South Africa is burning awake
screaming in the obscene necklace
writhing and trying not to writhe
and the grave political sentences
char and the stench rams us
and the deaths of Chernobyl reach out
in a claim bad for a century.
Any dust serves the squall
of the unlearning human spirit.
My private watcher glares
between the window and the corner
as I slog through stench, grief, voices
to wake, to pacify. The task.

NOEL MACAINSH

PATRICK WHITE AND THE AESTHETICS OF DEATH

The novels of Patrick White typically include descriptions of dying. Both minor characters and major characters die, usually with the distinction that the deaths of minor characters are witnessed solely from without, whereas with major characters some account of subjectivity is also given; we are offered glimpses of what it is like to die. In *The Vivisector*[1] (1970), the major death occurs at the end of the book; in *The Twyborn Affair*[2] (1979), the major death occurs almost at the end, with barely two pages of subsequent narrative; but more often the account of death is succeeded by appreciable description of life without the deceased. Typically, life goes on well enough, either in complete ignorance of, or disinterest in the deceased, or else with an arbitrary, self-interested distortion of the character of the deceased; at least differing perspectives on the life are presented, so that problems of identity are suggested, together with a sense of a life, lonely, alienated, unperceived in its essence, and now beyond all reach of social reconciliation and understanding. Only the reader, it seems, as distinct from a crass society, has the possibility of understanding and loving such a tragic existence.

The Aunt's Story[3] (1948), although it does not describe the physical death of a major character, describes what might be called a "social death," if this term can be used for psychotic separation from society.

But some degree of "social death" is present in most if not all of the main characters of the novels, not in the sense of psychosis but of appreciable diminishment of social integration. The novels make it clear, that before physical death intervenes, the dying process can be present already in separations, whether from a loved person, a familiar milieu, or hopes of fulfilment; these separations are associated typically with inner distraction and passivity.

Although the fact of death may be thought of as essentially the same fact, wherever and whenever it occurs, the most elementary description of this fact is an act of socialisation and must involve a particular viewpoint. In generalising over these viewpoints, we note of course the category of survival beyond death, as opposed to that of death as the start of nothing. Ideas of survival vary from more or less grandiose conceptions of a "heavenly" life to that of a quasi-empty shadow existence, as in say the Greek mythology of Hades. The idea of death as survival is essentially that of a change of form of existence; one life is exchanged for another; in which case death may well be robbed of its terror, even welcomed as the door to a "higher" world. From the viewpoint of dramatic effect, of aesthetic intensity, the gradient from one life to another is not as steep as that between existence and its complete negation; that is the death of someone who "really" dies is more shattering than that of someone who merely "passes on" to a better world. Indeed, the essential attraction of Swedenborgian or spiritualist accounts of living arrangements in the "next world" is that they offer a counter to the shocking thought of personal extinction.

Let us turn to death in the novels. Hurtle Duffield, the central figure in *The Vivisector* has a "rehearsal" for his death when he falls on the pavement, with a heart-attack. He has just come from the butcher's, where ironically the chopping block "was his one comfort." (p. 546) Like Elizabeth Hunter, just before her death, in *The Eye of the Storm*[4] (1973), he is feeling "so fit." Women look at him and make him think about "a fuck." He turns into Shitter's Lane, muses further, then suddenly collapses. While a sheep's heart rolls out of his bag onto the pavement, he sees "the extra indigo sky." (p. 549) He then becomes unconscious, for two days. Some seventy pages later, at his death, he remembers lying on the pavement and how his vision of "vertiginous blue" was what he had been reaching towards all his life: "on the pavement he was dazzled not so much by a colour as a longstanding secret relationship." (p. 616) Finally, Hurtle collapses while reaching for this colour; he crashes to the floor of his studio and dies. The final, imputed comment is, "Too tired too end-less obvi indi-ggoddd." These words, like much in White, are suggestive but equivocal. They may be read in the sense that Duffield, "too tired," gives up the endless quest

