Patrick White's The Vivisector: Anatomy of Art, Love and Faith

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Introduction

Patrick White, Novel Prize laureate, is one of the most influential writers in Australia. His life follows a typical pattern of Australian intellectuals in the last century. Born to an affluent, anglophile family in 1912, he was mainly educated in England, where he was despised as a colonial boy. He started his writing career in London, but decided to return to Australia for life after World War II, yearning after "the scenes of childhood."[1] Having two cultural heritages in himself, he was always conscious of the position of Australia as an adopted country in the light of European colonial history. Indeed, White is as much a European writer, who devoted himself to writing about Australia by European standards. His cultural plurality is taken over by some of his characters. As a writer, he criticized the affectation and complacency of Australians with piercing irony, whereas he praised seeker-visionaries, who are mostly social outcasts or eccentrics. This treatment, along with his symbolic style, may partly explain why he won his reputation overseas first. He died in 1990, leaving twelve novels, two collections of short stories and several plays.

Representing an artist in society has been a preoccupation for White. In fact, many characters in his novels can be regarded as "artists" to various degrees due to their unique inquiring minds and visionary qualities. In Voss (1957), for example, the protagonist is an obsessed explorer, who is impelled to reach the uncharted depth of the Australian continent. His religious and transcendental visions are equivalent to those of a mystic. Among his party is an amateur poet, who translates the physical progress of the exploration into a spiritual one. There is also a painter residing in Sydney, who believes in the possibility of generating beauty out of mundane urban lives. With these articulate characters, Voss can be read as a manifesto of White's artistic credo and his determination to achieve a unique Australian art. The expedition in the novel overlaps with author's exploration of Australian landscape as a source of creation. White further explores the relation of an artist and society through a part-Aboriginal painter in his subsequent novel, Riders in the Chariot (1961). It was one of the earliest attempts to foretell the potential of an artist with mixed ethnic backgrounds in multicultural Australia. Then, The Solid Mandala (1966), which the author referred to as "a very personal kind of book,"[2] portrays the lives of twin brothers. One is an intellectual but unfulfilled writer, and the other is a blundering simpleton who turns out to be a kind of artist, expressing his perception of the world through dance and poetry. Through these twins, White

pursues the theme of unity between reason and intuition. As we have seen, the main characters that White created are mostly searchers, and consequently possess the qualities of an artist.

While these characters are latent artists, none of the above can be deemed an explicit narrative of an artist. It was not until his eighth novel, The Vivisector (1970) that White was fully engaged in depicting the career of a professional painter. White made the most of his association with painters such as Roy de Maistre, Sydney Nolan, both expatriates, and Lawrence Daws[3] to depict a convincing character. As Helen Verity Hewitt extensively discusses in Patrick White, Painter Manqué, the naissance and development of the writer owe much to painters he met in England, and Sydney modernists after his return to Australia. We can better understand the works of White by locating them in the context of modernist movements in Australian art. Referring to de Maistre, White reminisces: "I feel he taught me to write by teaching me to look at paintings and get beneath the surface."[4] This statement is repeated with a slight variation by a pianist in The Vivisector. "To get beneath the surface" is also a principal method of painting for the painter-protagonist in the novel. As White called himself "a frustrated painter,"[5] the novel has a semi-autobiographical aspect, the story of the painter that the writer aspired but failed to be. David Marr demonstrates in Patrick White: A Life that there are models for some of his characters in the Sydney art world and the "Heide" circle in Victoria.[6]

The Vivisector follows the life of a Sydney painter, Hurtle Duffield, since the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Born as a son of working class parents, Hurtle is sold to an affluent bourgeois family, whom he discourages by running away to the war fought in Europe during World War I. Retuning to Australia, he establishes himself as a professional painter. Urged by an artistic instinct, he exploits his successive lovers for their forms, but fails to reciprocate their affection. In his old age, he finally finds his spiritual heir in a juvenile pianist, who makes use of his painting to nurture the artist in her. A second stroke fatally attacks him while he is working on his last painting of unattainable indigo which he glimpsed during a first seizure.

