

ELIZABETH PERKINS

VARIETIES OF COURAGE

Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife). Christina Stead. New York, Random House, 1976. pp.308.

A Fringe of Leaves. Patrick White. London, Jonathan Cape, 1976. pp.404.

These latest novels from Australia's foremost senior writers both take a woman for their central figure and around her create an experience of human courage. They are quite different novels. Christina Stead's Eleanor Herbert, an educated Londoner, steadily denies the dimension of life that Patrick White's Ellen Gluyas perceives from the beginning of her story as a Cornish farm-girl. This review will not give a detailed commentary on the novels but will concentrate on the central women. Patrick White's novel is based for fact on the adventures of Eliza Ann Fraser among the aborigines of the south-Queensland coast when the *Stirling Castle* under the command of her husband James Fraser was wrecked there in 1836. Important incidents in the novel, including the fringe of leaves which the wife strung round her waist and in which she hid her wedding-ring, are taken from the actual story of Mrs Fraser, and it is interesting to observe how an artist makes use of fact when the novel is compared with other accounts, for example, with Michael Alexander's *Mrs Fraser on the Fatal Shore*, (London, Michael Joseph, 1971).

A Fringe of Leaves, however, has the quality of an allegory. In real life Mrs Eliza Fraser seems to have been rather closer to Eleanor Herbert than to Patrick White's Ellen Gluyas, later Roxburgh. Christina Stead's work has the quality of realism: both novels are very powerful and in their strong sympathy persuade the reader to a greater understanding of human nature. It is probably only coincidence that the name "Ellen" is the Anglo-Saxon word for "strength", "valour", and "courage", and that "Eleanor" has the appearance of being a cognate word. Both novels are essentially concerned with varieties of human courage, especially as it is exacted from women in different societies and circumstances: Ellen and Eleanor are sensual and maternal women who, without moving beyond the socially prescribed feminine roles, struggle for self-realization in inimical and painful environments.

Eleanor Herbert avoids self-knowledge and closes up every wound, a way of living that is no less difficult and courageous in its blindness than Ellen Roxburgh's inevitable progress towards acceptance of her whole self and her careful expiation of her acts of betrayal. At the beginning of Ellen Roxburgh's story she has yielded to a sensual impulse and committed a swift adultery with her husband's brother, Garnet. This, and the failures she believes she has been guilty of, have left their mark on her, which the curiously unfeminine but perceptive Miss Scrimshaw perceives:

'Ah,' Miss Scrimshaw replied, 'who am I to say? I only had the impression that Mrs Roxburgh could feel life has cheated her out of some ultimate in experience. For which she would be prepared to suffer, if need be.'

Patrick White, *A Fringe of Leaves*, p.21

After Ellen Roxburgh's ordeal among the aborigines, where she is regarded as something of a goddess, but more as a slave, and after partaking as an outcast in a communion of human flesh, she reaches the Moreton Bay settlement with the help of an escaped convict. When, on reaching white civilization, the man turns his scarred back and returns to the severities of aboriginal life, Ellen Roxburgh comes fully to believe that she must not only assume responsibility for her personal sins but also share the betrayals of her society. To appreciate the delicacy with which Patrick White has converted fact to the purposes of his story it is useful to compare a description of the Commandant's garden at Moreton Bay given by two Quaker visitors in 1836 and quoted by Alexander:

Adjacent to the Government House are the Commandant's garden and 22 acres of Government gardens for the growth of sweet potatoes, cabbages, and other vegetables for the prisoners. Bananas, grapes, guavas, pineapples, citrons, lemons, shaddocks, etc., thrive luxuriantly in the open ground

Michael Alexander, *Mrs Fraser on the Fatal Shore*, p.173

Patrick White redirects the stiff prose and adds other details to serve his theme:

She (Mrs Roxburgh) hoped she might avoid discovery, and actually did, even by children. She made her descent through the Commandant's garden by natural slope and artificial terraces, where shaddocks and lemons, bananas and guavas appeared on congenial terms with cabbage, and tea-trees and the stiff cut-outs of native palms. A palm-leaf cut her hand as the result of her looking to it for support.