for the art-god. They may also be read in the sense of it being obvious to him that the "secret relationship" implied in the colour is with a god that has stood behind his painting from the beginning, namely Death. This view is suggested by Hurtle's beginnings as an artist. On his first day of school, he has a fear that "death . . . was being saved up for you" and discovers that drawing gives relief from this fear. (p. 39) He also realises at this early age that "Mothers and fathers, whoever they were, really didn't matter: it was between you and Death or something." (p. 55) We are told that Hurtle was "afraid of some shapelessness"; his art is a life-long attempt to give shape to his fear. (p. 39) This attitude may justify us in interpreting these last words also in the sense that, with his tiredness, he has become too "end-less" to strive for particular ends, for the particular determinations of "shaping," and is now given over to the same "shapelessness" he feared as a child, which is obviously to him the god of the "vertiginous blue," of the indigo he has been reaching for all his life, namely the great Vivisector, or Death. There are suggestions here of the German romantic doctrine of blue, the colour of infinity and longing. We could say that Hurtle Duffield has "gone into the blue." A still further aspect on these last words is provided by the author's earlier comment when Hurtle, near his end, wishes for endlessness without memory: "If he could have chosen, if, rather, he had developed the habit of prayer, he would have prayed to shed his needled flesh, and for his psychopomp to guide him, across the river, into an endlessness of pure being from which memory could not look back." (p. 603) Hurtle recognises the "dishonesty" of this wish, as treason to his "memories of the flesh." The concept of "pure being" is suggestively interpreted, in turn, through the figure of Austin Roxburgh, in *A Fringe of Leaves*[5] (1976), himself soon to die. Shipwrecked on a desolate promontory, he has a "moment when self-esteem is confronted with what may be pure being — or nothingness." (p. 188) This equating of pure being with nothingness, suggests that Hurtle is longing for death.

Another dying character who, like Hurtle Duffield, also experiences lying on a pavement is Eddie Twyborn, in *The Twyborn Affair*. The last words here are: "'Fetch me a bandaid, Ada,'" he croaked over his shoulder, while flowing onward, on to wherever the crimson current might carry him." (p. 377) Here, there is the notion of Eddie lying on the pavement after a fatal bomb explosion but nevertheless "flowing onward." When Elizabeth Hunter dies, in *The Eye of the Storm*, her last words, given in the first-person, are: "Till I am no longer filling the void with mock substance: myself is this endlessness." (p. 532) With Mordecai Himmelfarb, in *Riders in the Chariot*[6] (1961), we read of his dying that, "His own soul was carrying him forward. The mountains of darkness must be crossed" and that he was on "the plain he was about to

leave." (pp. 437-8) It might be noted that his name, signifying "heaven-colour" or "sky-colour," is again a reference to the ubiquitous blue in White's novels. We might recall that Himmelfarb's crucifixion, leading to his physical death, takes place on an "old jacaranda" which is visualised by the attendant Alf Dubbo as "the divine tree in its intensity of blue, wrapped in shawls of it, standing in pools of it." (p. 409) The chief agent of Himmelfarb's crucifixion is a man named "Blue." In the same novel, Alf Dubbo's death has accompanying imagery of "light pouring into his room."

If we can generalise over these and other instances of dying in the novels, we can say that while their features of flowing, of endlessness, certainly suggest no specific form of survival, no individuated further existence, neither do they quite deny the notion of continuance. Here, there is a logical consideration that bears on the question of aesthetic intensity. An abrupt, complete end to life is certainly a disjunction of the highest order, capable of producing a strong effect on the reader. Nevertheless, the basic idea of death as transition into nothingness implies *a priori* that the fear of death is pointless, has no justification. The dying person is alive until nothingness enters; with this entry, all possibility of suffering, of pain over loss, separation and catastrophe, all regret over an unfulfilled life, vanish. For the reader, there is literally nothing to identify with. Rather, the idea of death as catastrophe for the dying requires the paradox of a consciousness witnessing its own loss. This consciousness must extend endlessly, or at least the novel must suggest the possibility of this mysterious condition of endless experience of non-existence to the reader, since it is really the reader who is being appealed to for a living response, for his own fear of death. In this case, it is not enough to report the death objectively, like an accident, for the appeal to the reader is intensified by inducing in him a sense of identification with the lonely subjectivity of dying, this being achieved by first-person reporting or by imputed interior monologue and vision.