White portrays the body of the painter and his paintings as a milieu where two opposite vectors are in conflict, i.e., dissection and creation, like two faces of God. For Hurtle the ruthless meister, life is an endless forging of the painting out of the human furnace, whence emerges cruelty, the dark side of the human soul.[7]

In The Vivisector, the author adopts motifs such as adoption, deformation and prostitution to represent the psychological as well as socio-economic locality of his protagonist. Hurtle is doubly a marginal being due to his background and his unique aesthetic standard. This paper explores various human relationships in which the protagonist is involved. Furthermore, I'd like to consider how his life can be interpreted in conjunction with Australian colonial background and the reception of modernist art in the country.

1. Spiritual Orphan

Hurtle Duffield is the son of a labourer and washer-woman of British extract. From the very beginning, the themes of deformation and "*sans famille*" among family are brought to the fore. The boy is watching chickens in the yard:

> The fouls were fluffing in the dust and the sun: that crook-neck white pullet Mumma said she would hit on the head if only she had the courage to; but she hadn't. (It was Mumma who killed the fowls when any of them got so old you could only eat them.) So the white crook-neck thing, white too about the wattles, stood around grabbing what and whenever it could, but sort of sideways.[8)]

Hurtle's father says matter-of-factly that the white hen is pecked at "because it's different" (9). This assertion foretells Hurtle's isolation in his own family. The kid writes in his composition that his parents "do not understand what I tell them so I have just about had to give up telling" (42). This confession shows that from a very early age he is conscious that the verbal channel to communicate his ideas is closed. His life as an artist is indeed a pursuit of expression to convey his perceptions through visions.

Furthermore, the seemingly simple doubt that Hurtle casts on his mother's contradiction reveals his concern for the nature of men, in whom mercy and cruelty are intricately interwoven. Facing deformation is thus a trial. His uncertainty extends further to God, and he reaches his version of God as "vivisector" at a later age. He shows a tendency to stare at violence or ponder on death from which people prefer to avert their faces. Even before school-age, the precocious Hurtle is fascinated by an episode in the Scripture where a woman "smote him with tent peg" (15). His commitment to reality as mentioned above is certainly a qualification for a truthful artist. At the same time, he uses it as a justification for his painting method to dissect in order to reach the core of being.

The protagonist remains "deformed" to others like the crook-necked chicken until he succeeds in conveying his ideas. In regard with public reception, his awareness of being an outsider reflects the anxiety of being neglected by public. This was the case with White who moulded himself on the tradition of European writing and tried to cultivate a unique art of his own on the Australian soil.

As a boy, Hurtle does not posses a medium to express the world as he perceives it:

> He loved the feel of a smooth stone, or to take a flower to pieces, to see what there was inside. He loved the pepper tree breaking into light, and the white hens rustling by moonlight in the black branches, and the sleepy sound of the hen shit dropping. He could do nothing about it, though. Not yet. He could carry all of it in his head. Not talk about it. Because Mumma and Pa would not have understood. They talked about what was 'right' and 'honest', and the price of things, but people looked down at their plates if you said something was 'beautiful'. (18)

Here again, words are inadequate for his needs. Moreover, his rudimentary aesthetics and his

parents' pragmatism come into collision. The distance between the son and his parents is all the more highlighted by including the latter in the category of general "people." This passage reveals that the boy is not spiritually the son of his pragmatic parents. In other words, his art is unwedded to the conventions that his parents follow.

This extract also illustrates Hurtle's fascination with texture, light and sound. The immediate, perceptive approach to objects characterizes his future paintings. In addition, his curiosity at the anatomy of a flower is a reminder of the vivisector-artist that he will become. Like White's mentor, Roy de Maistre, Hurtle is dissatisfied with surface reality, and digs into a deeper level. His pursuit coincides not only with that of Australian modernists but also with White's efforts to overcome social realism persistent in conventional Australian writings.

Hurtle is sold for five hundred pounds to the affluent Courtneys whom his mother visits weekly to wash. While Mrs Courtney wants a healthy, brilliant boy, his natural mother believes that the arrangement is good for her son who is "what Pa and me knows we aren't" (22). Hurtle is fascinated by a chandelier in the Courtney's stately home. The prospective painter is conscious of an inner chandelier waiting to be released, which responds to the shuddering light from the real one: "Nobody, not his family, not Mrs Courtney, only faintly himself, knew he had inside him his own chandelier. This was what made you at times jangle and want to explode into smithereens" (53).

