

THE POEMS OF PATRICK WHITE

In the extensive discussion that has taken place on Patrick White's work, virtually no attention has been given to his poems. Doubtless, there are several reasons for this. Firstly, the poems are not easily available. *The Ploughman and Other Poems*, with which I am concerned here, was published in 1935 by the Beacon Press, Sydney, in a limited edition of 300 numbered copies only, with no further issue. Two of the poems were anthologized by G. Mackaness in his *Poets of Australia* which was issued by Angus & Robertson in 1946, gaining for these poems a wider audience; but this anthology is now of limited availability. An earlier collection of White's poems is harder still to obtain, though a copy is held in the Fisher Library, University of Sydney. Also, the attitude of the author himself has discouraged attention to his poems. Apart from the fact that he has not cared to have them reissued, Patrick White seems glad to pass over his poems in silence. Some time ago, when the present writer, with a few fellow poets in a personal gathering, including White, raised what seemed a quite natural point in the context, namely that White himself had published poems, the response was a mild demur. The main reason for this appears to be that the poems are a personal disclosure. The well-known embarrassment of older writers at their own juvenilia may have some place here, but certainly is not warranted if, as usual, it is based on unhappy recollections of gaucheries of style and sentiment. After all, White was 21 or 22 years of age when these poems were written, and their style and matter is assured, developed and admirable.

Other readers, however, have seen the poems differently, and possibly this has also served to deflect due attention from them. For instance, Barry Argyle in his *Patrick White* (pub. Oliver and Boyd, London, 1967) calls the poems "a depressing introduction to his work. Full of inversions, archaisms and a gentle melancholy uncharacteristic both of the time and their later author." This is not my own reaction to the poems, though there is a partial truth in Argyle's view. Nor am I concerned with the technical felicities of expression, though these, however uncharacteristic of the times and the later author, are for the most part adequate to the success of the poems *qua* poems. Rather it is the presence of certain motifs, the use of Nature as a metalanguage that I find interesting, particularly with the hindsight we now have from White's later works. Again and again, we find in reviewing an author's total *oeuvre*, that central themes, leitmotifs, are already sounded in his earliest works; in Australian poetry alone, Brennan, Hope and McAuley come to mind immediately. Poetry, because of its concision, often affords the readiest examples of this foreshadowing. It seems to me that something of the kind is to be found also in White.

The Ploughman and Other Poems is "dedicated to my

mother". It contains 33 poems, all written between 18th December, 1932, and October, 1934; White was born in 1912. The poems were written at various places, including the Scilly Islands, Heidelberg, Hanover, Cambridge, Polperro, Zennor, Winchester, Oxford, Corfe Castle, London, Salisbury, and Wimbourne. Four poems, written on or near the Scilly Islands, are dated as early as December, 1932, and January, 1933; the rest of the poems, 29 of them, were written between July, 1933 and October, 1934. For the most part, the poems are short nature-lyrics but of a kind where nature is clearly the script of the inner life. Hence we find that perennially recurring elements of the natural world, such as rain, cloud, sea, sun, the seasons, are employed as the "objective correlative" of loneliness, loss in love, of hope, growth, joy and resurrection.

Certain motifs are repeated in varying ways. For example, we find that birds are mentioned in almost half of the poems and that the bird of the poem is typically under way, is rising in flight to a distant and ideal destination. For instance, the poet cries for the return of the day -

... when one white swan
Rose from the meadows where the kingcups shone,
And striving like a fierce and lovely cloud
To span the sky, ineffable and proud,
Tore my heart with the music of her wings.
(O Cold, Cold Rain)

In another poem, the bird, a gull, is asked to "linger at my window", but it replies -

I cannot stay now.
I must be gone,
Over the rim of the world,
Into the moon - beyond.
(To a Gull Blown Inland By the Storm)

Or, more simply -

Even as the swallow into Africa,
Is sorrow flown.
(Interlude)

And again -

... hate can leave the heart
When gulls beat past my window ...
(Lines Written on Leaving the Scilly Islands)

More directly, in a poem expressive of longing for "boundless calm and beauty", the poet craves -

To soar in equity among the stars
And there forget that we are hostages
Beating our futile wings against the bars.
(Morning Soliloquy)

This notion of the self imprisoned in the world while longing for a higher order of being finds further expression in bird-imagery raised to a Phoenix-type symbolism of rebirth. For instance, in a poem written in Heidelberg, July, 1933, the poet, heavy with melancholy, turns again in memory to the past -

O, then I am given birth again
By the heavy, pregnant, brooding one;
And the glossy-feathered sky
Stands from the ashes where cold she has lain,
And her claws are barbed with the gold of the Sun.
(Rain in Summer)

Here, the poet is born again from a glossy and barb-clawed 'mother' who has lain cold but now rises to loom across his world. Later, in October of the same year, at Cambridge, the poet records that he was a stranger among men, "That I stood on the edge of the world..." but that a mystical union with the dawn, symbolised by the Phoenix, allayed his loneliness -

And then there was warmth in my heart, in my breast,
Warm with the wonder of what was revealed:
The life that burst from the death of the planets,
Phoenix-wise in the morning ashes ...
(They Held Out Their Hands to Me)