Furthermore, while death is commonly regarded as a threshold, with White at times it has more the suggested character of a mask. The thought that the face of a being might be only a mask unsettles our daily trust in the nature of things, our feeling of being safe in a familiar world. The mask stimulates speculation, a sense of mystery, while disclosing nothing; it is a strong but diffuse provocation. The scene in *The Eye of the Storm*, when Dr Gidley comes to certify the death of Elizabeth Hunter, demonstrates this provocation. Sister Manhood tells Gidley that "She [Mrs Hunter] died quietly — behind my back," to which Gidley replies, "I don't expect she'll regret it." This ambiguous note is continued when the nurse explains how Mrs Hunter, in her "best form," went to relieve herself on her commode and was later found to be dead

when the nurse came to take her off. Gidley comments that Mrs Hunter was "Caught napping for the first time in her life!" (p. 545) The body of Mrs Hunter on the bed is "masked" in various ways: "The damp pledgets prevented you seeing what was underneath, whether human eyelids, or slits cut out of a painted mask. The green shadows on the cheeks had been emphasized . . . A thick black line surrounding the lips had melted and overflowed into the cracked crimson, making the mouth look like a stitched seam, and increasing the mask effect." (p. 545) The body is then referred to in the course of Gidley's examination as "the object on the bed." Gidley concludes that, "Elizabeth Hunter's bought it all right." Against this finality, the nurse protests: "I have to wash my patient, Doctor." Sister Manhood then washes the body, leaning over to protect "Her" [the dead Mrs Hunter] and we read: "The mask did seem to be taking on the expression of original purity, and in assuming, to assure." Gidley, by this time, is rubbing himself against the nurse's buttocks. She rebukes him, saying " . . . if you've forgotten your wife, I haven't forgotten my patient, I'd like to treat her respectfully." Gidley counters with: "All the right sentiments! Like in the textbook. But don't you know a textbook is never for real?" (p. 547) The essence of this exchange is that hints of possible survival are opposed and then presented again. The matter remains ambiguous. This effect is to be found elsewhere also, say on the occasion of Voss' death or that of Himmelfarb.

Along with this ambiguous transition into death, we find a suddenness in its onset. The fatal intervention occurs swiftly, arbitrarily. Although it is true, in a sense, that Elizabeth Hunter is dying throughout *The Eye of the Storm* and that the reader, under the influence of more or less subtle literary devices, senses well in advance her eventual demise, she is nevertheless, in her own subjective presentation, taken from life suddenly. She is unexpectedly struck on her commode. Voss, likewise, is plainly nearing his end as his expedition fails, but the onset of death is sudden and, from his point of view, totally unexpected, when his head is hacked by the black boy he had loved. Hurtle Duffield crashes suddenly, while painting. Eddie Twyborn dies suddenly from a bomb-blast. And so on. As the young schoolboy, Hurtle Duffield, says when drawing his first picture of Death as an elephant, "It can trample its keeper without any warning, and rip with its tusks." (p. 41)

