

contexts, the novels make clear that that which comes “between us,” in all the varieties of its masking, is death. Also, since death comes between us, it follows that the death of the individual, our own death, is something wholly incommunicable, quite mysterious, quite lonely, which the dying person cannot communicate, either to himself or to others. The horror of these deaths described by White arises not only from their suggestion of a life lived without fulfilment, but from the accompanying awareness that a correction is no longer possible. Their sudden and arbitrary character is a provocation to the reader, beneath the socially-expected mask of well-being, to face the anxiety of his dying without opportunity to correct a course he may sense as already wrong.

NOTES

- ¹Patrick White: *The Vivisector*, Penguin Books, 1973. All page references will be to this edition.
- ²Patrick White: *The Twyborn Affair*, King Penguin, 1981. All page references will be to this edition.
- ³Patrick White: *The Aunt's Story*, Avon Books, New York, 1975. All page references will be to this edition.
- ⁴Patrick White: *The Eye of the Storm*, Penguin books, 1975. All page references will be to this edition.
- ⁵Patrick White: *A Fringe of Leaves*, Avon Books, New York, 1978. All page references will be to this edition.
- ⁶Patrick White: *Riders in the Chariot*, Penguin Books, 1974. All page references will be to this edition.
- ⁷Friedrich Nietzsche: *Werke in drei Banden*, edited Karl Schlechta, Munich 1954-56, Vol. III, p. 1024, or *The Dawn of Day*, Section 14.
- ⁸Patrick White: *Voss*, Penguin Books, 1957. All page references will be to this edition.
- ⁹Patrick White: *The Solid Mandala*, Avon Books, New York, 1975. All page references will be to this edition.
- ¹⁰Nietzsche: *Werke*, III, pp. 853, 466, 872.

ANDREW LANSDOWN

TOUCH

When I touched him, the old man,
when I interrupted his struggle
to remember what he wanted
to say and said, “Look

at the rainbow bird"—
when I touched his arm
the flesh was saggy, loose
like old canvas on a windless day.

I tried not to think of it.
I let go and said, "Up there,
look." It was on the high wire,
colourless against the clear sky.

No hint of iridescence,
no hues of rainbows, but
I recognised its shape—
the bullet body, the sharp beak,

the twin thin feathers
trailing from the tail.
He looked up, the old man
looked up and looked puzzled.

"I used to know all the names,"
he said. "What did you call it?"
"A rainbow bird. They come down
from the Kimberleys to nest."

"I love birds. I used to know
all the names. But now
I don't know any." This horror.
The mind like the arm and

a greater slackness coming.
When I looked back, the bird
was gone. Only the wire
like a scratch on the perfect sky.