A Fringe of Leaves, p.359

Real life may always assume allegorical dimension in the hands of the artist. Almost all the details of Eliza Fraser's story are treated in this way. Children have a specific importance in the novel for it is the sensual and maternal in Ellen Roxburgh's character that is emphasized, but this is done without neglecting her almost mystical apprehension of guilt and responsibility and its proper apportionment amongst frail humanity. This sense of responsibility and of having failed to meet all responsibilities begins with her relationship with her father in Cornwall and grows during her married life. There is not much in her life that renders her culpable before society, but society is not the court at which Ellen arraigns herself. Finally she learns that even children who might "by their innocence and candour, help her transcend her self-disgust" (p.357) are also capable of apparently meaningless cruelty. The sharing of guilt involves all human nature, aboriginal and white, and when describing to the Commandant her

treatment by the aborigines, the death of her husband at their hands, and the death of the sick native child she was given to nurse, she cries: 'No one is to blame, and everybody, for whatever happens.' (p.363). *A Fringe of Leaves*, then, is concerned with human inter-relationship in the same way as are other works by White. Ellen, on her rescue, is most agitated by the fear that she might not be able to gain for Jack Chance the convict, the pardon she has promised. Her official reception by the Governor in Sydney now seems an "ultimate in trials", but one she must undergo:

'I must try,' she uttered, low and dry. 'Yes, you are right. If only on account of my petition. I must not forget I am responsible to someone – to all those who have been rejected.'

A Fringe of Leaves, p.351

Although she moves towards understanding and forgiveness of herself and others, the great and the petty betrayers, she finds herself thinking 'As though the rescue ever takes place!' (p.378) This novel is more gentle than others by White, there is a sense of reconciliation, some peace and some hope within modest expectations. Finally, dressed in a becoming gown of garnet silk which has been given to her, Ellen Roxburgh meets the widower Mr Jevons, and the last scene suggests that she will find another relationship to fulfil her womanhood. In this she is compared with the sometimes ridiculous, sometimes noble Miss Scrimshaw who showed a passing interest in Mr Jevons and then "renounced" him to Ellen:

'Oh, my dear!' At pains to absolve her friend, and to administer extreme unction to any resigned passion of her own, Miss Scrimshaw laughed. 'To be candid, Mrs Roxburgh, I could not bring myself to share my bed. I do so love stretching out in comfort.'

A Fringe of Leaves, p.401

But there are more persuasive reasons for Miss Scrimshaw's independence or preferred isolation. She sees herself, or aspires to be, an eagle in spirit:

'To soar!' Miss Scrimshaw wheezed. 'To reach the heights! To breathe! Perch on the crags and look down on everything that lies beneath one! Elevated, and at last free!'

Mrs Roxburgh felt dazed by the sudden rush of rhetoric. Once launched, Miss Scrimshaw was prepared to reveal still more. 'Have you never noticed that I am a woman only in my form, not in the essential part of me?' Somewhat to her own surprise, Mrs Roxburgh remained ineluctably earthbound. 'I was slashed and gashed too often,' she tried to explain. 'Oh no, the crags are not for me!' She might have been left at a loss had not the words of her humbler friend Mrs Oakes found their way into her mouth. 'A woman as I see, is more like moss or lichen that takes to some tree or rock as she takes to her husband.'

A Fringe of Leaves, p.402

The author perhaps wisely prevents the women debating further these sentiments which are rather provocative in the present climate of female readership, and Mr Jevons bears down to escort them to tea. The last sentence in the novel shows Miss Scrimshaw tidying up the fragments of a teacup broken by Mr Jevons who has tripped over a child, or chair-leg, or carpet on his way to serve Ellen her tea.

. . . . for however much crypto-eagles aspire to soar, and do in fact, through thoughtscape and dream, their human nature cannot but grasp at any circumstantial straw which may indicate an ordered universe.

A Fringe of Leaves, p.405

Ellen Roxburgh is not of the Theodora Goodman or Miss Hare clan, and Miss Scrimshaw's role is more in the nature of a chorus to Ellen's drama. It is Ellen's normality that gives strength to her spiritual sensitivity, and endows her with abnormal courage.

Christina Stead's Eleanor Herbert constantly asserts her own ordinariness. She tells her friends Marky and Ivo who live together unmarried in Paris:

"But I like the suburbs, I want my home and children and that's all." Eleanor said, "and I want my own career, in writing. I don't think I should like America."

and she continues in a speech that well represents the strength, the timidity and the bitchiness of which Eleanor, thirty and unmarried, is occasionally capable:

"Ah, but, darlings, you're right too, it's lovely to be wanted again. It seems wicked wishing to want to be safe and married; and yet it's the fate of women, isn't it? If you're sure, really sure, like you and Ivo, it doesn't matter dispensing with the little matter of legal permission! But I'm romantic, my precious, I want everything, the white wedding, the friends, the table silver, the new Jacobean; I even want modern walls. Tell me," she said, sitting up, "of course you don't regret the step you've taken, for, of course, law doesn't mean much to you, does it? But don't you feel rubbed the wrong way, when you are left out. That's it. But then you have love, of course, real love," she crooned, "that's so different. Oh, no, I don't think I could strike that sort of bargain. I want the real thing, signed, sealed and delivered, I'm old fashioned. . . ."

