overwhelmed by what he encounters in the lower realm". The descent is an erotic incestuous ritual, "a penetration (at least for male consciousness) of the maternal womb, regression to early childhood, immersion into the matrix". By analogy, because male homosexuals are not attracted to vaginas it is harder for them to make the journey back into the womb of the mother, and therefore it is harder for them to achieve psychological integra-

tion and wholeness.

What the professor and the Jungian have both taken advantage of is the legend of White's difficult personality, and of course no one is going to deny White was difficult. But it's too easy to overstate this difficulty, and it's too convenient to project homophobia and pathology onto him. If White had high expectations of others, these were no higher than his expectations of himself, and it's naive to believe he lacked self-awareness. He gave his autobiography the title *Flaws in the Glass* and he had the grace to call himself a monster on reading Marr's manuscript not long before he died. The challenge is to notice, as White came to notice, that the problems of Western civilisation are societal rather than psychological. Jeffrey Masson came to realise that, which is why he gave up Freudian practice. James Hillman came to realise that, which is why he gave up Jungian practice.

An essay topic that tries to engage the student with the approach of White as psychosexual problem might look like:

*In all his novels White the visionary struggled to integrate his sense of social fragmentation, which was an extension of his sense of personal fragmentation. Had he been heterosexual, however, his personality would have been more psychologically integrated and his literature would have been more intellectually coherent. Through a close reading of **A Fringe of Leaves**, demonstrate this proposition.*

THE LITERARY SCAM

THE ULTIMATE hatchet job on White comes from Simon During, whose slim volume *Patrick White* was the final offering in the Australian Writers Series before Oxford University Press shut the series down as unprofitable. During wears a black armband and offers a reading of White that's all literary and cultural theory and no first-level evidence. It's simply an attack on the culture of dead white males that leaves one with a distressing sense that something wrong is happening in the humanities.

During despises White and everything his work stands for. He believes that White's writing won't be valued as highly in the future as it was in the past. This is because the White he assassinates in his slim volume is hard to tolerate:

the elitist White, the White who fictionalised contemporary Aboriginal life away, the misogynist White, the White who affirmed incest, even the White who thought himself a genius because he was physically sick or damaged, and the (intimately related) White who considered art and literature as too profound to be simply available as an administrative and educational resource.

Notice here that, while Tacey reads the occasional incestuous image in White as a sign of the author's borrowing from Jung—which it is—During wants us to read those same images as a sign of the author's pathology.

During's polemic is vicious and unreasoned; and, in spite of its nod towards the side altars of feminism and queer studies in the cathedral of literary and cultural theory, is insidiously anti-feminist and homophobic. His wholly unsubstantiated claims of White's misogyny don't ring true, especially to those female readers who've told me how authentic White's female protagonists seem to them. Also, while it's true White never felt the need to embrace the gay agenda—which didn't exist for most of his life and career anyway—the fact that he didn't doesn't mean he was a self-loathing homosexual.

White interrogated the Western meta-narrative, which he believed in even though he found it wanting. During apparently doesn't believe in that meta-narrative, although what he does believe in is unclear, as his incendiary approach to White fuels a deep hostility at the core of his theory of reading. He belongs to what Bloom calls the "school of resentment", which sees authors and texts as nothing more than social constructs. This school wrested authority from an earlier school that took a more romantic view of author and text as inspired. The academic war between these schools was fought for decades but the victory claimed by the school

of resentment is pyrrhic and the once proud discipline of English literature has been marginalised as a result of its own efforts.

Freud may be passé as well as unscientific—Freudianism being based on the Platonic model of the mind, not on science—but academics who want to disarm their subjects aren't above using Freud as a ploy. During begins his study by investing White with a double Oedipus complex—as if one wasn't enough for his purposes—thereby forgetting that according to Freud every child has an Oedipus complex, sometimes called an Electra complex in girls. Having placed White at a strategic but mythical disadvantage, During uses him as a scapegoat for everything he despises about the culture of dead white males and the texts they canonised.

