

## YOUTH

Youth is very much man,  
being in youth what age is;  
incredible of ear, harsh hearted,  
seeing freedom in cages.

The boy will make obedience  
to the numerous god-heads,  
and accept the disposition  
only that the rod bleeds.

Virgins appear not to have,  
dispense with the vaginal;  
achieving pleasure in pages,  
orgasm at the urinal.

Young is made to continuance,  
dutied to preserving flood,  
but breaks the wet creation,  
makes circulation wood.

BRUCE JAMES

**STERILE CRITICS AND FECUND ARTISTS : OLD THEMES BROUGHT UP TO DATE. THE VIVISECTOR, by Patrick White. Jonathan Cape, 1970. \$4.70.**

*It is certainly the right of every artist to carve out his own world and to interpret and re-interpret his creation until he or his audience drop from exhaustion. There are many thousands of ways of saying the same thing, and inevitably anything worth saying will be expressed by someone in each one of these thousands of ways. In The Vivisector Patrick White expounds, exposes and dramatizes the themes which have formed the basis of all his prose - novels, short stories and plays. These themes, as every reader knows, are simple, but capable of being experienced or understood at whatever height or depth of awareness the reader desires. In the first place, White tries to show that only the meek, the innocent, (but not the ignorant), and the truly pure of heart can ever achieve a measure of contentment. A second basic theme, and one which it is easier to illustrate in fiction, since oddly enough these characters are more common in real life, is that the ecstasy of gods or of devils is the reverse side of human spiritual agony, and that the man who would realize the divinity within his human frame, the God within him, must undergo the most fearful physical and spiritual hunger and suffering. Such people, says White's corollary, will inevitably be thought insane by most of the*

world. A third theme, which follows the second, is that the world is inhabited by the living and the dead: on the whole, the dead are in charge, they comprise the establishment, they frame the laws of social conduct, they are the academics, and they go yakkity-yak all the time. Very often the dead are evil, more often they are merely embittered, unhappy, or married to a husband whom they are slowly suffocating in a variety of horrible ways condoned by suburbia, the law and the church. The living may not be identical with those in search of the God within, but at least they recognize the Searchers when they meet them in White's novels. The living are the sensitive people, with some faults and weaknesses, and usually they do not say very much. White singles out the rejects of society, and shows that really they are more vital than those around whom society appears to revolve. The stones that the builders of suburbia rejected have become the corner-stones of White's gothic temple of words.

The subsuming theme is the search for love. The dead in White's novels seem to belong to one of two extremes, for either they are incapable of warmth and giving, and are quite dessicated; or else they grab, gobble and devour those around them. The living are subtle in their love. Love comes to rest gently on their opened hands, and their fingers never clutch around it. Sometimes they will eschew human contact, although they may be sought after by others, and they find in their isolation, perilously and fleetingly, the contact that the mystic has with love.

Not surprisingly, the final revelation that White offers about love is that such things as a gob of spittle, or the kitchen table, or a festering sore, or an old smelly goat, or a gobbet of horse-flesh fed to cats, or the stench from the back-yard dunny, or a painting of chairs, are in fact LOVE — if only, as the Landlord says in *The Ham Funeral*, you can get to know it. God is also Love; and having presented in *A Cheery Soul Miss Docker's* belated realization that "dog" is an anagram of God, White does the same thing in *The Vivisector*, when the artist discovers that the colour "indigo" contains the anagram of God-In or In God. Perhaps, after all, only fools sneer at the profound comments of artists and children, but White's profundities of a mystical nature are usually more specious than moving. It is the dramatic presentation of his keen observations of outward conduct and motivation that finally holds our attention.

White has some penetrating and useful ideas about human relationships, and about the relationships that human beings have with objects, and if there appear to be whole areas of possible human relationships that he cannot see, or prefers to ignore, it is his business as an artist to ignore them.

*The Vivisector* about whom White writes is God, and also one of His human incarnations, the Artist. Life is also a vivisector and Life uses both the living and the dead indiscriminately as the knife and the victim. This complex of ideas in the novel is an interesting knot for the research student to unravel, but the basic notion of the artist as Vivisector is a commonly accepted notion.

It will be recalled that in *Man and Superman* Shaw summarizes this idea in a speech he gives to John Tanner :

Tanner . . . But you, Tavy, are an artist: that is, you have a purpose as absorbing and as unscrupulous as a woman's purpose.  
Octavius Not unscrupulous.

*Tanner* Quite unscrupulous. The true artist will let his wife starve, his children go barefoot, his mother drudge for his living at seventy, sooner than work at anything but his art. To women he is half vivisector, half vampire. He gets into intimate relations with them to study them, to strip the mask of convention from them, to surprise their inmost secrets, knowing that they have the power to rouse his deepest creative energies, to rescue him from his cold reason, to make him see visions and dream dreams, to inspire him as he calls it. He persuades women that they may do this for their own purpose whilst he really means them to do it for his. He steals the mother's milk and blackens it to make printer's ink to scoff at her and glorify ideal women with. He pretends to spare her the pangs of child-bearing so that he may have for himself the tenderness and fostering that belong of right to her children. Since marriage began, the great artist has been known as a bad husband. But he is worse: he is a child-robber, a blood-sucker, a hypocrite and a cheat. Perish the race and wither a thousand women if only the sacrifice of them enable him to act Hamlet better, to paint a finer picture, to write a deeper poem, a greater play, a profounder philosophy. For mark you, Tavy, the artist's work is to show us ourselves as we really are. Our minds are nothing but this knowledge of ourselves; and he who adds a jot to such knowledge creates new minds as surely as any woman creates new men. In the rage of that creation he is as ruthless as the woman, as dangerous to her as she to him, and as horribly fascinating. Of all human struggle there is none so treacherous and remorseless as the struggle between the artist man and the mother woman . . . .