The adoption of the boy replicates the desire of the bourgeois class for collecting curiosities. In a sense this is a caricature of collecting paintings. Failing to establish real affection on both sides, the foster parents and the adopted son enact a quasi-family drama. On the one hand, Hurtle feels it his obligation to love his foster parents; on the other, Mrs Courtney occasionally lacks a sensibility to treat the boy as an autonomous human being. For instance, she pushes the head of the newly acquired son into her wardrobe:

> In fact Mrs Courtney did something unexpected and very strange. She suddenly moved her hand to the nape of his neck, and shoved his head amongst the limp dress. The sensation was at first one of blinding, then of a delicious suffocation as his face was swallowed by the scented silky darkness, through which Mrs Courtney's voice continued somewhere rustling. (89)

Her sense of ownership is obvious in her words to a maid: "Children are like puppies, you know. And a new puppy can be attached to his owner by teaching him to recognize the owner's scent" (89). Her remark clarifies the position that Hurtle occupies in the Courtneys: a pet bought at five hundred pounds. It is true that Hurtle is at the mercy of the self-righteous intentions of a bourgeois family. However, there seems more to be explored in the motif of adoption than mere power politics of class. The episode of Hurtle's adoption reminds us of Alf Dubbo, a part-Aboriginal painter in Riders in the Chariot, who is also adopted by a white parson. Both of them are expected to assimilate into highbrow European culture and way of life, but escape from their respective guardians. These common patterns are likely to come from the same source. The relation of the adopted son and foster parents can be associated with that of

Australia and Europe, especially, Britain. The dissociation of the young painters from European households seems to reflect complex feelings of Anglo-Celtic Australians towards the mother country Britain, and the author's desire for the independence of Australian art.

Mrs Courtney's intention to tame the adopted boy does not work out. Hurtle admires her as a work of art rather than as mother. He remains a somewhat aloof observer towards his beautiful "Mamman" even when emotional involvement is expected. For instance, when his graffiti of a dead body caused Mrs Courtney a great shock, he reacts to her grief with detached curiosity: "He was seriously interested. He saw there were real tears in her eyes" (102). After all, he does not love her but "was in love with how she looked" (53). What attracts him to the world of the Courtneys is the light, shape and, solipsistically enough, "her big, silent house, in which his thought might grow into the shapes they chose" (53). He is not a helpless victim of situations, but astute enough to exploit whatever is available to cultivate his art.

Along with his visual ability to penetrate into one's inside, his otherness in the bourgeois circle gives him further insight. He violates their reticence, thus from time to time threatens their peace of mind. Mrs Courtney accuses Hurtle for that reason, saying: "you, Hurtle – you were born with a knife in your hand. No, [. . .] in your eye" (146). Just as Alf Dubbo can expose the inherent cruelty of the egalitarian Australian working class owing largely to his marginal presence, Hurtle the Vivisector can uncover the unconscious violence behind the gentility of the Australian bourgeois class.

The estate of the Courtneys is appropriately called "Sunningdale," where "the golden light" prevails. However, as the artificial grandeur of the chandelier disguises the moral depravity of the owner, there is a flickering presence that accuses the conscience of the graceful mother: her daughter, hunch-backed Rhoda Courtney. Mrs Courtney appears to be always looking for the daughter, who in turn seems to hide in every nook of the house. This mock hide-and-seek implies that Rhoda is a shadow of conscience, which excruciates its seeker. Hurtle is rather fascinated by her appearance.

> [The photo of Rhoda] was framed in gold, with golden branches flowering with blistered pearls.
>
> He took the photo. 'It's a good likeness,' he said in his best voice.
>
> 'You haven't met her, have you?' Mrs Courtney didn't want her chat spoilt.
>
> 'Just now,' he said, covering the frame with his hands so that he only saw the picture. 'You did right to only take her head.'
>
> 'Why? Mrs Courtney gasped, but it could have been because she had her cup of chocolate.
>
> 'Well, the back. You wouldn't want to see the back. The head is the best part of her.'
>
> 'It's only a slight curvature,' Rhoda's mother spluttered. 'It can be corrected.' (33)

The photo in a golden frame showing "the best part of her" symbolizes the affected beauty of the life in Sunningdale. The little vivisector unfeelingly dissects its fiction physically ("covering the frame in hand") and verbally ("You wouldn't see the back"), and thus brings uneasiness to the household. His artistic criteria rest on presenting an image true to his senses however

disgusting it may appear; on the other hand, arbiters of public taste like Mrs Courtney tend to assimilate or exclude those who are not in harmony with *their* aesthetic/moral codes. Mrs Courtney's attempt to cure her daughter's deformed back connotes this implicit desire.

