

# PATRICK WHITE'S WORLD: NATURE/MADNESS—PATHS TO REDEMPTION AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

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At the very core of Patrick White's world lies a profound longing for divine realization. His solitary figures, all flawed on some level, whether emotionally or psychically, silently struggle with this intensely relentless desire for transcendence. Because of this innate need his protagonists journey to self-knowledge in diverse and unexpected ways. Characteristically this attainment always comes at a price—institutionalization, death or societal rejection. Spiritual awareness is not depicted as a blissful, almighty state but as a deep recognition of things as they are and are meant to be. As exemplified in *The Aunt's Story* and *The Tree of Man*, this spiritual truth is arrived at through the power of nature and/or the perception of madness; two quite disparate elements that merge naturally and unequivocally to create a basically ordinary character into one of supernatural sensibilities.

Nature, the Australian bush, in its dual manifestation of beauty and brutality both reflects and provokes the spiritual transformation and is responsible for the individual's moment of enlightenment. Nature is the subtle but potent emanation of God. White embraces with conviction this pantheistic notion as opposed to traditional Christian Church exhortations of eternal life and salvation. With sardonic wit he exposes orthodox religion to be the antithesis of a true religious experience. The individual's acceptance and recognition of the ineffableness of nature is truly illuminating. It is through nature and by nature's grace that we are able to see our true Self.

Madness/eccentricity, on the other hand, allows the characters to be true to themselves from the very beginning and thus they have the freedom to fathom and explore different levels of being with impunity until the end when societal boundaries

of human behaviour, understanding and acceptance are breached and it precipitates the final step of society's denial and negation of an individual's mystical experience. It is also through craziness that we may arrive at our true Being.

*The Aunt's Story* (1948), 'a novel about a wandering spinster going mad in a world on the brink of violence (Marr 237),' is an original and absorbing tale of chaos and lucidity, brutal truths and exotic fantasies, stolen identities and fabrications. In the end it is the story of the discovery of one's true Self and the total acceptance of the consequences it entails.

The novel, structurally divided into three distinctive parts, follows intimately the internal and external life of Theodora Goodman. The first part, Meroe, the family home, named by an earlier owner after its Ethiopian counterpart, introduces us to a plain, unattractive girl 'deep of understanding (31).'

Emotionally rejected by a frivolous and unloving mother and neglected by a silent, ineffectual father, Theodora's emotional and psychic levels come to light. Comparable to this household of mediocrity is the barren landscape of:

....black volcanic hills....with....tussocks grey in winter, in summer yellow, that the black snakes threaded, twining and slippery, and the little unreliable creek, whose brown water became in summer white mud. The house looked over the flat from a slight rise, from against a background of skeleton trees. But there was no melancholy about the dead trees of Meroe. They were too far removed, they were the abstraction of trees, with their roots in Ethiopia (20).

In this minimalist landscape of primal colours and contours she too, like the lifeless trees in her vicinity, is an abstraction. Her roots, her quintessential being is elsewhere. She recognizes it in the hawk.

But the act of the hawk, which she watched hawk-like, was a moment of shrill beauty that rose above the endlessness of bones. The red eye spoke of worlds that were brief and fierce (33).

Her connection to nature is neither romantic nor symbolic but truly intuitive. It is here, at Meroe, the mythical centre of the universe, with the 'red eye' of consummate

knowledge penetrating her psyche, that she begins to recognize and acknowledge her diverse selves, facing them fearlessly and fiercely.

A hunting spree with Frank, (a neighbour and romantic possibility) and her sister Fanny, is our first clear indication into her mental state. Quietly pleading with Frank not to kill the little hawk settled on a branch she then proceeds to take its life when Frank misses.

Theodora had begun to laugh. She knew with some fear and pleasure that she had lost control. This, she said, is the red eye (70). ....She took aim, and it was like aiming at her own red eye. She could feel the blood-beat the other side of the membrane. And she fired. And it fell (71).

With this initial disturbing attempt at quelling those intimations of plurality and psychic fragmentation, reflected and identified in the bird, and now deeply ensconced in her very being, she then begins to nurture, in a sense, that destiny that she so lucidly visualizes.

After that Theodora often thought of the little hawk she had so deliberately shot. I was wrong she said, but I shall continue to destroy myself, right down to the last of my several lives (71).

