CHAPTER I

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The very term Australian Experience may seem a repetition of the American Experience a concept, that has been examined from many perspectives, in a repeated attempt to throw fresh light on American Cultural History.

Both Australia and America were colonies of Britain and dumping ground for the flotsam and jetsam of the English society- in the Australian context, its criminals. Both were virgin territories and both outgrew the parent – child relationship with England. In fact it would not be a serious exaggeration to say that Australia as an entity came into being because of America. The 1776 American Revolution meant that England would have to look elsewhere for its crime – drain, and Australia conveniently discovered by captain Cook was handy. Thus the new colony was born soon after the two revolutions of historic importance had taken place - The American and the French; the moving spirit of both revolutions – Democracy and Liberty shaping the ethos of the new continent.

That the Australians have had a distinct experience, spiritual and metamorphic is clearly revealed in their evolving art and literature. Viewed in retrospect, the Australian experience could have been an experience so traumatic, that it might well have unhinged a lesser people. The sense of imbalance that the vagaries of Australian weather, landscape and vegetation created has been depicted so often, that it seems
almost trite to mention it. However it plays a significant role in the Australian consciousness.

To quote Marcus Clarke: “In Australia alone is to be found the Grotesque, the Weird, the Strange scribbling of nature learning how to write. Some see no beauty in our trees without shade, our flowers without perfume, our birds who cannot fly; and our beasts who have not yet learnt to walk on all fours (3).

For centuries English Literature had symbolised evil through inversions of organic nature. Shakespeare has horse eating horse, lions roaming the streets and untimely comets, to comment upon or herald some foulness or alteration against the natural law. Though Australia has none of these things, one feels Shakespeare would have been content with running monster birds, animals that used their tails as a fifth leg when they ran, and seasons set upside-down as his symbols of inversion. It would have been a jolt to the Psyche to see that symbols of inversion or something akin to it were in Australia the reality. Australia, Judith Wright states: “[...] seemed either a prison, a land to be escaped from as soon as possible or to be endured till death, or to the few who saw Utopia in her, a new country a country of hope and faith” (21).

Their Psyche had to re-orient itself, something that takes time and intense effort and even more difficult, they had to re-create new symbols – symbols that avoided the crudity of simple reversals of the earlier symbols, but which at the same time were authentic and relevant to their experience.

How successfully they have managed to do this, is best demonstrated in their literature. That becomes the testing ground. This does not necessarily mean the
creation of a new literary genre or technique. What do the Australian Writers do? To quote William Walsh: "If he is a serious writer he cannot but be involved in the business of accumulating the spiritual experience of the race. He is concerned to draw the exact curve of the specific sensibility of his own time and nation. He is the analyst and critic of his society" (12).

What is the nature of spiritual experience in Australia? What are the factors that gave rise to it? Is it only the strange alien landscape with its disconcerting topsy-turvy? That would be a drastic simplification unfair to the Australians. Something more cataclysmic than a surrealistic landscape is needed towards the creating of a rich experience, an experience that can be transmuted into art and give that work of art lasting value, not just historical or topical importance.

Even a cursory glance at Australia reveals that there was ample material for an experience of profundity and depth. Here was a country whose original inhabitant could easily be at home in a world a few thousand years younger – pre-historic living symbols of a past the European usually encountered only in books.

Into this set up there comes the European, carrying with him not only the weight of his traditional past, but a sharp awareness of the present as well – he is very much a product of the present. Added to this strange juxtaposition of past and present is the new, virtually untried country: "This is the country of the future"(28) , says Mr.Bonner in Voss (1957).

But apart from the landscape there were two other factors which later literature will show to be important if not more than the setting. They are the Aborigines and the Convicts. The first, the civilised world had forgotten such people
existed, the second, they would dearly like to forget about them. There are certain delicious ironies in the later situation. England was trying to make itself into a model country, free of the undesirables of its society – the criminals. It was an oblique way, an attempt towards perfection. Australia presented itself as remote enough and god – forsaken to be a fit receptacle for these rejects.