Rhoda remains a moral challenge for Hurtle himself. His conscience as a brother constantly nags him when he fails to love her, just as Rhoda's fretfulness irritates him at the dinner table. In addition, her deformity serves as a mirror to reflect his sense of being different, which intensifies his disgust towards her.

The protagonist cannot be fully grown as an artist as long as he stays in Sunningdale, which the luscious breath of "Mamman" permeates with a streak of depravity. The house is aptly presented as a womb:

> The house was so warm, so suffocating, smelling of dust in spite of maids, he could have choked on the way to his room. The half darkness through which he was climbing seemed to be developing an inescapable form: of a great padded dome, or quilted egg, or womb, such as he had seen in that da Vinci drawing. He continued dragging around the spiral, always without arriving, while outside the meticulous womb, men were fighting, killing, to live to fuck to live.
>
> He looked around, half expecting to see the womb had been split by his thought; but the darkness held. (165)

His adolescent desire for independence, urged by sexual frustration and a formless threat from the remote war, is about to burst. He needs some form of violence to cut off the umbilical cord connecting him to the foster mother. Then, he decides to join the war, thrusting a hard fact at Mrs Courtney: "If you're not killed in one way, you are in another" (168). Though White avoids directly describing the war, one can imagine that the protagonist undergoes drastic changes in values, as the author did during World War II.[9] His flight from the formal parents and their class is appropriately described as a delivery: "he had broken the caul: it lay all sticky gelatinous around him; he was panting from the effort" (168). It follows that the war gives an opportunity of independence for young Hurtle.

Rhoda does not remain an accuser alone; she and Hurtle liaise "at a deeper level – like a conscience" (175), as she puts it in a letter, than any other pair in the text. Rhoda proves to be a dedicated correspondent to Hurtle in Europe. She confesses her troubles in her letters even when surrounded by attentive family and friends, which in many ways her adopted brother shares. Rhoda, aware of their approximate psychological condition, dares to reveal her idea of spiritual affinity to her brother:

> When they look down at me, I am forced to look up through them. This is something I have never felt with you. I know we are not related by blood, but that isn't necessary; blood relationship can often be a disadvantage. As I see it, we have been brought closer together by suffering from something incurable. (175)

Like Gregor in Franz Kafka's The Metamorphosis, the young artist and his crippled sister suffer from the inability to communicate with their family due to "something incurable," and

the situation turns them into monstrous beings in the eyes of others. It is also true that White repeatedly emphasizes that "incurable" otherness, either spiritual or physical, is a license to be an artist. When we look at Australia from European point of view, the country with its unique geography and inhabitants might appear a "deformed," adopted son of Britain. It seems that White hints the potential of Australian art through the career of the artist-protagonist.

Hurtle the Vivisector, haunted by his artistic daemon, and Rhoda, "born vivisected" (445), are complementary to each other. Rhoda, who "talked, but didn't talk" in her family, is his counterpart: "There were moments when Rhoda became so recognizably himself, together they blotted out the twin nightmares of war and misunderstanding" (176). Being legally related but not genetically, the vivisector and vivisected, connected through "something incurable," their relationship is the most controversial representation of the mystery of the human bond in the text.

2. The Artist in Love

Hurtle's successive affairs with two lovers only emphasize the dissociation of his artistic criteria from social norms.

On his return to Australia after the war, Hurtle now working as dishwasher and cleaner comes to identify himself as "Duffield" again, which is the family name of his blood parents. His first lover, Nance Lightfoot, a street woman, offers her form to the initiate to explore, and contributes to the naissance of the professional painter.