Christina Stead, *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)*, p.71

Eleanor's strength lies in her noisy assertion of her identity, which in fact she never seems fully to know, and in her courage in accepting the painful situations in which her misguided energies land her. She gets her suburban marriage to the mean-spirited Heinrich Charles and works at it vigorously only to find that she is left with a totally incomprehensible situation when

Henry deserts her and their two children. One does not blame Henry, as he prefers to be called. The rest of her life is a struggle to support herself and the children by hack editing, reading for publishers and acting as a writers' agent. Her literary talent is bounded by her practice of re-writing stories taken from women's journals and by editorial principles suggested by the following remarks:

She said of him (a novelist whose work she had been reading) in her report to Orchard's, a large fiction firm: 'This novel is without beginning or end and with splotches of Walter Scott that must certainly come out; or at least, we must clean up the heavy old canvas; and yet he has a kind of intuition of genius and we must put our foot down firmly there, or it will ruin his talent'

Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife), p.291

And to the elderly Geoffrey Quaideson, partner in a publishing firm:

"Supposing a manuscript of the very highest literary value was left, an acquisition to the literature of the nation and this manuscript was marred by coarse sexual digressions or it advocated anarchism or communism, wouldn't we be perfectly right in editing out the excrescences?" Eleanor said. "I would do it without hesitation out of respect and reverence for the author's wrong-headed genius."

Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife), p.299

By this time the reader knows that Eleanor's own wrong-headed genius is deployed in fighting the insecurity created by her constant suppression of her drive towards sensuality and spiritual freedom. She displays a genius too for finding high-sounding reasons for her actions, since she does not know and could not admit if she did know the real reasons for many of her actions and attitudes. Thus the "respect and reverence for the author's wrong-headed genius" is her explanation of her terrified reaction to admitting anything sexually abnormal or politically nonconformist.

Her friend Cope Pigsney had early in his career written a book with a radical political thesis and she frequently uses this to threaten his security during the repressive years of the nineteen fifties.

Eleanor went on teasing him: she hated this book for a reason obscure to her. She secretly felt and even hoped that in the end it would even ruin him. Whenever she spoke of Cope she would say, "But of course he made one bad mistake: that was when he wrote *Seeds of Time*. It's completely ruined by having a lot of political ideas pushed into it and it's bad as a book"

Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife), p.244

Cope Pigsney, "the Guinea Pig" of the fourth part of the novel, remains her friend and adviser and helps her to wring a number of guineas from the tight-fisted world of publishers. His marriage also gives rise to many of her erotic fantasies.

She would, late at night, tear open some coarse, naive erotic book that she kept hidden away, or recall some savagely suggestive phrase in one of the manuscripts — perhaps even a phrase she had at first quite misunderstood — and sit for hours in her armchair with the electric fire at her feet, or lie on her bed crudely, fiercely, thinking, picturing, but what came to mind was not anything that had happened to herself long ago. She had forgotten all that.

Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife), p.242

If either novelist is concerned with indicating the "origins" of their heroines' characters, Patrick White's Ellen has been shaped by her closeness to the soil and to the atavistic mysteries of life and passion associated with the legends of Cornwall. Tintagel exercised a hold over her imagination, although she never visited it:

It was Ellen Gluyas's hope that she might eventually be sent a god. Out of Ireland, according to legend. Promised in marriage to a king, she took her escort as a lover, and the two died of love. Pa confirmed that they had sailed into Tintagel. She had never been as far as Tintagel, but hoped one day to see it. Her mind's eye watched the ship's prow entering the narrow cove, in a moment of watching sunlight, through a fuzz of hectic summer green.

A Fringe of Leaves, p.50-51

The coming to beach that does bring her apocalypse, the convict escort whom she accepts as lover and who represents all the men she has known, and her understanding that there is god perhaps but not "a god", is described thus as the boats from the wreck reach the first landfall:

The surf by contrast was punishing the reef with such animal ferocity it did not seem as though any respite could be expected, when on rounding a coral neck, the pinnacle and its insufficient relative the long-boat were vouchsafed the peace and protection of an elliptical recess rather than a bay, its curves as white as kaolin.

A Fringe of Leaves, p.205

Such nervous expectation is aroused in a reader of Patrick White's novel, that some long-ago Geography lesson reminds that kaolin is a product of Devon and Cornwall. Christina Stead's art does not function like this. Without the slightest direction towards symbolism or layered meaning the reader feels himself in the middle of a reality that only gradually forms some kind of pattern.

