

RIGHT CONDITIONS TO GROW?

THE EYE OF THE STORM. by Patrick White. Jonathan Cape, London, 1973. pp. 608. \$6.75.

A seed is a plant in embryo and needs the right conditions to grow into a plant like its parent.

In some plants the seed drop to the ground. Those that grow under the tree usually die because of competition from their own parent. Often the young plants may grow quite tall before they die, as can be seen in this picture of a boab tree and its seedlings. Should the parent plant die, then one of the youngsters takes its place.

Australia's Wildlife Heritage, 22.

This epigraph is as appropriate to Patrick White's novel as the three epigraphs he himself chose, which is to say that each comments aptly upon some aspect of theme and character, and none is profound enough to shock the reader into delight and admiration. The eye of the storm is about the right conditions for growth - for physical, emotional, moral and spiritual growth - and it is a very skilful depiction of the truth that each man is part of the environment available for the growth of those around him. Civilized life is a struggle to survive and a human being draws life from others and each man has the capacity to nourish the life of others. Each could be, in fact, the eye of a storm, an equilibrium of centrifugal and centripetal forces, of energy that drives out into the world and energy that is sucked inwards to the individual man. Elizabeth Hunter illustrates the possibility at its intensest within this novel; silly old Sister Badgery illustrates the possibility at its weakest. Sister Badgery draws little from her environment but 'physical food' and conventional spite and gives back on the same level. Let us say no more about Sister Badgery. We know whom she represents. Like all Patrick White caricatures, she is an excellent and disturbing piece of low-toned satire.

But to return to the boab tree. Elizabeth Salkeld married Alfred Hunter, a gentle, sensitive man whose value she realizes fully only when she nurses him in his final illness. She has all the power of a beautiful and vital woman, and as a mother she had the potential power to create children who would be nourished by her power and vitality. Instead, she stunts and distorts them. She ensures that they cannot grow secure and independent while she is alive to remind them of their weakness and inferiority, a verbal and behavioural skill at which she is adept. It is logical enough that they conspire to kill her by transplanting her to the Thorogood Village nursing home. It is not simply greed, the fear that the large Centennial Park establishment consumes too much of the inheritance they will receive, that makes them act with murderous hypocrisy, but the lesson they have learnt from their mother, which is the art of survival using what weapons, nasty or glamorous, are available. Perhaps Elizabeth outwits them by willing her own death, or perhaps she plays into their hands by committing this form of suicide. It is an ugly picture of the generations of man, and the phenomenon is uglier in man than it is in the boab tree.

Against this human ugliness which Patrick White uncovers so skilfully, he draws some characters who are aware of special qualities in human existence that beckon them beyond their own imperfections. It is a kind of supreme vitality that beckons Elizabeth Hunter, so that she herself becomes a symbol of life for those who cannot threaten her, like the Macrorys and Mrs Lippmann. Alfred Hunter perceives a spirituality that binds 'les

âmes d'élite' in Stendhal's *La chartreuse de Parme*, and he quietly lives out his life with this novel as a touchstone. His daughter Dorothy, repressed and distorted, dimly perceives this same spirituality in the French novel, but to her it represents rather an aesthetic principle. The son, Sir Basil Hunter, the actor, seeks intermittently a pure and perfect portrayal of Shakespeare's *Lear*, for this picture of a king stripped to his essential self is the best substitute Sir Basil dare make for facing his own essential self. Sister Manhood, the pretty, nubile young nurse, fumbles after an ideal of motherhood without submissive domesticity, but this venture into female liberation terrifies her when she thinks she is to have a child. What Sister Mary de Santis seeks is implied in the name Patrick White has given her. The description of these various forms of awareness relieves the penetrating satire of the novel, but the satire is never transcended.

Elizabeth Hunter was born beautiful and intelligent but her family's financial status was not adequate to give her the setting and resources appropriate to her attributes. To her dying day she half identifies with and half resents Kate Nutley, her insipid childhood friend from a neighbouring station whose parents were prosperous enough to afford to give her a nursemaid and an abundance of dolls. On the day Elizabeth dies she misses one of her jewels. The nurse cries, "Anybody could have stolen the thing."

"Yes." Mrs Hunter smiled. "Or I might have given it as a present. Kate had so many dolls she was always giving them away and often couldn't remember." (p.541)

Although the young Elizabeth envies Kate's possessions, she is contemptuous of her lack of spirit. It is Kate's sister, Lillian, who ran away and got murdered on the banks of some great river in Asia, whom she envies, and even as a child vaguely conceives that this kind of death could be both romantic and apocalyptic.

Her own apocalypse occurs when, alone on an island off the tropical Queensland coast, at the age of seventy or so, she survives a cyclone. Her destructive emotional greed ensures that she is alone during the trial, but her courage and commonsense enable her to survive it. Patrick White suggests that the woman experiences a spiritual revelation.