Considerable stress has been placed by writers and commentators on the cultural crisis that resulted because of Australia’s desperate and sometimes laughable attempts to measure up to the mother country. Looking so persistently at one side of the coin can make one miss the irony. For the forming of new colonies like America and Australia, where pioneering kind of life was necessary, meant, that the culture of the mother – country, its society and norms would be seriously questioned by the new world, which could not afford either redundant or obsolete norms. Inevitably the values the new society carves for itself becomes a critique of the values the mother country lives by.

Both England and Australia were engaged in discarding: England its convicts, but Australia’s discarding could be far more damning than Britain’s for it was not so much the casting off of people than something much deeper, attitudes and way of life. Thus Australia’s Ultra-radical democracy is a direct reaction to British conservatism. But the irony does not end here. It continues with more ramifications. For as part of the great Australian dream is the concept of a society that is purely white and which found political expression in Australia’s white foreign policy.

Here again is the distorted attempt at creating a model civilisation, that pervasive and recurring dream of a new Eden that so haunts the colonising European.
The recreation of a new Eden was a serious attempt at the infinite, which meant had to discard or suppress the irritant factor, the irritant here being the aborigines. Harry Reynolds in his paper entitled *Progress, Morality and Dispossession of the Aboriginals* (1874) states: "The destruction of the Aboriginal society was more than an accidental and unfortunate corollary of encroaching settlement. It was indeed one of the proofs of progress, a benchmark to use while measuring the triumph of Civilization over Savagery" (310).

Australians, he commented, in this rationalisation of cruelty went beyond national reason and offered biological ones to celebrate their passing. The extermination of the Aborigines was psychologically necessary for the Australians. They had no place in their concept of Eden. They were besides, as Harry Reynolds states, beautiful examples of how a weaker race naturally fades out when a stranger (or stronger) takes over it. It could also be, that the usurping white man did not like the reminder tacitly made by the bewildered savages, that once they were like them.

It is quite clear, in assessing the more spiritual aspects of the Australian experience, that the white Australian has abused and therefore destroyed the metaphysical possibilities of an aboriginal – white relationship. The aboriginals by the very nature of their lifestyle, their sensual closeness to the earth had probably a far better idea of the archetypal Eden than the white man. This is the theme that Australian writers and poets would examine in their works later.

There could never have been a peaceful aboriginal – white confrontation. The clash was necessary but avoidable. It was inevitable that the dominating culture should have disintegrated the weaker one, like Chinua Achebe’s *Umolofia* in *Things*
Fall Apart (1958). There are inherent weaknesses within the culture itself which makes it vulnerable to such an onslaught. Among the aborigines it was the discursive nature of their tribes. They could never be consolidated into one group to fight a common enemy. Besides, their set up, their values, could just not cope with those of the 'civilized' world. They were hopelessly ill equipped for it.

But if the white Australian has squandered his chances of creating a synthesis between the aboriginal and himself, thereby adding to the Australian experience a note of rich humanity, (the idea is not sc naïve as it appears; the conquering Aryans landed in India, and after quite successfully beating down the Dravidian resistance, set about propitiating the alien gods of their new country, composing hymns to the Sun and Wind and Fire, imbibing the Dravidian culture and imparting some of their own, eventually even marrying them) the aboriginal tragedy has reaped rich dividends in literature. The guilt that it has generated has made the more introspective and honest writers come out with genuinely beautiful poems and novels. Though Lang thought it a general appointment of Divine Providence that both the Indian Wigwam and the Aboriginal wind break “should be carried utterly away by the floodtide of European colonists” (308), it is to the Australian’s credit that in his literature at least he has done more justice to the Aboriginal than the American has to the Indian.

Judith Wright, however, thinks Australian poetry in particular hardly does justice to the aboriginal – it either presents him in hackneyed terms or ignores him altogether. Judith Wright Comments:“Our history has been reflected in the poetry we have produced through those years … Poetry reflects social attitudes at least as much
in what it leaves out as what it puts in; in what it tacitly assumes as in what it affirms [...]