The horror of death can of course be presented in terms of a full consciousness faced with imminent total extinction. Such a situation typically engenders an intense reflex, a physical response of warding, attacking, or of curling, whimpering, pleading; it is a staple ingredient of adventure stories, the decisive moment and even high-point of the plot, usually occurring near the end of the work. There is a brief hint of this

type of response in *A Fringe of Leaves* when shipwrecked sailors are attacked by natives. Philosophically, these moments have been called limit-situations, and are described in terms of heightened life, of authenticity, of being intensely here-and-now; they are even sought after by intrepid souls as the greatest stimulants to life, while "dicing with death." These are not the kinds of moments to be found with White's chief characters, nor as a rule even with minor characters. The latter, even in a generally dangerous situation, as with Captain Purdew among natives, in *A Fringe of Leaves*, are eliminated suddenly, without time for full living response to imminent death. Captain Purdew, for instance, is at one moment shouting to his men not to antagonise the natives: " . . . the next instant a spear was twangling in his ribs. It went in as though he were scarcely a man, or if he were, nobody they had ever known. As he toppled over he conspired with fate by driving the spear deeper in." (pp. 216-7) In contrast to the lifewards kind of reflex mentioned above, here there is the seemingly absurd suggestion of a deathwards conspiring. At the same time, there is a suggestion of estrangement from humankind as the Captain topples over into willing agreement with fate.

Elsewhere, the response to imminent threat of death is conditioned by prior experience of what, in psychiatric terminology, has been called "life-insult," such as loss of partners, of home, of career, of normal expectations. In these cases in the novels, death is indicated as already immanent in life; it is present in partings, losses. When Mrs Roxburgh, the chief character in *A Fringe of Leaves*, senses the beginning of her martyrdom among savages, we read that, "Mrs Roxburgh barely flinched, not because sustained by strength of will, but because the spirit had gone out of her. She was perhaps fortunate, in that a passive object can endure more than a human being." (p. 220) By this time, she has lost her husband, a would-be lover, and an early, familiar way of life. Likewise, Himmelfarb, in *Riders in the Chariot*, can walk through a town under aerial bombardment and not be afraid because he is already inwardly "dead" from the loss of his wife; "he had in fact reached a state of practical disembodiment . . . " (p. 157); he has become a "beetle of faith" (p. 163), is numbed, distracted by inner vision. In the same novel, the response of the Jews headed for the gas ovens is also essentially passive; they have already received grievous life-insults. We read of them that "more fortunate individuals enjoyed at least the protection of their own vision . . . " (p. 175) This ironical reduction of vision to a mere analgesic before destruction is reflected more extensively in Himmelfarb's own passivity leading to his crucifixion and the burning of his house. Although Himmelfarb escapes the gas ovens, this active response to imminent death is not of his doing, but arises from obscure inmates

who have taken the initiative of burning the camp and killing its staff. The general point emerges that direct response to physical death in the novels sets in essentially after death has struck; the response occurs not on "this side" but on the "other side" of a fatal intervention; a knife-thrust, a heart-attack, a bomb plunges the main character not into immediate extinction but into a swiftly-advancing dying process. Thus the elements of the death situation are: a suddenness and a brief report of subjective experience beyond the fatal intervention, a report which hints more at a "beginning of death," an ambiguous self-aware endlessness, than at an end of life. The rapidity of the dying process, as well as the brevity of report, appear to justify elimination of any "review of life," such as is said to occur with dying persons. Imagery allusive of the past may occur on dying and in the slow delirious run-down to death, as with Voss and with Himmelfarb, who is perhaps the most cultivatedly reflective of White's characters, but this is by no means a life review. No opportunity is presented for a rationalisation of the life. Even if this were not the case, the general character of the novels suggests that any such rationalisation would become relativised in the manner of say the well-to-do citizens' rationalisation of the life of Voss, as yet another instance of self-interested distortion of the facts.