Eleanor Brent has a Masters degree from an English university but her character has been shaped by the genteel middle-class ignorance of her mother, one of "the Herberts". Eleanor's preferred reading seems to be women's magazines, and she looks to them for all social and personal wisdom. Her father, a gentle socialist, writes a novel which she edits and

which achieves some considerable success. It is called *Brief Candle* and concerns a dying woman, "a blonde of a coppery-rose complexion, kind and inveigling — to Eleanor a detestable creature, capricious, mean, a bag of tricks." The author adds, "The story was tender, forgiving, like a man writing about his daughter." (pp.168–169) The woman, Sabrina, retreats to a village to die and enslaves all the men so that all the women fear and hate her. It seems that Lindsay Brent perceives the dormant sensuality, the Circe quality in his daughter that middle-class social conditioning has reduced to warm, oily, affectation. The two complementary parts of Ellen Gluyas's character, represented by the alternation of her Gluyas/Roxburgh mode of speaking, reinforce each other. Eleanor Brent, however, puts aside her married name and her father's name, and reverts to her mother's name, Herbert. Eleanor's character is tragically self-divided.

What gives Eleanor Herbert's life something of an heroic dimension in spite of her utter lack of self-knowledge, her constant denial of intelligence, her timidity, her pettiness, is the strong instinct that prevents her succumbing. The weakness that will allow her no real fulfilment also prevents her doing any real harm.

Eleanor's struggle is for survival, no more nor less; and where Ellen Roxburgh survives by acquiescence and the kind of activity that her dominant environments, whether her mother-in-law's Gloucestershire mansion or the coast of south-east Queensland, dictate, Eleanor Herbert struggles for survival in the scarcely less barbaric environment of Grub Street and the seedy intellectualism that fringes Hampstead Heath. (Harold Pinter's play *No Man's Land* provides an interesting comparison.) Eleanor's great strength could have been her rich female sensuality, but she actively denies this except in its more sickly, stereotyped form of middle-class seductiveness. All that remains is her propensity for hard work and a certain innate kindness which functions freely when not circumscribed by her fear.

At the end of the novel Eleanor experiences the only moment that approaches the kind of epiphany known to many of Patrick White's characters. Dr Linda Mack, an austere figure a little older than Eleanor and her friends, appears in the novel as a kind of moral reference, one which Eleanor is as likely to deceive as to accept as mentor. Well over fifty, Eleanor conceives a passion for her daughter's lover, a man of thirty-four, and for some days lives in a state of sensual but naive exaltation. Suddenly wearied, she seeks out Dr Mack, to find that the doctor has gone away to northern India. "She intended to walk into Ladakh in Kashmir and beyond into Tibet; she may stay there," Eleanor is told. "She has special clothing; it would not be easy to tell whether she is man or woman." (p.307) Eleanor feels lost, "She felt she had no one to turn to," and on returning home she has a kind of brainstorm. "It was just as if someone lifted the top of her head for a moment and let air in so that part of her brain blew cold." Her daughter finds her asleep on a couch.

I've been very, very cold, just as if I'd fallen into a c-c-crevasse in Tibet." She laughed a little. Deborah looked after her. She recovered, though she felt unwieldy, she who had

been so limber. But she had her work to do and it was as if somehow she had made a wise decision: she was going to take things easier. A life full of work — good, good, she had accepted life. She could rest. She said to Deborah. "I kept to the rules, but the rules didn't keep me. But I hewed to the line; I cultivated my garden. So let us work, my pet. Soon I will have my pension and then I am going to write the story of my life; then I will really get down to it; and it will open some eyes."

(p.308)

And so the novel ends. The reader may place his own interpretation on Eleanor's words. All he knows is that she will continue to survive in the same blind, brave, stupid way. As complementary novels, *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)* and *A Fringe of Leaves* are very moving studies of human nature. Patrick White's work suggests how it could be, but Christina Stead tells how it more often is.

Christina Stead and Patrick White have both struggled with their unique gifts and their reluctant readers. Their present success recalls Wordsworth's observation in 1815:

. . . . every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed

Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1815

Their styles, their attitudes are vastly different, and their idiosyncrasies although equally strong, are also different, but in these novels both writers have modified their idiosyncrasies and are meeting their more reluctant readers at least half way. If Patrick White's prose style provoked the reader by bewildering him thirty years ago, it has now ceased to provoke him with surprises, though it can even now rebuke. Christina Stead's purple patches of luxuriant prose, which endeared her to some readers and made her unreadable to others, are pruned to a merest sprig of flourish. The collections of bizarre and exotic detail which occur in other of her novels are found here only in the briefest mention of Geoffrey Quaide-son's collection of sadistic erotica.

Both artists have asserted their genius more convincingly than ever before in showing that the power of their work depends not at all on anything that disturbs the conventional reader. On this account these novels are all the more disturbing.

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