Judith Wright herself would break this impasse with her beautiful tragic poem *Nigger's Leap* (1975): New England. Commenting on this poem, Jack Healy states:

Darkness, night, the sea, which is over running the range of hills, which overran the aborigines, is threatening to over run Western society in Australia in a time of World War. It is from a sense of impending destruction, which reaches out to the roots and future of civilisation itself, that Judith Wright discovers again, becomes vulnerable to, the silent wounds of Australian history. Fear is the handmaid of insight.

While Les Murray, "[...] sees with a bitter clearness the Aboriginal settlements into which we have driven the survivors". She adds "yet few writers, even now, face the reality of either the black or the white situation" (138).

Judith Wright concludes more hopefully:

But the old attitudes of contempt and silence have been seriously undermined by the increasing publication of studies of Aboriginal culture and the Aboriginal plight. We can hear the voices of Aboriginals themselves; they are writing their own poems, acting their own dramas, this time in a language we cannot pretend not to understand. (150)
She qualifies this however by ending dryly:

It will be interesting to see what kind of poems emerge from our newly changing relationship with Aboriginals. Perhaps it will be a poetry of self-examination, of protest against ourselves. But of course there is the simpler alternative which has served us so well—we may not write about Aboriginals at all. (150)

Fiction seems to fare better than poetry when it came to dealing with the aboriginal. Long before Judith Wright's poignant poems about them, there appeared Eleanor Clark's *The Timeless Land* (1941), Katherine Sussanah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929) and Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1938). They deal with the theme skilfully, compassionately and sometimes bitterly. But it needed writers like Patrick White, Randolph Stow and Thomas Keneally to put the whole tragic fact in the right perspective.

If the Aborigines are treated with less than justice in Australian literature and are sometimes ignored altogether, the other skeleton in Australia's cupboard—its convict history is treated in all genres in detail and the convicts themselves have contributed no mean amount to Australian Literature. More important, they have in their aptitude of defiance and devilry, in their obsession to make a clean break with the past, rejecting all the institutions that upheld it, made a very distinct contribution to the shaping of the Australian ethos.

The convicts heighten the Edenic aspect in the Australian experience. Australia gave them the chance to have a break. The idea of an Australian Eden, inevitably reminds us of the great American dream to start a new Eden in America.
But whilst the latter Eden had strong religious overtones, the Australian Eden meant primarily a chance to start afresh with strong materialistic overtones, which was not absent amongst the American Puritans either.

This does not mean that the idea of an Australian Eden was entirely devoid of any spiritual or metaphysical content. Quiros called it the South land of the Holy Ghost. Randolph Stow quotes the historian Manning Clark’s indirect comment on Quiros by James McAuley. “Quiros, with his ideal of a land dictated to the Holy spirit, showed that not all those who were driven to search for a south land were the servants of Mammon. So in time some of the inhabitants of that land looked to him for spiritual comfort and refreshment in a materialistic age” (163).

Most of the free settlers left England with thoughts of material gain and very little thought of Australia itself. But always there was a sea – change not withstanding their expatriate nostalgia. So an important aspect in the Australian experience was its metamorphic nature (a metamorphosis which owed as much to the land as to other factors). Australia as a transmuting agent where Micawbers became magistrates, reckless younger sons richer and more respectable than the symbolic older brother in the mother country, and transported convicts pillars of their society there is an almost poetic congruity between this and the inversions in Australian geography, weather, vegetation and birds and animals.

These characters embody a small but crucial vignette of the Australian experience. Intense optimism, the chance to slough off their old skin completely, and simultaneously despair, pessimism, the feeling that this land was strange, alien, inhospitable and would never really become their own. This is not the only duality
that is present in the Australian experience. It is a motif with many ramifications, and such a prevailing one, that it is almost a phenomenon, and it is a motif that starts with white Australian history itself.

Judith Wright in her essay *Australia’s Double Aspect* (1964) comments on “the two strains of feeling – for the conservative, the sense of exile and for the radical, the sense of liberty, of a new chance” (2).


