

PATRICK WHITE – A GERMAN REVIEW

(Tr. Noel Macainish)

The following review by Hedwig Rohde appeared in *Neue Deutsche Hefte*, 1/1974, a quarterly journal of high standing based in Berlin. Heinrich Boell who, together with his wife Annemarie, has translated White, was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1972. He has been referred to as “the conscience of modern Germany.” A frequent theme of his writing is the individual’s acceptance or refusal of personal responsibility, and an anti-war, non-conformist point of view. He was born, a carpenter’s son, in Cologne on December 21, 1917, a child of one war and a foot-soldier of a second. He was captured by the U.S. forces in April 1945 and imprisoned in France. On repatriation, he enrolled at the University of Cologne, in order, so it is said, to qualify for a ration-card. His first stories were published in 1947; his first novel, which attracted popular acclaim, *Der Zug war Puenktlich* (The Train was on Time) appeared two years later. He has been translated into more than 30 languages. He announced he would contribute much of the \$100,000 prize to a fund to free writers imprisoned the world over for political reasons.

Patrick White: *The Tree of Man* (Zur Ruhe kam der Baum des Menschen nie) Novel. Translated from the English by Annemarie and Heinrich Boell, pub. DTV (Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag), Munich 1973, 7.80 DM.

: Voss

: *Riders in the Chariot* (Die im feurigen Wagen)

Both published Rowohlt, Reinbek 1973.

The Nobel Prize has been awarded this time to an author who has “brought a new continent into literature”. Hardly was this reason made known when the Australian writers’ union protested against the distinction of Patrick White: present-day Australia is represented by other authors. The names which were mentioned mean nothing to us. Even White has hardly become known to us. We can only assume from the public protest that White, who is in his sixties and lives a withdrawn existence, is not, or is no longer, honoured in his own land.

Here, there is a case of lack of appreciation which calls for explanation. No one can appeal to simple ignorance in consequence of lack of publishing. The great novels of the son of an Australian sheep-farmer, who was born in London and brought up in England, and who took part in the second World War as an RAF officer, after his studies in Cambridge, have appeared in the fifties in the English-speaking world and have been taken up by critics with acclaim. In Germany, the publishing-house of Kiepenheuer & Witsch attempted to promote the author, probably at the suggestion of Heinrich Boell who, together with his wife Annemarie, has translated the settler-epic *Tree of Man*. But neither his first work published in German, nor the following, had any success. And in the meantime, Patrick White has been so forgotten by us that the Nobel prize actually seemed strange. It is to be hoped that the three rapidly produced pocket-book editions will lead to a change. Now there is already announced the newest White: “In the Eye

of the Storm" (Im Auge des Storms): a title like a Turner painting. The wonder artist of British "light and colour" recently celebrated his great rediscovery. High time that we discovered for ourselves the closely related master of words, the seeker of light and God, White. An author who comes from lyric poetry (his poems remain unknown to us), a difficult visionary poet who, from book to book, demands more from his readers than from himself. *The Tree of Man* could still be read as a pioneer and generation novel. The rise and struggle, the battles and misery of a man who opens up a continent, establishes his offspring and is exposed to the forces of fire and water, love and loneliness. But this is no straight-forward nordic "And eternally sing the forests", despite the title which comes from the verse-motto "The tree of man was never quiet".

The unopened, stony bushland, under cruel heat, and ice cold at night, visited by drought and lack of water, shows itself to the white intruder as hostile, does not become hospitable. To subjugate it, does not mean a stilling of despairing unrest for someone who has brought with him the entire burden of the European past. The author and his hero Stan Parker do not find the aim of their life in the cultivation of cattle and fields. The farming-epic writer who draws a wide breath is at the same time divided in himself, the modern romancier of a freedom of decision that separates.

He loves the maladjusted, the weak and decadent more than the primitively competent. He depicts their helplessness in the hard conventions of a newly growing society without embellishment. Stan Parker, who owes everything that he is and has to himself, finds neither appreciation nor love in his life. Misjudged by his relations, under suspicion from his neighbours, not accepted in any group, he is eventually pressed back by the fringe-growth of the town onto a fragment of the ground he once made arable. Nothing remains firm but what is properly incomprehensible, not rooted in the earth. The despised and impoverished settler Stan experiences, before he dies, "that One, and no other figure, is the answer to all sums."

A circumscribed concept of God, which, in the following books, becomes clearer but also more challenging and mystical. Patrick White has transplanted the legacy of William Blake onto a part of the earth that is only half civilized. He describes the inner burning of a divine mission. A renewed martyrdom, a denial of arrogance, is his life-theme. His heroes are elect and damned to radical outsiderdom and to strictest accountability. In the novel *Riders in the Chariot* (Die im feurigen Wagen) which first appeared in German in 1969, four outsiders are pursued on account of their upright humility and become the victims of the hateful petit bourgeois. There are quite uniquely penetrant figures: the infantile-wise Miss Hare, aging and fallen on hard times in her crumbling ruin of a castle; the born painter Dubbo who is a mixed blood and lives among whores; the washer-woman Mrs Godbold who has many children, is beaten by her drunken husband but in spite of this is always ready to help; the German Jew Himmelfarb who has migrated and is a strict believer. They recognise each other by their secret knowledge of the biblical chariot of fire and are unable to mutually save themselves, either from the injustices of their everyday world or from the evil that breaks in on them. The inexorable supra-confessional faith of the author finds its darkest symbol in the crucifixion of the jew.

Unlike Claudel or Bernanos, Patrick White cannot count on a catholic reading-public. His God, who is afar and demands everything from the pious, excites offence. And the enlightened, psychoanalytically informed reader of today sees nothing but hysteria in the ecstasies of his unredeemed saints. Australia's philistines as emissaries of the devil, German migrants and poor aboriginal mixed-bloods as the elect of heaven: that appeals neither to Australians nor to Germans. But, perhaps because they have been made curious by the fame of the Nobel prize, they could finally begin to recognize in these unique mysteries, all embedded in sharply observed reality, a poet of our time. In his undauntedness there can be found certain points of contact with younger expressionist authors who, like him, believe in Hell—though not in the constant presence of heaven. A jagged, angular language which avoids cliché even in subliminally grotesque humour, ironic sharpness as compensation for visionary flights—these are the marks of a literary quality rightly crowned with a prize.

With the novel *Voss*, White should really find readers precisely in Germany. For the historically authenticated story goes back to the explorer Ludwig Leichhardt who was lost in the Australian desert in 1848. Only White's Johann Ulrich Voss has more the effect of a recalcitrant saint, not that of a scientific pioneer. In the first half of the novel, he is pushed to and fro by the well-off Sydney citizens who are financing his expedition into the bush. He is a nuisance to all, and only to Laura Trevelyan, the only loner like himself, does he present any hope. Like Stan Parker's late and odd love for a stranger whom he saves from a fire, the relationship between the moody German fanatic-of-will and the British woman locked in at home by her relatives springs from a romantically lightning-fast recognition and finds no bodily confirmation. In the second part, it mounts into a parapsychological, visionary dream-play: Laura, alone on her sick-bed, shares the dreadful but triumphant death of the explorer in the bush.

If there is an Australian literature at all, that is more than a colonial offshoot of the English, then Patrick White has founded it. With him, an original combination of hard reality and spiritualisation has entered into Anglo-Saxon writing. In the raw climate of the lost continent, he is a pioneer and prophet and, not least, a merciless critic of the petit bourgeois established there. What he defends there on the other side of the globe is a piece of lost terrain from the spiritual inheritance of Europe.

Berlin.

Hedwig Rohde.