Nance takes the penniless Hurtle to her apartment room and peels off the young man's decorum as a "Courtney" boy while he is bathed in the landscape from childhood:

> He was staring at the streaming golden paddocks on which the sun was rising through his boyhood as he sat between Sid Cupples and Father. The ridges were perhaps more silver than gold, the gullies more shadowy in which the strings of ewes heaved into a rolling camper. [. . .] Nothing seemed less likely as she began to strip resistance from him, layer by unnecessary layer. (Father would only have thrown a fit to see the suit crumple round his ankles – if it hadn't been so nasty cheap.) She was peeling, paring; he might have been something else: some exotic fruit. (185)

Her professional, detached assault upon him is a burlesque of his artistic approach to his subjects, for Nance herself in turn "like all human vegetables [. . .] was offering herself to the knife she only half suspected" later (200). The reader notices that there is no definite border between Nance's art of prostitution and Hurtle's dissecting art. In addition, for the artist who is often carried away by absolute sensuousness in painting, sexual experience replicates his artistic ecstasy. The protagonist even feels that "he was the prostitute: he was seducing Nance Lightfoot into giving him, not money, not her actual body so much as its formal vessel, from which to pour his visions of life" (203). White thus establishes an analogy between the artist and prostitute, and by doing so, attempts to efface the futile dichotomy between the sacred and

the profane as a criterion in evaluating art works.

The essence of Hurtle's art lies not in theory or reason but in intuition. Like other protagonists of White, Hurtle is given sensuous, visionary quality. Even as a little boy, he confesses his weakness in logic:

> Hurtle too knew better than everybody, than all these anyway, Sid Couples included; not that he could have explained what he knew: because he saw rather than thought. He often wished he could think like people think in books, but he could only see or feel his way. Again he saw in his mind the rough-looking sheep. He itched to get his fingers in their wool, for the feel of it.[10] (106)

His reliance on "imagery" seems only intensified as he grows up: "he might have felt lonely if it hadn't been for his thoughts: not the consecutive, reasoned grey of intellectual thought, but the bursts of kaleidoscopic imagery, both flowering in his mind, and filtered sensuously through his blood" (188). White juxtaposes intellect and imagery here and gives a priority to the latter. At the same time, the body occupies a principal position in the quest of his protagonists. The exploration of Voss is a good example of the immediate approach to objects: he perceives the landscape instead of logically interpreting it. This inclination is shared by Hurtle, who imitates licking a painting by Boudin, "pulling his tongue in and out to experience it" (62). We can interpret such a reliance upon perception as White's endeavour to transcend the limit of reason in searching for truth.

While Nance accuses Hurtle of his solipsism, he is aware that the Nance he loves is nothing but his creation: "Nance was, in fact, his work; and he had only begun creating her" (200). Evidently, love is another form of creative process for Hurtle, thus a fiction. Their affair entails a controversial question: what is "real"? The notion of reality vastly differs between the two. For the abstractionist painter who distills essentials from the concrete, the more he devotes to his paintings, the wider the gap between them becomes. Their failure in love sheds light on the distance between an artist who aspires to reach the core and those who are committed to surface facts. So, their relationship characterized by the contrast between Hurtle's "art" and Nance's "life" is comparable to that of the writer and the reader.

White succeeds in presenting a convincing figure of the artist as "vivisector," the reckless murderer Hurtle=Hurt All. As he paints his lover, he "had disembowelled her while still alive; he had watched her no less cruel dissection by the knives of light. You couldn't call an experience an experiment, but he had profited by whatever it was" (246). Hewitt illustrates that Hurtle's dissecting art is a descendant of the actual painter Roy de Maistre, and a fictional counterpart of Francis Bacon.[11] She locates the development of White's prose in the context of modern paintings. Her research vindicates that The Vivisector can be read as a record of the reception of modernist art, including White's, in Australia.

Hurtle becomes a successful painter as "London and New York began to take notice" (260). He purchases a house facing two streets: decent Flint Street and huddled-muddled Chubb's Lane. The house is compared to a skull in which his thoughts can grow freely; whereas it also

embodies the two worlds inside him, those of the labourer Duffield and bourgeois Courtney. His existence relies on both worlds: “The two faces of his house complemented each other; one taken away might have upset the balance: together they made what was necessary for his fulfillment and happiness” (264). His body is a front where various elements collide: working and bourgeois classes; sacred and vulgar; honesty and distortion; creation and destruction. All entwined, two constituents of each pair cannot exist separately, just like “the two faces of his house.” The art of Hurtle evolves from these borders, just like contemporary Australian art has developed from the amalgamation of European tradition and unique Australian experiences.