All is fear inspiring and gloomy. No bright fancies are linked with the memories of the mountains. Hopeless explorers have named them out of their suffering – Mount Misery, Mount Dreadful, Mount Despair.

(146)

Now compare this with a passage from T.I. Moore –

Of all the social patterns expressed in Australian Literature none find a clearer and more undeniable embodiment than[...]. Earth[...] vigour and humanism[...] It appears in the literature in four distinct, if closely allied, forms: In its purely literary aspect it emerges as an energy that is characteristics of the writing; on the philosophical side it is revealed as an emphasis on will, effort, and action[...].(146)

All these opposing myths and contradictions reveal a people with considerably more complexity and subtlety in their thought patterns, than they are given credit for. It is easy to subscribe to the notion of an Australian who is naïve, basically innocent and brashly confident – who can never be really evil. But the writers quoted above,
show quite clearly the ambiguity in Australian culture – an ambiguity that could only be the result of sensitive introspection – showing clearly the Yes and No that exists simultaneously in every culture.

Perhaps that is why, there is a sizable portion of Australian literature that is constantly pointing backwards, deliberately rekindling memories that have faded, or resurrecting events that are history. Judith Wright, Randolph Stow, Patrick White, Thomas Keneally and Savier Herbert, to mention only a few, are constant in their works, through a revival of certain areas of the Australian experience, adding sensitivity, urgency and a finer historical imagination to the literature.

Australian Literature’s evolution spans over a period of two hundred years. All Australian literature of the nineteenth country, since the first settlement in 1788, relates broadly to the imagery of bush life. In Australia, it was environment that dominated; the place was unlike Europe. The landscape there was new and strange, it drew the writer’s attention. For the sake of convenience we may divide Australian literature into three periods, a. a colonial period, extending from 1788; b. a nationalist period terminated by World War I; and c. a modern period following World War I.

The earliest miscellaneous writings were produced by convicts, emancipators, travellers and explorers. New South Wales of 1800 was a convict outpost, a prison romantically remote but still a prison. The first Australian novel was the disguised autobiography of a convict. Henry Savery’s Quintus Servinton (1830). The convict was felt instinctively by writers to be the symbol on which they built their fictional world.
Australian writers responded significantly to the Depression of the 930s. In the thirties and forties, several writers produced short stories in which the depression figures as an ingredient in the narrative. Among the more memorable ones are Vance Palmer's *The Trap*, Don Edward's *What Chance* and John Morison's *Christ, the Devil and The Lunatic*.

A representative work of the Depression period is the novel *Power Without Glory*. Frank Hardy has recorded that his main intention in writing this book was to show the face, the livid face behind the democratic façade that (he) had seen in the 30s.

There grew up a generation of "Bush Balladists" and narrative writers who were widely published by the Sydney Bulletin. The leading writers were A. B. Paterson and Henry Lawson. Lawson was the best of the writers of this group and has been regarded as one of the world's masters of short fiction.

Contemporary Australian literature is marked by great diversity. Robert Fitz Gerald and Kenneth Slessor have contributed significantly to the Australian Poetry. The main feature of Fitz Gerald's work has been its consistent intellectual challenge.

There has been a phenomenal growth of activity in the theatre also. This is especially reflected in the plays of Douglas Stewart and Ray Lawlor. Stewart's work anticipates in many ways the course of Australian Drama in the renaissance of the 1950s. His plays are at once a counterpart in drama of the cult of historical narrative in modern Australian verse. In Lawlor's *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955), Australian drama seems to have found a new footing.
Since the last War, the writers who have achieved world-wide prominence are Judith Wright and A.D. Hope in poetry, and Patrick White in the novel. Australian writing in the recent decades has acquired great breadth and diversity. There has been a steady flow of European migrants to Australia since the War, a fast industrial development and an increase in urban population. All these changes have been reflected in recent Australian writing. Judith Wright's poetry is marked by emotion, humanity and nostalgia. She is perhaps the most womanly of the Australian women poets. Her first collection *The Moving Image* (1946) made a great impact on the contemporary literary scene. She broke away from the stock attitude of the bush-balladist and put an end to nature poetry in the Wordsworth-Kendall mode.