This prophetic vision materializes itself in the second part, at the Jardin Exotique.

With the death of her mother, Theodora, now middle-aged is at last freed to live her many predicted lives. It is in France at the Hotel du Midi where her journey through Europe has finally deposited her that the interplay of personalities begins. The release and transition is as natural and inevitable as rivers flowing out to sea. It is a brilliant, dazzling madness replete with vivid, tangible beings, exposing irony, contradictions, and truths—collective, secret parts of Theodora. She traverses the line between reality and irreality with ease and consistency. Both her subjective and objective universes being equally valid and true. The actual moment of letting go is not obvious. Nor the reason. But it is in the garden.

Notre jardin exotique, Monsieur Durand had said, but his pronoun possessed only

diffidently. It was obvious enough now, Theodora knew. This was a world in which there was no question of possession. In its own right it possessed and rejected.... The garden was untouchable (140).

The lushness of the *jardin exotique* as opposed to the barrenness of Meroe, along with the quaintly exotic configuration of guests, all singular characters with dark, painful pasts and indeterminate futures, empower her to effortlessly, as it were, steal from their lives and construct intricately detailed scenarios. It is a silent theft. With uncanny insight she builds realms from wisps of unexpressed desires, the scent of failure and disillusionment, faded, jaded, memories. She assumes many and varied roles and identities, each distinct and meaningful, voicing inner truths.

As Ludmilla, Sokolnikov's (a pseudo aristocratic Russian emigree) illusionary sister-incarnation, she delves in the question of religion.

But you believe in God, said Alyosha Sergei. (Sokolnikov)

I believe in this table, she said.

A vulgar yellow thing that we have because we have nothing else.

But convincing, she said. It has such touching legs.

And because she knew, she smiled.

Ludmilla, he said, leaning forward, what a beautiful, luminous thing is faith.

He held his head to prevent it bouncing.

Do you also believe in the saints? asked Alyosha Sergei

I believe in a pail of milk, said Theodora, with the blue shadow round the rim

And the cow's breath still in it?

And the cow's breath still in it (152).

The concept of God and faith, thus being reduced on the one level, to an equation of tangibility and visibility easily attainable to those of a pure and simple nature, White then proceeds to expound its opposite, through the personae of Lieselote, the very Eastern philosophical/religious notion of the ego.

We must destroy everything, everything, even ourselves. Then at last when there is nothing, perhaps we shall live (168).

Very clearly Theodora's madness is not mental degeneration but in fact a regeneration. In the same deep sense that she penetrated and identified with the little hawk, she takes on the lives of others to elucidate the .. many in one.. This process of selves-destruction allows the spectrum of spiritual paths to be elucidated. It is a distillation and refining that irrevocably leads to a spiritual awakening.

When the fire started by the real Lieselote destroys the hotel and some of its guests it also brings to a natural conclusion the pastiche of personalities inhabiting her consciousness. Like the phoenix rising from the ashes, Theodora, intact but inextricably deeper into herself, decides to return home to Australia, via America. It is here in the yellow corn landscape of America that she arrives at her redemption. Tearing to shreds her return ticket home and abandoning her very name she is finally liberated of past incarnations.

The third section of the novel, titled *Holstius*, is the clarification of the nature of her being. Through the voice of *Holstius*, a benevolent, wise-father apparition, ostensibly the dead owner of the deserted house where she has taken refuge, she discourses and reflects on the nature of duality.

You cannot reconcile joy and sorrow, *Holstius* said. Or flesh and marble, or illusion and reality, or life and death. For this reason Theodora Goodman you must accept. And you have already found that one constantly deludes the other into taking fresh shapes, so that there is sometimes little to choose between the reality of illusion and the illusion of reality. Each of your several lives is evidence of this (278).

Having now reached a certain clarity of mind and closer to 'pureness of being (269),' the acceptance and resolution of her true self comes once again in the image of a bird. Not the penetrating red eye of the little hawk she had destroyed, but 'the brown bird with the velvet eye. Even at close quarters it was not critical (278).'

With the insight of one who has transcended quotidian reality and having arrived at the point of recognizing the nature of her being and what it physically and spiritually entails, she allows, with outward passivity and humour to be taken to town. Physical confinement is no curtailment of her essential Being and with this knowledge comes

her salvation. We are left with an image of secret understanding.