Hurtle has another affair with Hero Pavloussi, the wife of a Greek ship tycoon. Ancient Greek imagery is noticeable throughout this episode. The second lover is associated with a Greek sculpture with a figure burnt to “terra-cotta” and an “expression of fatality” (311). In spite of her exquisite form, her head sits “rather oddly on the body, as though by some special act of grace, and she wouldn’t be surprised to have it fall” (311). Her head as if inviting decapitation gives an impression that she is an offering. In fact, the image of idolatry is persistent around her. For instance, Hurtle comes to love her “in the desire to worship and be renewed by someone else’s simplicity of spirit” (322), whereas his lover admires her “good husband” as god-husband, who rescued her from poverty. Their triangular relationship, which is formed upon false worships, results in utter collapse.

Hero Pavloussi suffers from a sense of guilt towards her husband, whose expectation of a pure wife she fails to meet, and desperately needs regeneration of her soul. Then she drags Hurtle in her mock pilgrimage to the sacred island of Perialos in the Aegean Sea, expecting him to play the role of “stand-in groom” (378). In spite of her hope of regeneration, what they find there is not sacred but secular aspects of life as if to deride the inefficacy of Hero’s faith: a pissing monk, an avaricious abbess in a seraglio-like convent, “orphan-whores” (388), and above all, human excrement beside the altar. Again the sacred and the profane is presented as two facets of life, both of which do not exist independently.

Even so, Hurtle with a discerning eye can glimpse a vision of beauty in this island:

> All this time a little golden hen had been stalking and clucking round the iron base of the café table, pecking at the crumbs which had fallen from their mouths. The warm scallops of her golden feathers were of that same inspiration as the scales of the great silver-blue sea creature they – or he, at least – had watched from John of the Apocalypse, ritually coiling and uncoiling, before dissolving in the last light. (392)

On the other hand, his Greek lover is blind to such a golden light in mundane trivialities, as she simply dismisses his paintings as “pornographic” (361). For the painter, they are “rather, an expression of truth, on that borderline where the hideous and depraved can become aesthetically acceptable” (361). In Voss, a painter, Willie Pringle, communicates a relevant idea: “The blowfly on its bed of offal is but a variation of the rainbow.”[12] This is the quality that characterizes both Hurtle’s and White’s works. It is true that The Vivisector abounds in seemingly offensive images such as farts, excrement and viscera, but it seems that White tries

to show through them that beauty can be drawn out from the mundane aspect of life, and even from "dregs" (391), as he comments on his own works: "I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of [ordinary] people, and incidentally, my own life since my return."[13] Repeated accusations towards the protagonist by his lovers remind us of criticism against White.

3. Revelation

Just as Hurtle does not have parents who understand his aesthetic principles, he produces no child, either spiritually or physically, in his successive love affairs, except for a series of paintings. His relationships with Nance Lightfoot and Hero Pavloussi remain physical, for his lovers are not competent enough to appreciate his paintings. His childlessness suggests that he has no one to inherit his art.

It is not until his old age that the painter finds his counterpart in a juvenile pianist apprentice, Katherine Volkov. Kathy proves to be an artist who struggles to convey what she perceives in music, "the colour of opals" (433), for instance. Hurtle dares to relate his idea of true kinship to her: "one can be so remote in spirit from one's actual father – or mother – it's as though one doesn't belong to them. Spiritually [. . .] one can be someone else's child" (424).

It turns out that Kathy, "a glutton of the senses" (539), has been absorbing his paintings like a fetus in the womb of Hurtle's studio. After establishing herself as a successful pianist, she writes to him:

> It was you who taught me how to see, to be, to know instinctively. When I used to come to your house in Flint Street [. . .] it was the paintings I used to look at sideways whenever I got a chance. [. . .] I was drinking them in through the pores of my skin. There was an occasion when I had to know what they felt like, and however close and exciting it had been to embrace with our own bodies, it was a more truly consummating love-shock to touch those stony surfaces and suddenly glide with my straying fingers into what seemed like endless still water. (540)

The generative power of his painting is compared to a sensual experience, and connected with "water," by Kathy. Like de Maistre for White, Hurtle plays a role of a spiritual father in the birth of Kathy as a pianist. She admits: "I prefer to think of you as the father of anything praiseworthy that will ever come out of me" (540). It is implied that the spiritual child is as much a work of art for Hurtle as his painting. What Kathy inherits is the spirit of the painter to "get beneath the surface." In another light, the series of motifs such as spiritual orphan, adoption and the birth of a spiritual child represent the position of Australian art in the context of European cultural tradition, its emergence and prospect of being inherited by artistic individuals.