Instead, these delirious visions are distorted recastings of the past or imaginary actualisations of hopes, as with Voss, riding with Laura Trevelyan as "man and wife," or Himmelfarb dozing, seeing his Bride, or watching the thousands waiting for him "along the banks of an interminable river." (p. 437) These visions, as with dreams and insanity, are characterised by distortions of memory; they are frequently presented by White in a different language from normal, in a quasi-poetic prose. Relative to the character's life, they represent surrealistic "creative" moments. *The Aunt's Story*, in which the central character, Theodora Goodman, finds that "only chairs and tables are sane" (p. 167), is a special case, in which illusion and reality compete with each other clearly in the foreground of the work, and the illusory, creative imagery is very much part of the texture of the novel. But the principle of this conflict is present in the other novels also and finds expression in surreal language. Holstius' words to Theodora Goodman, about being frightened at figures in mirrors, and erroneously assuming "that permanence is a property of pyramids" (p. 286), are echoed in the inner world of the manipulative old tyrant, Elizabeth Hunter, who, dying in a house which is "overloaded" with mirrors (*The Eye of the Storm*, p. 168), has a repressed longing for identity and security which culminates at times in visions of "blue pyramidal waves" and birds, presented in unpunctuated poetic prose: " . . . wind stirring the balconies of clouds as blows between the ribs it would explain the howling of what must be the

soul . . . precious water as it filters through the cracks the cavities of the body blue pyramidal waves with swans waiting by appointment . . . " (p. 532) This vision is presented as occurring at her own death. Earlier, her response to the news that her husband is dying is presented in similar language: "As light is unlikely probably as painful as a shark's egg the old not body rather the flimsy soul is whirled around sometimes spat out anus-upward (souls have an anus they are never allowed to forget it) never separated from the brown the sometimes tinted spawn of snapshots the withered navel string . . . " (p. 188) Quite apart from whatever meaning the reader may read into or out of passages of this kind, they function in the novels as suggestive of transcendence. With the delirious Himmelfarb, for instance, these visions take place when he is dozing, when he is "removed from the compartment of his body into a freedom of time and space . . . " (*Riders in the Chariot*, p. 431) A few pages further on, this motif of "freedom" is taken up in authorial comment: "Whereas at Bienenstadt, his green and supple soul had been forced to struggle for release, the scarred and leathery object which it had become would now stand forth with very little effort." (p. 437) However, these suggestions of transcendence, of emergence from physical limits, are generally conditioned by opposing suggestions of senility (Elizabeth Hunter), delirium, craziness, of unintelligible language. Illusion and reality are so presented that each casts doubt on the other.

The radicality of this principle, of madness breaking free from the limits of reality and finding a "higher" truth, was of course recognised by the Surrealists and others. However, a concise and suggestive formulation here is that of Friedrich Nietzsche; he states that through madness the "lonely and disturbed" finally come to a belief in themselves. In so far as they acknowledge reality, they must also recognise that they are social rejects, creatures of anxiety and doubt; but in madness they sense something authentic that allows them to survive loneliness. Typically, in these saving, surreal visions, the essential features of social experience, that is historical perspective, fixity of time and space, are abbreviated and distorted; reality becomes wholly present: "and reality is always present tense, whether for mad kings, or unemployed, ham actors." (*The Eye of the Storm*, p. 499) Nietzsche also applies his concept of the mask to such phenomena, since they, like the mask, express a reality and at the same time doubt of it, with the possibility of something beyond it.[7]

Here, we have yet another perspective on death in the novels, where the main protagonist, despite apparent socialisation, as in say the case of Elizabeth Hunter, is nevertheless presented in dying as inwardly isolated and disturbed. It is clear that a whole complex of ideas is implied here, of self-deception, of creativity, of social criticism, of individual survival

beyond both the body and social fraud, and of the desperate plight of the isolated individual, who, as he becomes increasingly private, cut off from society, also becomes idiotic, in conformity with the Greek root of this word, meaning wholly private.