*Tanner's thesis is embodied in much of White's work, and certainly appears to be the attitude of his artist, Hurtle Duffield. The real problem for anyone reading The Vivisector for simple enjoyment, and not in line of duty, so to speak, is that in this latest novel White, for the first time, has not committed himself to his characters. It is not a commendable authorial detachment that is noted here, for White is not detached. The reader feels that the personality of the novelist is very much involved with what is being written. What is missing is the novelist's alliance either with his readers or with his characters, nor does he seem to want to mediate between them.*

*Is the masturbating grocer an object of pity, contempt, or admiration, or is he an object of all three, or is he merely an object dredged by White from his fertile imagination? Is Hurtle Duffield, with his Doppelgänger, his hunchbacked adopted sister, really a living creation of whom we are aware, or is he just an elaborate hoax of White's? Are his paintings great or bad, and does it matter? What does matter, however, is that White appears to be trying to show that dedication to a vision is painful but comforting, that the artist is always isolated but never alone, and that in the end he succumbs to heart attack and strokes like other men, but also that his death is unlike the death of other men. On very rare occasions only, can the artist White creates be taken quite seriously. One such occasion is during the conversation on the ferry with Mothersole, the printer. Those reading the novel in line of duty will note the significance.*

*The novel is interesting to read, and to some extent, that is all one should really expect from any novel. There is, however, a disturbing element in the experience of reading The Vivisector. What makes the book interesting are the proliferation of characters, especially those that are more or less caricatured, and a dexterity of phrase that White employs most successfully in passages of satire. That the caricatures and the objects of satire have all appeared in earlier work by White is irrelevant to one's enjoyment. Nevertheless, the reader feels now for the first time in reading anything by*

White, that not only are there no new ideas in this novel, but that White has not bothered to find a new way of saying the old ones. Alf Dubbo, the aboriginal artist in *Riders in the Chariot*, was an exciting creation of whom one would have liked to have heard more, and it is with a pleasant expectation that one begins *The Vivisector*. As soon as Hurtle Duffield is sold to the Courtenays, however, the life drains out of the child, and while we know that the growing youth both is and is not the self-centred egotist that an artist always is and is not, White does not succeed in displaying this paradoxical trait of the artist, but merely has his other characters talk about it.

Symbolism appears to have been thrown in for the benefit of lectures in Australian literature - the European visits, the rocks amongst which Duffield begins his career as a painter, the hut and the wooden table that he makes with his own hands, the death of the prostitute, the Aristotle Onassis character and his wife Hero, the little aboriginal girl who just manages to avoid being drowned with the cats, and the fact that the artist finally settles into a derelict suburban house invaded by vegetation in a street called Flint. Perhaps White did not throw in symbols as one throws dried fruit into a cake, perhaps these components emerged slowly and organically as part of the vision of an artist struggling to realize himself on the European-tinged littoral of Australian culture. But the vision seems more contrived than coherent.

What is most annoying about this sense of staleness, is the feeling that White has refurbished his old themes with a topical touch of scatology, homosexuality, *Portnoy* and *Lolita*. And while it is true that the artist draws breath from his immediate environment, polluted though it may be, it is difficult to feel that White himself has whistled a new tune this time.

In *Voss* the spirit-child of Voss and Laura, in reality the illegitimate daughter of the servant Rose, stays demurely as a tactful symbol in the background. In *The Vivisector*, Kathy Volkov, the plait-chewing brilliant young pianist, the spirit-child of Hurtle and his adopted sister Rhoda, is in reality the possibly illegitimate daughter of a Russian opal-gouger and a granite Scotswoman, "whose virtue was probably her vice". Kathy displays a *Lolita* appetite for her spiritual father, thus introducing a new variety of incest, and re-invigorating the artist with new springs of creative energy. Shaw's theme is depicted quite clearly, with the artist-father recreating himself with the maximum security to his own personality. Sometimes the latter part of the novel becomes more farce than fiction. Hurtle Duffield is likeable, which alone says much for White's unquestioned skill as a writer: but Duffield and his world are paper-thin compared with the character of Joyce Cary's artist, Gulley Jimson, and the world Gulley inhabits.

The satire on Sydney upper-class culture maintained throughout the novel, and the art gallery scenes, are the most convincing artistic parts of the book. It is almost to be hoped that White will turn all his talent to satire, like his friend Barry Humphries, so that, relieved of the burden of feeling that he should be taken solemnly, the reader will relax, and take him seriously.

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