Hurtle's formal sister Rhoda Courtney reappears in the text about the same time as Kathy to play the role of a mother in the trinity of the spiritual family. Acquainted with Kathy earlier

than Hurtle, she subtly arranges the girl's visit to Hurtle's studio.

Rhoda is good at words, and even aspired to be a novelist as a young girl. She even finds "a kind of poetry" (609) in the names of the dead carried in the newspaper. Thus, Hurtle's imaginative family consists of different types of artists: Hurtle the painter, Kathy the musician and Rhoda the writer. It is clear that White values this comradeship of artists more than physical ties such as family or marriage.

Rhoda reflects Hurtle's dissecting nature like a mirror, though verbally. She ruthlessly thrusts truth at her brother, and consequently disillusions him.

> 'Aren't we,' he mumbled on the black toast, "what is left of a family?'
>
> Rhoda smiled a faintly yellow smile. 'I think you're an artist, aren't you?'
>
> 'But not the monster you'd like to make me out.'
>
> 'What I meant was *sans famille*.' Here was his brute-sister trying to prise out of his hands the painted toy he wanted to hang on to. (516)

Her penetrating words also expose the painter's hubris: "Your painting. And Yourself. But those, too, are 'gods' which could fail you" (518). As a young painter, Hurtle scribbled an unfinished aphorism on the wall of the toilet: "God the Vivisector / God the Artist / God" (307). By denouncing his self-deification, Rhoda leads him towards humbleness, which is the only ideal condition to reach God, as Laura admonishes Voss. Therefore, it is not Kathy, often referred to as "psychopomp" by Hurtle, but Rhoda that guides him towards the infinite. Kathy's mother supports this interpretation by saying: "Miss Courtney is of the earth she is *strong* and would carry us all on her back – or so I would say – to the end" (613). This remark adds a positive dimension to Rhoda's hunched back by transforming her into a Christ-like figure. White's major characters, who suffer for their unique spirit or physicality but never lose the spirit of inquiry, often undergo such a metamorphosis in the end.

In the final phase of Hurtle's life, a lightning of revelation literally strikes him. The elderly painter has a stroke while walking on the street, which results in his losing control of words and the right side of his body. His "falling down" on the pavement paradoxically turns his eyes towards "the extra indigo sky," which becomes a key word to solve "the last and first secret" (549). One can associate the colour with a series of water imagery: Hero's Greek sea; "endless still water" (540) of Hurtle's painting in which embryo-like Kathy floats; "the Infernal River" (598) where his psychopomp is taking him. In White novels, "blue" symbolizes the beginning, like the water in the womb, and the end, the colour of the celestial sky. It is also associated with creativity as in the case of Alf's maternal river in Riders in the Chariot. Again in The Vivisector, the colour suggests Hurtle's ascent from the human sea to the infinite sky.

"Stroked by God" (613), the painter becomes "the great Invalid" as the fourth epigraph to the text, quoted from Arthur Rimbaud's Théorie du Voyant, foretells: "He becomes beyond all others the great Invalid, the great Criminal, the great Accursed One – and the Supreme Knower. For he reaches the unknown."

His loss of control enables him to release his body from conscious will. While his former

paintings are "the windows to [his] actual, *willed life*" (572), his last painting is the window to "the unknown," only reached by intuition. The "stroke" probably connotes the stroke of a brush by the hand of God; his half dead body has now become His canvas. Acquitted of theory and technique, he also becomes an instrument:

> An immensity of space had given him his visual freedom, or more: he was being painted with, and through, and on. While conscious of his articulated crab's claw going through its usual jerky motions, the strokes themselves on the primed surface often surprised by being unlike what he would have expected, or intended, certainly never during the blaze of his controlled technique, not even since physical limitations had reduced him to niggling round the edges of totality. (614)

It seems that the unconscious creativity explicit here alludes to Jung, whose ideas White adopted in some of his preceding novels.

As if to crush his last attempt to "reach higher" (617) by will-power, Hurtle has a second and final stroke (617). In the dissolving consciousness, his last words resound in his mind, "obvi indi-ggoddd" (617). It can be read as: obviously, I in God and God in I.[14] God thus emerges from the immensity of indigo when Hurtle lets go of pride, theory and technique.