It is significant that none of the major deaths in the novels is self-inflicted. It is hinted that Miss Hare, in *Riders in the Chariot*, walked into the water and was nibbled into anonymity by trout, but the reasoning for this suggestion is dismissed as "devious." Certainly, there are numerous more or less subtle hints to the reader that characters are pregnant with their own demise; but at the same time hints are also given that the "saving" craziness, which enables these characters to sense something authentic beyond the despair of social rejection, and which also saves them from the despairing fall into suicide, is implicit in their temperament from their earliest years onward. Although Sir Basil Hunter in *The Eye of the Storm*, is not presented as dying, his view of suicide is suggestive of the view implied in characters who die: "To be truthful, he considered suicide once or twice in his life, but had not come at it: on each occasion the water was too shallow. In any case, he was not by temperament a suicide: theatrical gestures only convince when you can share them with an audience." (p. 499) Here, the temperamental feature which precludes suicide is that of inability to share this "theatrical" gesture with an audience. The degree of concern for an audience, for even one actual person, implied in sharing this gesture of suicide, is not present in Sir Basil, nor is it present in White's principal characters generally. Eddie Twyborn thinks of himself briefly as an "Amateur Suicide" but rejects this act; he wants to escape from his relationship with Angelos Vatatzes "But not through suicide." He is of the view that everything important "can only be experienced alone." (*The Twyborn Affair*, p. 68) Himmelfarb and Voss may seem to stand in contradiction here, since they have partners in love. Nevertheless, we read of Himmelfarb that, after the seizure of his wife by Nazis, he explored the interstices of his ribs with the knife "and might have driven it into the heart inside, if he had been able to see any purpose in dying twice." He is already a "dead man, a distracted soul." (*Riders in the Chariot*, p. 157) Voss,[8] at a stage where he might be thought of as contemplating suicide, has already entered a "saving" delirium. In neither case, both Himmelfarb and Voss, is a loved one actually present during their sufferings, and in both cases an inner claim, something not quite free of the taint of craziness, has precluded the gesture of suicide; there has indeed been no one to share it with. Yet another note on suicide, and on the after-life as well, is sounded when the Lady of Czernowitz, in *Riders in the Chariot*, rejects suicide, saying: "Oh, yes! Death! If I had not expected it involved *des ennuis enormes*, I might have used my precious little cyanide . . . "

(p. 178) Again, there is a suggestion here of endlessness, of eventlessness, shapelessness.

Notwithstanding their ambiguous hints of survival, the novels let it be understood that it is here, in this life or nowhere, that human fulfilment is to be reached, justice achieved. Under these circumstances, an immense claim is implied for the freedom and responsibility of the individual, which is rendered less likely of fulfilment to the extent that every kind of transcendence is nihilistically dispensed with, with the exception of going out of oneself towards one's fellows. And it is here that a life-enhancing response to death in the novels is to be found. For, although death as absolute end may make life seem meaningless, its contemplation also intensifies the love of life and the urge to create meaning intersubjectively. This latter, created meaning, even the hope of it, in turn confronts death with the possibility of it being not an end but a border, beyond which one is re-united with one's loved ones, an effect suggested in the delirium of both Voss and Himmelfarb. Of Eddie Twyborn, in his role as the drag-queen, Eadith, the author comments: "Yet whatever form she too, or whatever the illusion temporarily possessing her, the reality of love, which is the core of reality itself, had eluded her, and perhaps always would." (*The Twyborn Affair*, pp. 294-5) And, on the same lines, there is the quote from Louis Aragon, given at the beginning of *A Fringe of Leaves*: "Love is your last chance. There is really nothing else on earth to keep you there." Where this motivation, of loving hope, of hope of love, fails, then death, unrelated to "the care of reality," can only appear as inhuman, meaningless, a terrible "Vivisector." Death is not only a Nothing but also a something that arbitrarily breaks in and annihilates, like the sea that takes Oswald Dignam, in *A Fringe of Leaves*: "The sea rose, and with a logic that had only been suspended . . . swept him off the ledge . . . protesting . . . before the sea put a glassy stopper in his mouth." Mrs Roxburgh runs to save him, but "a rising wave warned her off." (p. 194) Here, in this grim, animistic presentation of the waters, there is the question of Death as a dramatic figure in White's novels. Historically, of course, Death has appeared on the stage in various forms, mostly as a skeleton. Its presentation is a problem, since, in principle, it is the end of all figuration. There is no space here to pursue White's presentation of the figure of Death, but along with the various forms this terrible presence can take, we typically find that the dying person has animal associations. In loveless circumstances, one dies like a dog. Indeed, dog-imagery is present at a number of the deaths in the novels. In *The Solid Mandala*[9] (1966), Waldo Brown's body has its throat torn open by a dog. (p. 298) Just before Hurtle Duffield dies, he has a half-formed vision of a mongrel dog, and we read that he, "Never felt the least bit doggy, except when clamped to