A.D. Hope, a great intellectual and learned scholar, may be regarded as a University Wit. He has been prolific and all his works have a great complexity and richness. The appearance of Hope's *Collected Poems*, (1930-1965) declared the range of his output and justified his conception of poetry as a "Celebration of the World" an act of joy. Amongst the modern Australian poets, it is necessary to include James McAuley and Douglas Stewart.

As K.R.Srinivsa Iyengar mentioned in his *Commonwealth Literature: Themes and Their Variations* (1970), "When you come to think of it, there are not many themes in literature. Perhaps there are only three; man in relation to nature, man in relation to men and men in relation to God" (18), Australian Literature seemed to give importance to the link between Nature, God and Man.

Patrick Victor Martindale White who wrote under the pseudonym P.V. M, English born Australian novelist, playwright, memorist, short story writer and poet
was not an exception in selecting one or all of these themes. The first child of a wealthy Australian couple, White was born while his parents were visiting London. He began writing plays at an early age and attended schools in Australia until the age of thirteen, then his parents sent him to Cheltenham college, a boarding school near Gloucester, England. After graduating in 1929, White returned to Australia and worked for two years as a Jackeroo, or ranch hand. During this period he published a small volume of poetry and began writing novels. In 1932 White returned to England and entered Cambridge University, where he studied French and German. Receiving his Bachelor's degree in 1935, White remained in London but frequently travelled throughout United States and the European continent. After serving as an intelligence officer in the Royal Air Force during World War II, he finally returned to Australia.

His feelings about his country when he returned are beautifully summed up in the following lines written by him in an article on his own work *The Prodigal Son* (1958).

Returning sentimentally to a country I had left in my youth what had I really found? "[...] In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the school master and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind eyes[...]" (14).

But his response to this horror was not to escape by a second migration, it was to create a work in which the conditions that appalled him would be not merely analysed but transcended.
[...] inspite of myself I began to conceive another novel. Because the void I had to fill was so immense, I wanted to try to suggest in this book every possible aspect of life, through the lives of an ordinary man and woman. But at the same time I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people, and incidentally, my own life since my return. (14)

That book is The Tree of Man (1955). White's statement about its genesis is an admirable illustration of the theme of this research; for it tellingly suggests the way in which the search for a national identity can be blended with the search for a personal and metaphysical identity in a country which does not in fact conduct either search with any vigour or conviction. White's effort was to probe the ordinary in the very act of creating a rounded sense of it; to probe it to the depths at which the probing came actually to transform it in the mode of art; and in transforming it, to purge his own experience of its dross of bitterness. No dimension of the artist's responsibility is missing from this account; and White's achievement in The Tree of Man, Riders in the Chariot (1961) and Voss admirably fulfils his intention.

Awarded the gold medal of the Australian Literary Society in 1941, White's first published novel, Happy Valley (1939), takes place in a fictional rural region of Australia during the mid-1930's and chronicles the events leading up to the murder of an adultress and the subsequent death of her murderer. Although Happy Valley was generally well received, White refused to allow its republication for fear that the family on which several characters in the novel were based would sue him for libel.
The Living and the Dead (1941), White’s next novel centers on a middle aged bachelor who reflects upon his childhood and family history. This work is chiefly noted for its development of stream of consciousness narration and use of flashbacks. White’s third novel, The Aunt’s Story (1948) is generally considered his first major work. The narrative begins with the death of its eccentric female protagonist, Theodora Goodman, and moves backward to reveal her childhood in Australia and travels in France and America. Described by White as “a work which celebrates the human spirit” (390), this novel portrays Theodora’s increasing sense of alienation, which has been interpreted both as her mental disintegration and as her progression toward greater self-awareness. According to Nancy Winegardner Whichard The Aunt’s Story marks the emergence of White’s maturity as a writer. An interlacing framework of allegory, myth and archetype, provides a rich, seemingly evergreen form around which White constructs this and his remaining novels.