The Phoenix-symbol, as well as being associated with a maternal principle and with the elements of sky, blueness and gold, can also be found in the image of a Great God -

But there against the sky the Great God stands:
Blue are his wings, and living gold the grain
That in the morning scatters from his hands.
(Resurrection)

This is the Great God of resurrection in Nature, compared to which the "raven Priests" of traditional religion, who chant by candlelight, "shall be naught in time" -

... but ever bud
Of blackthorn will make darkened hedges white
And year by year shall generations find
Caught in the branches of the Judas tree,
The long-sought answer to eternity.
(Resurrection)

The idea of nature as a gnostic script is perhaps put at its clearest in -

... the meaning of the world is burned
Into the sky and sea by stars and sun.
(Lines Written on Leaving the Scilly Islands)

The notion of the meaning of the world, as "burned" into the natural elements of the world by celestial beings is also extended to men. Those who have experienced "meaning", that is, knowledge of another order of being, have had this meaning "burned" into them, as with the author himself -

But now the Sun, in risen might,
Has burned pain deeper in my soul,
And ecstasy has come to me ...
(Second Life)

Or -

The sun smote my face with the sword of its glory
And there was joyful pain in the wound,
For I was no longer alone.
(They Held Out Their Hands to Me)

Likewise, the contemplation of death "burns" -

This great mystery is too much for me.
Burned is my throat; and dim my eyes
From gazing on the majesty
Of Death -
No calm ...

But the fierce breath
That chars all consciousness of what has been ...
(Lines Written After an Encounter with Death
in a Country Lane)

"Burning" is also associated with love, but with a
supernal love -

If you would see that I love
Something beyond your Self ...
Then now burning-swift our love under the web of
the trees;
Then our kisses, no mere kisses, carnal lingering,
But meet to draw us upward into the stars.
(If You Would See)

Or -

Yet speak, my love, and on the barren gorse
Such flames will kindle ...
(Lament in Winter)

The intensity of "burning" varies with the seasons of the
year, each of which finds expression in the poems. But it
is Spring and Autumn that receive particular attention,
for "in the ecstasy of Spring" is the flare of rebirth,
with its attendant pain, while in Autumn, "This Autumn I
have still/to win for myself", there is -

a sleepy nodding of fruit,
A half-burn flicker of drowsy eyes
That proclaim an endless peace.
(Early Autumn)

This same "half-burn flicker" is to be found transposed
to a scene of old people sitting on benches in parks, in
a poem written in Hanover, in August, 1933. Here we find
"There is no reason for their being, / For their heaped
up existence on benches in parks;" -

Yet sometimes between the slats of their eyes,
Out of a moth-ball stupor, of jet bonnets, and
mustiness,
Flickers the glimpse of another world:
The smooth drift of sunlight through the trunks
of trees,
And cowslips starred with tears.
(When Thoughts are Still and Formless)

Here, our ordinary world, in whose terms the life of
certain people is meaningless, is contrasted with another
"world" that flickers between "the slats of their eyes";
this second world being described in terms of the elements
of Nature, which we are told elsewhere are "burned with
meaning". Thus we have yet another version of the poet's
view that the other world lies within this one, in the

world of Nature and in man; that the natural order contains the supernatural order.

The central view of the poems is religious, even if not orthodox - a view in which a higher, more abiding "world" is immanent in the natural order. The higher world "burns" meaning into the lower one. Human beings partake of both worlds, though their degree of participation may vary greatly; that is, the humble and meaningless people of this world may participate richly in the other order ("When Thoughts are Still and Formless"); or, conversely, as with the canons, deans, vergers and charitable ladies of "Resurrection", those people with a well-approved place in this world may have an inner life of vanity and "withered bones". The direction of aspiration, often conveyed by bird-in-flight imagery, is towards supra-rational union with a transcendent, regenerative order revealed in Nature, evoked particularly by imagery of dawn, light, burning. Rebirth into this union is symbolised by Phoenix-like imagery or by the resurrection of the seasons. Concomitant with this, is the recognition of oneself as a stranger in the ordinary world, where loneliness is overcome by union with a life that bursts "Phoenix-wise in the morning ashes ..." ("They Held Out Their Hands to Me").

Sexual love, its physical expression, is seen as subordinate to a love beyond the Self, a love that leads to the stars and spiritual fertility ("If You Would See"). As with the poet's religious attitude, interpersonal love is seen in unorthodox and mystical terms, in which customary social forms are rejected as a perversion of the aspiration to, and experience of metaphysical union. This union is the poet's "meaning", but, as with mysticism in general, there is an insuperable problem of language; for the "meaning" transcends the capacity of any language whatever to convey it, and an author who is nevertheless committed to attempt this "raid on the inarticulate" must of necessity be driven to a poetic and problematic expression, which, at best, will elicit the help of those who already know his meaning while themselves being in a difficult position to explain it further.

There is more that could be said about the motifs to be found in these poems, but I think enough has been indicated here to show that certain themes, generally recognized by criticism as central to White's later work, are already sounded in this early work.

It is tempting to cite numerous parallel instances of these motifs from White's novels, but to do so would also require due comment on the great elaboration they have undergone - a task which would not be without interest but for which there is no space here. Suffice it to say that certain "seeds", or points of accretion for the later growth, appear to be present in these poems.