All else was dissolved by this lustrous moment made visible in the eye of the storm, and would have remained so, if she had been allowed to choose. (p.425)

"If she had been allowed to choose" is Patrick White's way of saying that Elizabeth is exalted and exhausted by the first passage of the cyclone, and she would have been resigned to becoming part of the general shambles, had not commonsense told her that this lull was simply the passage of the still centre of the storm, and more was to come. The sight of a noddy transfixed in agonised death to a snapped tree branch reminds her that the same thing could happen to her, and she scuttles off to the safety of the bunker in which she had found shelter. Sadly enough, this experience does little for the woman but add to her sense of superiority and provide her with another weapon for attacking her daughter. Sic transit gloria spiritus mundi. At least, so passes the glory of the spiritual world evoked in this novel. Elizabeth Hunter's death scene, however, carries poetic conviction.

The eye of the storm is a rich novel, with many implications and thought-provoking assertions. Some situations are contrived and manipulated, others flow naturally from attendant circumstances. For example, a clumsy device is used to take Mrs Hunter's hosts, the Warmings, off Brumby Island before the cyclone strikes, but it is psychologically credible and almost inevitable that Dorothy and Professor Pehl should desert Mrs Hunter, given what she is and what they are. Some situations are repetitive from other parts of Patrick White's work, even to the point of dialogue, as in the exchange between the Macrorys about Kirkaldy which echoes the Girlie and Clive Pogson exchange about "Rosedale" in *The Season at Sarsaparilla*.

"Eat it up! When I was a little girl at Kirkaldy spotted dog was my favourite pudding. Certainly the spotted dog was lighter..."

"At Kirkaldy! At Kirkaldy! The husband bowed his head. "Everything was lighter, sweeter-better class. Only the fences were the same. Barbed wire never changes." (p.481)

Clive (looking over Girlie's shoulder) Egg's, eh?

Girlie (shaking the pan) Pah! That's what they're sold as. One thing we always had was eggs. Warm from the nest into the pan. And shells! The Rosedale eggs didn't break if you dropped them on the floor

(*The Season at Sarsaparilla*. Act Two)

If the novel sometimes becomes a little tiresome it is because the style is sometimes pretentious and sometimes glib. Let us take a simple example. A due respect for objects without reference to their material value is a commendable trait whenever it is found in human beings. Sister de Santis possesses this trait.

Whether religious or not (that was something she would not have breathed about, not even to Mrs Hunter asleep) Sister de Santis admitted to a belief in common objects. If you depend on something to any extent, you might as well learn to respect it: so she never kicked the furniture or threw the crockery about. (p.171)

Elivira, in Hal Porter's novel, The right thing (1971), also possesses this trait.

"Yes," she said, folding up the bathing-costume as carefully as a Treasure Island plan, as carefully and thoughtfully as she did most things. This carefulness seemed to state: if one needs constant vigilance to avoid hurting people, however silly, one equally needs it to avoid spoiling objects, however valueless (p.61).

Patrick White's paragraph says or implies nothing more than Hal Porter's, and Hal Porter's mode of expression does not overtly mock what it describes, as does the flippant phrase, "so she never kicked the furniture or threw the crockery about." Although it is part of Elvira's character to speak very precisely, the narrative voice, except for the "Yes", is that of the author. It is not clear who is speaking in the paragraph from Patrick White's novel. The confusion of "she" and "you" appears frequently in passages from The eye of the storm and try as the reader will, it is difficult to understand what purpose the confusion serves. Readers of Patrick White fall over their prejudices and instinctive taste trying to avoid

repeating A.D. Hope's neo-classical dismissal of some of Patrick White's style as "illiterate verbal sludge" - of course it is not illiterate and of course it is not sludge. Perhaps some trained linguist, working closely with an ordinary Australian reader, will analyse Patrick White's style closely and explain to a great many readers why it is mean and silly of them not to admire and enjoy it more wholeheartedly.

Possibly every observation made about this novel leads back to the same point, that Patrick White's vision of life is essentially satiric, and that satire and simple visionary experience are antithetical. There does seem to be a greater harmony between the narrative voice of the author and the cadences and expression of Elizabeth Hunter's thinking, and the stream-of-consciousness narrative succeeds best when she is the subject. The limitations of the stream-of-consciousness technique, in any of its full or modified forms, is that the writer must represent interior voices by what he knows of external language. The characters in *The eye of the storm* think and speak in lines that would be excellent in stage drama, but which seem to diminish their stature in the novel. The inescapable effect is that everyone is treated satirically, even in moments of mystic surrender and exaltation. Perhaps this is the effect Patrick White intends. Again, if the reader approaches the novel with stylized, unrealistic, even hypocritical notions of how people think within themselves, he may perceive as satire what Patrick White is presenting as honestly recorded realism. That possibility must remain open. Nevertheless a great many readers who try to approach the novels honestly, and who are not stupid, find it very difficult to believe in the reality of inner consciousness that Patrick White suggests.

The situation that the novel draws offers enormous scope for the recreation of the terrible complexity of human relationships, but what is given is pungent observation of human behaviour. *The eye of the storm* disturbs the reader with the painful insistence of rich satire, but the novel seems to want to go beyond this, and seems not content to be read as tragic satire. It may be that the artistic brilliance of the novel lies in the fact that its sense of straining aspiration reflects perfectly the impotence of the central characters to arrive at something beyond their human imperfections.

ELIZABETH PERKINS