White received international recognition for his fourth novel, The Tree of Man, which concerns a pioneering Australian couple who established a farm at the turn of the twentieth century. While often faulting White’s fragmentary style, reviewers praised The Tree of Man for its focus on the experience of common individuals. The eponymous protagonist of Voss is modelled after Ludwig Leichhardt, a German explorer who disappeared while attempting to cross the interior of the Australian Continent during the 1840s. Contrasting the experience of outsiders in Australian society with those of the well-established middle class, much of the narrative alternates between Voss’s expedition across the outback, and the daily life of Laura Trevelyan, a young woman living in Sydney with whom Voss shares an
intuitive emotional bond that some commentators have described as telepathic. Critics have interpreted Voss’s journey as a metaphor for human suffering as well as a symbolic exploration of the Australian Interior.

*Riders in the Chariot* concerns the persecution of four social outcasts by the inhabitants of Sarsaparilla, a fictitious suburb of Sydney. In a letter to his publisher White asserted,

*What I want to emphasize through my four ‘Riders’—an orthodox refuge intellectual Jew, a mad Erdgeist of an Australian spinster, an evangelical laundress and a half caste Aboriginal painter— is that all faiths, whether religious, humanistic, instinctive, or the creative artist’s act of praise, are in fact one.* (391)

Critics have frequently noted White’s satirical condemnation of the stifling conformity of suburbia in his portrayal of the residents of Sarsaparilla.

White’s seventh novel, *The Solid Mandala* (1966), is likewise set in Sarsaparilla and concerns the troubled relationship between elderly twin brothers Arthur and Waldo Brown, whom some critics believe represent the emotional and intellectual sides of White’s personality. John Alfred Avant commented that *The Solid Mandala* probes further beneath the surface of human frailty than any other novel of Patrick White.

In *The Vivisector* (1970) White examines the relationship between the artist and society through his portrayal of the artistic and emotional development of a fictional Australian painter, White was awarded the Nobel Prize shortly after the publication of his ninth, novel, *The Eye of Storm* (1973). This work focuses on the
last weeks of an elderly woman who reminisces about her life and the tranquility she had experienced while temporarily stranded on an island fifteen years earlier. A Fringe of Leaves (1976) draws upon the true experiences of a British woman who was shipwrecked off the Australian Great Barrier Reef in 1836. Ellen Roxburgh, the novel’s protagonist, survives a shipwreck and is enslaved by aborigines, but returns to civilization with the aid of an escaped convict. The Twyborn Affair (1979) delineates the multiple identities of a male transsexual: while some reviewers found this work repugnant and degrading, others commended White’s compassionate view of homosexuality. Betty Falkenberg praised The Twyborn Affair as,“[..] an extraordinary novel of quest, an Odyssey through place, time and especially gender all three of which, by virtue of their boundaries, delimit and even alienate the individual from his possible selves” (391).

White appears as a character in his last novel, Memoires of Many in One, by Alex Xenophon Demirjian Gray, (1986), which he ‘edited’ from the ramblings of an elderly woman afflicted with Alzheimer’s disease. White’s short fiction is collected in The Burnt ones (1964), The Cockatoos (1975), Three Uneasy Pieces (1988). Many of these stories feature the Sarsaparillan settings and themes found in his novels are often noted for their harsh satirizing of middle class life and politics. White’s other works include plays, three volumes of poetry, and an autobiography Flaws in the Glass: A Self Portrait (1981), which focuses primarily on his early life and relates his experiences as a homosexual and a writer in Australian Society.

The arrival of Patrick White upon the Australian literary scene was a great shot in the arms of Australian enthusiasts. Here was a writer who commanded respect
internationally; his writings presented a challenge to critics. The award of the Nobel prize in 1973 was a feather in his cap. R.K. Dawan aptly passed the following comment: “Because White’s works have been able to cast their spell on readers all over the world for more than thirty years, he has gained recognition in India and elsewhere as Australia’s guru, an enchanter and sage whose words carry extra weight” (3).