Her face was long and yellow under the great yellow hat. The hat sat straight, but the doubtful rose trembled and glittered, leading a life of its own (287).

After the dizzying flights into Theodora's mind we are plumbd to earth literally, with the silent and solitary figure of Stan Parker. The novel begins with trees, space, separateness. It also ends with the enigma of trees. Where Theodora Goodman is the abstraction of nature, Stan Parker is the solid embodiment, deeply rooted. Where Theodora exploits her many voices, Stan's inner voice is one, constant. Their paths are different but the end the same.

In *The Tree of Man*, (1955) the outback, biblical-like in its description, evokes the perfect metaphor of an Eden created out of a deep longing for God. The juxtaposition of the simplicity of the story to the complexity of the human heart and spiritual denouement gives depth and credence to the character who is struggling to come to an understanding of things divine. The novel begins with a homage to the beauty of trees.

A cart drove between the two big stringybarks and stopped. These were the dominant trees in that part of the bush, rising above the involved scrub with the simplicity of true grandeur (9).

Having found his physical centre 'of being somewhere (9)' in the tangible world of bush and trees, ironically in the middle of nowhere, he begins with his new bride, to carve a life, to create children, to fight fires, rescue people from floods, to go to war, to church on Sundays, to pray. Stan Parker is a truly good man. He is solid and dependable and in harmony with nature. Deeply respected and admired by all he is nonetheless unknown and unknowable to those closest to him. He does not, nor cannot reveal himself to a wife desirous of possessing his very being, nor a son and daughter resentful of a silent and emotionally uncommunicative father. This is his flaw; his inability to give of himself. He is a man in an emotional void in search of a spiritual core, at singular moments verging on transcendence. His most intrinsic needs are not for human connections. His inner life, intertwined like the roots of his

beloved trees, unfurls and unfolds in the search for God. This paradoxical proximity to God and yet distance from humanity reveals the fundamental notion that self-realization comes through some kind of sacrifice and that it can only ever be a solitary, individual experience.

The novel simply structured, plotless, fluid, centers on the holy alliance between man and nature and the message that if we break this rapport there can only be destruction of the Self. This is represented in the form of Stan's son, Ray. Unlike his father, lacking reverence and respect for nature, Ray's life epitomizes meaninglessness and emptiness. By doing violence to nature and man and thus severing the inherent subtle bonds, he does violence to himself. He denies the union between man and nature which leads to God.

The physical landscape reflects the darkness of the heart and the utter desolation of the spirit, when together, father and son go for what ostensibly is a meaningful drive.

There beneath that tree, under which they had pulled up, a gnarled difficult native with harsh, staring leaves, the man and the boy were resenting each other for their separateness.... That part of the bush was very grey. Its symbols would not be read (222).

The perceptible symbols of nature are replete in the physical and spiritual life of Stan Parker. Trees not only sustain and energize him but they are the very forces that lead to his moment of revelation, the foundation of his Being. As he is being verbally assailed by a young convert, who has penetrated the inner sanctum of the garden, pontificating to the power of the Gospel, and salvation, Stan, now an old man, sitting at the very centre, encapsulated by his holy trees, professes that perhaps he is not meant to be saved. It is at this very moment of letting go and verbalizing with quiet resignation, that Stan Parker 'was illuminated (476)'.

In a Patrick White-like coup de grace, juxtaposing the mundane— 'the jewel of spittle (476),' to the sublime— 'that is God (476),' pointing to the spit, he arrives at the ultimate Truth that 'One, and no other figure, is the answer to all sums (477)'. Stan Parker dies with this knowledge. The masterly restraint in this revelation is truly liberating.

The final chapter begins and ends with the mystique of trees: their perpetuity and regeneration. The imperceptible union between man and nature is strikingly transmogrified in the simple image of his recently found grandson walking through the trees:

Putting out shoots of green thought (480).

Both novels contain profoundly eloquent portrayals of solitary beings, not content with the vicissitudes of life, the ordinariness of existence but longing for a true transcendence. Integral to their approach and discovery of this Truth, they are faced with spiritual dilemmas, the undeniable sacredness of nature and the relinquishing of the self. With humility and lack of rancor they embrace their divine enlightenment and take it with them—Stan Parker to his grave and Theodora Goodman to her mental asylum.

#### Notes

- 1 Patrick White (1912–1990): Australia's Nobel prize winner for Literature 1973.

#### References

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