The reader realizes from this ending that through The Vivisector White presents the path of a soul to reach the unknown. The pursuit of beauty by the artist is a model of that process, as the first epigraph by the painter Ben Nicholson states: "As I see it, painting and religious experience are the same thing, and what we are all searching for is the understanding and realization of inifinity." It is only that "infinity" lies beyond reason, and the dissolving mind alone may know the answer.

Conclusion

As we have seen, The Vivisector explores vast ranges of issues surrounding the artist-protagonist. Around the central image of vivisection, an arabesque of human relationships is weaved: pseudo family ties, love affairs, life with a hunch-backed sister and nurturing of a spiritual child. These connections are formed through, and characterized by, the politics of class, art, sexuality and most significantly, spiritual affinity. To be an artist is the protagonist's only and final vindication for any failure in these relationships. This self-identification is the single fixed point for the artist-seeker who carries many borders within him.

The protagonist of The Vivisector is repeatedly accused of being "cruel" because of the way he renders his models in his paintings. The question is, who is cruel? One wonders whether those who flatly reject his art are not also cruel. Aesthetic criteria themselves are under examination in the text, where we witness the challenge of the author against Australian standards of art at the time. It is our task to verify the development of the seed that Patrick White sowed in the soil of Australian literature.

Notes

1) Patrick White, "The Prodigal Son," Critical Essays on Patrick White, ed. Peter Wolfe (Boston: G.K.Hall & Co., 1990) 22.

2) White, "Patrick White," Critical Essays on Patrick White, ed. Peter Wolfe (Boston: G.K.Hall & Co., 1990) 26.

3) White, "Patrick White" 25.

4) White, "Patrick White" 25.

5) White, "The Prodigal Son" 23.

6) Located at Heidelberg, "Heide" was one of the most significant centers for avant-garde artists in the 1940s. Around John and Sunday Reed gathered artists such as Joy Hester, Albert Tucker, and most importantly, Sidney Nolan. See chapter 9, "Art, Myth, and Society: the Australian Avant-garde 1939-50" in Andrew Sayers, Australian Art, Oxford History of Art (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 155-173.

7) Hurtle's craftsmanship seems to be a direct lineage of the blacksmith Los in William Blake's plate, "A Divine Image," which is among four epigraphs to the text:

> Cruelty has a Human Heart,
> And Jealousy a Human Face;
> Terror the Human Form Divine,
> And Secrecy the Human Dress.
>
> The Human Dress is forged in Iron,
> The Human Form a firely Forge,
> The Human Face a Furnace seal'd,
> The Human Heart its hungry Gorge.

Blake critics agree that these verses were not included in The Songs of Experience due to their extreme savageness.

8) White, The Vivisector (London: Vintage, 1994) 9. All future references to the book are to this edition, cited parenthetically in the text.

9) White recollects the Blitz in an essay: "There is nothing like a rain of bombs to start one trying to assess one's own achievement." White, "The Prodigal Son" 21.

10) At a glance it is apparent that Hurtle shares his intuition with Arthur Brown, the divine fool in The Solid Mandala. The central theme of this novel is the attempted unity of intuition and reason/intellect, and its ultimate failure. The simplistic Arthur tries to take his intellectual twin brother Waldo in his world of love, but paradoxically drives him to suicide. Hurtle seems to be a character on his way to unite two qualities, like Blake's Los, who tries to recover his lost half, Enitharmon. Arthur is also aware of innate cruelty in human nature, as he writes in his poem: "my heart is bleeding for the Viviseckshunist / Cordelia is bleeding for her father's life / all Mary in the end bleed / but do not complane because they know they cannot have it any other way" (SM 212-213). As this instance shows, The Vivisector extends some of the crucial themes White explored in the previous novel.

11) See Helen Verity Hewitt, Patrick White, Painter Manqué: Paintings, Painters and Their Influence on His Writing (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2002) Chapter 8.

12) White, Voss (London: Penguin, 1960) 447.

13) White, "The Prodigal Son" 23.

14) Karin Hansson further associates "I" with the "eye" image. Her observation seems appropriate because the dissecting eye of Hurtle is associated, in his psyche, with that of God. As painting is established upon the dynamics of gaze, "eye" is certainly a pivotal image in the text. See Hansson, The Warped Universe: A Study of Imagery and Structure in Seven Novels by Patrick White (Lund:

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