the operating table;" which is an obvious allusion to the "Vivisector" imagery of the novel. (p. 614) Eddie Twyborn's death is accompanied by imagery of a "dog's obedient paws" lying on the pavement beside him. (*The Twyborn Affair*, p. 377) Birds are another motif to be found at death. Elizabeth Hunter has a vision of being savaged by black swans. Hurtle Duffield is stroked at death by an "iron feather." Alf Dubbo lies on the bed, " . . . more like some animal, some bird that had experienced the necessity of dying." (*Riders in the Chariot*, p. 460) He also is stroked by feathers. Elsewhere, we find associations with other animals. After Himmelfarb's death, "the only sound was that of a goat scattering her pellets." (p. 439) Austin Roxburgh, dying, attempts to re-assert himself, "but the attempt petered out in the parody of a landed shrimp." (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 217) Himmelfarb, after the loss of his wife, becomes "a beetle of faith." And so on. The associations suggest assimilation to the natural world.

It is not surprising, from this perspective, that funerals get short shrift in the novels. Perhaps it is Hurtle Duffield who sums up the matter most concisely when, after his heart attack, he plays with the word: "'Few-near-real,' he said at last. 'My own funeral!'" (p. 551) In fact, no account is given of his funeral. Such account as is given of funerals points to their unreality, that is the absence of "the reality of love." Mayor Craston's funeral in *The Twyborn Affair* is described both as "the loveliest funeral I was ever at," and "the mayor's fuckun funeral," which, in the context of the novel, leaves little to choose between, for indifference to the dead. (pp. 205-6) Of Alf Dubbo, we read that the body "was quickly and easily disposed of." (*Riders in the Chariot*, p. 461) In general, not much time is spent on the dead. *A Fringe of Leaves*, with its setting among savages, provides occasion for extremes of eating the dead, shoving a dead child into a hollow log, and letting Mr Roxburgh's corpse openly putrefy. The longest account of a funeral, that of Elizabeth Hunter in *The Eye of the Storm*, is explicit about the bleakness of the occasion; it takes place at the Northern Suburbs Crematorium, with "a pennant of smoke streaming from the chimney." (p. 556) We read here of "smiles which went so far and no further" and that there were "few mourners," " . . . in any case funerals, like shipboard farewells, tend to attract recent acquaintances rather than friends." Such friends, as are at Mrs Hunter's funeral, "limped or shuffled out of the past, peering through a brandy haze with an air of humorous incredulity." (p. 556)

The loneliness of the deaths in these novels is emphasized when we bring to mind that none of them takes place under traditionally desirable circumstances, say under dignified repose in the world of one's triumphs and satisfactions, surrounded by loved ones. These deaths are intensi-

fied, in that their depiction excludes any softening by external or internal factors; neither the presence of loved ones. These deaths are intensified, in that their depiction excludes any softening by external or internal factors; neither the presence of loved ones nor reflective interpretation affords comfort; there is at best only the withdrawn, inner realm of delirium and dream in the dying-process. For contrast, we might think of Banjo Paterson's poem "The Dying Stockman," in which the process of dying is presented as one of reminiscence and a coming-to-terms with memories of people known in life, in the presence of an audience who lay the dying man down in the shade. With White, a dignified death, a reconciliation of one's life with the community of loved ones, is either ruled out or grotesquely parodied. Nor, as we have seen above, is the peace of final extinction unequivocally granted. In terms of social values, of religious certainties and philosophical probabilities, these deaths are nihilistic; they hint at Nietzsche's most extreme form of nihilism: "Nothingness (meaninglessness) for eternity!"[10]