We learn that White was a mediocre talent who wrote from the closet, was a misogynist as well as a class-conscious snob who despised popular culture, happened to be at the right place at the right time when Australia needed a figure of international stature but couldn't see him for the scam he was, and cynically manipulated the academy into believing his work was more significant than it really was. We hear his work is filled with homoeroticism and incest. We are told his pathetic attempts at being creative were offensive to women and indigenous people.

During offers a self-confessed doctrinaire approach that takes no prisoners and provides very few references from the novels to demonstrate its thesis. For example, he makes much of White's alleged hostility towards popular culture, especially film, which he believes "threatened the values" that White felt were "upheld by serious literature", but he provides only two images to support this reading.

The first is from *Riders in the Chariot*, where Mrs Jolley at the movies becomes White's misogynistic way of adhering to the "wider cultural logic" of consistently placing women alongside "passively received" mass culture and against "actively engaged" high culture. The second is from *The Vivisector*, where a passage in which Hurtle Duffield and his partner Nance go to the movies becomes not only a piece of "bad writing" but "crudely repeats the stereotypes in which the division between high art and low culture has been gendered". Given White wrote ten novels and several short stories, much more evidence needs to be given to demonstrate this thesis. Two images don't demonstrate anything.

One has to be completely and narrowly committed to the prisms of literary and cultural theory to be receptive to During. One must stand back and wonder what the inherent value of such a destructive and mean thesis, which annihilates both the author and his work, really is. To read During is to feel negative emotions that surely must approximate the emotions felt by those

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fighting in the history wars who don't wear black arm-bands, who believe in the importance of first-level evidence, who still champion close reading, and who promote substance over style.

An essay topic that tries to engage the student with the approach of White as literary scam might look like:

*In spite of being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, White was a mediocre author who wrote his fiction from the closet. His novels are snobbish and pathetic attempts at high culture, deeply hostile towards popular culture, homoerotic, filled with incest, and highly offensive to women and indigenous people. Through a close reading of *The Eye of the Storm*, demonstrate this proposition.*

THE ROLE OF EVIDENCE IN THE HUMANITIES

THE ABOVE FOUR APPROACHES are valid ones to hold, even though the last two morbidly focus on the author's sexuality and fail to negotiate the relevance of a literary academic operating as a psychoanalyst or sociologist. Ultimately, however, all four approaches are obliged to demonstrate their validity, and this depends on what each is able to offer as evidence. Teaching students about the rigour of evidence-based critical enquiry is more important than

venting personal prejudices and mouthing party shibboleths. It's here we come up against White's Nobel Prize for Literature, which is hard to ignore unless one believes it's meaningless. And if it's meaningless for literature then is it equally meaningless for physics, chemistry and medicine?

It's no mystery why academic approaches to White's fiction have evolved from religious author, to failed visionary, to psychosexual problem, to literary scam. The evolution becomes more obvious once the politics of interpretation are understood. This is literature's version of the history wars in which the proponents of each approach hold institutional power during different periods and are able to influence how texts are interpreted while they hold that power. The four approaches are sufficiently incompatible to raise alarm bells about the methodologies some of them employ. We need to focus on the evidence they offer before deciding which approaches are academically rigorous and best serve the interests of the humanities.

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BY MOONLIGHT

You didn't know where Moscow is or who Mozart was.
I touched you and asked you to dance but your face collapsed.
As you slammed the pupils of your eyes shut you unleashed
a powerful one-note perfume, like a carapace, like a cicatrice.

I loved you. I remember you by moonlight, inaccurately,
with the white hair-slide of false hope curving like your shy smile.
I remember you by moonlight, accurately, suddenly barefoot,
suddenly adroit, as the white horse lay and groaned in his sleep.

The moon swayed, the pine trees,
on your boundary, like a premonition,
switched perspective, becoming foreground
with smooth, elusive panache. Trees can do that.

I'll take my teeth out and put them in a glass beside the bed.
So I can't bite. This is my last and best gift. Such sentiment!

Jennifer Compton