The effect of these deaths on the reader, terrible though they are, would not be so marked if some fulfilment in life were indicated. In this case, the deaths would become accidents, arbitrary, heartbreaking losses, against which the notion of fulfilment would nevertheless imply some ameliorating perspective. Generally, this is not so in the novels. Himmelfarb may seem to have had some fulfilment, but that is in the past; he has become a "dead man" after the loss of his wife and wanders to his final death in a state of distraction. Love, where it is experienced in the lives of those principal figures who die, comes to define a parting, which is death. The suggested meaninglessness of the world, of life, itself succeeded by a meaningless death, is itself a mask for the lack of self-evident relatedness to a group of people, for whom one is there. These characters do not go out of themselves in the automatic caring involved in loving those dependent on them.

It is astonishing, in *Riders in the Chariot*, that the washerwoman, Mrs Godbold, should be speculated on, in authorial comment, for a "core," a "truth," for "sacral dignity," when all she does is live with "a love and respect for common objects." She is a "very simple person. Always there." (p. 478) But in the world of the novels, of wounded soloists, such a person is rare. Indeed, it is Mrs Godbold, who, in speaking of life, really states an essential truth about death in the novels: " . . . it is the winters I can remember best at home. Because we children were happiest then. We were more dependent on one another. The other seasons we were running in all directions. Seeing and finding things for ourselves. In winter we held hands, and walked together along the hard roads . . . We loved one another most in winter. There was nothing to come between us." (*Riders in the Chariot*, p. 284) In their differing

contexts, the novels make clear that that which comes "between us," in all the varieties of its masking, is death. Also, since death comes between us, it follows that the death of the individual, our own death, is something wholly incommunicable, quite mysterious, quite lonely, which the dying person cannot communicate, either to himself or to others. The horror of these deaths described by White arises not only from their suggestion of a life lived without fulfilment, but from the accompanying awareness that a correction is no longer possible. Their sudden and arbitrary character is a provocation to the reader, beneath the socially-expected mask of well-being, to face the anxiety of his dying without opportunity to correct a course he may sense as already wrong.

NOTES

[1]Patrick White: *The Vivisector*, Penguin Books, 1973. All page references will be to this edition.

[2]Patrick White: *The Twyborn Affair*, King Penguin, 1981. All page references will be to this edition.

[3]Patrick White: *The Aunt's Story*, Avon Books, New York, 1975. All page references will be to this edition.

[4]Patrick White: *The Eye of the Storm*, Penguin books, 1975. All page references will be to this edition.

[5]Patrick White: *A Fringe of Leaves*, Avon Books, New York, 1978. All page references will be to this edition.

[6]Patrick White: *Riders in the Chariot*, Penguin Books, 1974. All page references will be to this edition.

[7]Friedrich Nietzsche: *Werke in drei Banden*, edited Karl Schlechta, Munich 1954-56, Vol. III, p. 1024, or *The Dawn of Day*, Section 14.

[8]Patrick White: *Voss*, Penguin Books, 1957. All page references will be to this edition.

[9]Patrick White: *The Solid Mandala*, Avon Books, New York, 1975. All page references will be to this edition.

[10]Nietzsche: *Werke*, III, pp. 853, 466, 872.

ANDREW LANSDOWN

TOUCH

When I touched him, the old man,
when I interrupted his struggle
to remember what he wanted
to say and said, "Look