White’s death in September 1990 marked the end of a great era. During his lifetime, White was an enigma; he was loved, he was hated. His writings often posed problems and common readers found it hard to relate White to his milieu. Perhaps no critic or book could project the writer in an objective and impassioned manner. This long felt need has now been fulfilled by the stupendous biographical work on Patrick White, undertaken by David Marr. Entitled *Patrick White – A Life* (1991) the book has been a phenomenal success. The astounding sale of the book speaks volumes about the popularity of Patrick White. The book is not only an account of White’s own experience but the insights, misconceptions and characters encountered and the stories heard on which he drew to write his novels.

In 1973, when Patrick White was sixty-one, he won Australia’s first Nobel Prize for literature. Between 1935 and 1989 he published eleven novels, a collection of poems and stories, a novella, eight plays, two collections of short stories, a full length autobiography and two collections of autobiographical and polemical essays and reflections. But his reputation was made by, and rests on, his novels. His work dominated Australian literature for three decades, and his influence continues to go wide and deep in the work of contemporary Australian writers.
The first detailed overview of White’s work appeared in the June 1956 issue of Meanjin, whose editor Clem Christesen had observed the publication of *The Tree of Man* by commissioning a full survey of White’s work to date. The result was a long essay by Marjorie Barnard entitled *The Four Novels of Patrick White*, discussing *Happy Valley, The Living and The Dead, The Aunt’s Story* and *The Tree of Man*. White was delighted. “A great many people have become excited over *The Tree of Man*”, he wrote to Barnard, “but it is the first time anyone has shown that I have been working towards it over the last twenty years” (103).

Until the publication of *The Tree of Man* and its aftermath, White’s fiction, while well received in the United States and to a lesser extent in Britain, had fared less well in Australia. The most famous negative Australian comment was made in A.D. Hope’s review of *The Tree of Man*. Hope, as an academic classicist, actively anti-modernist poet, inevitably called White’s writing “Pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge” (310). Not only his style but also his subject matter was regarded as suspect by realist writers and rationalist critics who found White’s mysticism unpalatable or worse.

*Happy Valley* is set in an Australian valley where nobody is happy; *The Living and the Dead*, set entirely in England, shows some of the themes, motifs and stylistic devices of White's later work. In his third novel, *The Aunt’s Story*, White began to demonstrate the complexity of his vision, give play to his originality, and extend his range. The novel explores two kinds of disintegration, with the fragmentation of Theodora’s conscious into madness paralleled by the destruction of Europe during World War II.
The two novels White published in 1950s established his reputation internationally and marked its turning point in Australia. White in later years liked to emphasise the negative reaction of critics like Hope, so rendering invisible the positive responses of those like Barnard. Voss springs from the same mythopoeic impulses as The Tree of Man and returns, indirectly, to the subject of World War II in the characterisation of its eponymous megalomaniac German explorer. Voss, elicited mixed reactions from Australian critics; it was largely in response to these that White wrote his 1958 manifesto, The Prodigal Son. “I was determined to prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary, dun coloured offspring of journalistic realism” (37). He said, in a remark that was to implant itself firmly in Australian literary history.

With the publication of Riders in the Chariot in 1961, White began to be seen as one of the country’s great artists, constructing a nation and its social history in his writing and suggesting possibilities for a spiritual dimension to life in a relentlessly secular country. In a similar vein of protest or resistance, Riders in the Chariot, with its racially assorted four main characters, was also an early model for the ideals of multiculturalism. “[A] great many ignorant native – born Australians”, he wrote in 1960.

go out of their way to encourage New Australians to drop their own standard in favour of the dreary semi – culture which exists here [but] there are also a great number of civilized old Australians who are hoping that the migrants[...] will bring something of their own cultures with them. (19)
This embrace of difference looks unremarkable now but was, for its time, extraordinary. Riders in the Chariot, while maintaining a form of realism, and certainly of social critique, also represents Australian life as having a spiritual dimension. It is, as Carole Ferrier has pointed out, “White’s simultaneous engagement with the ‘dun-coloured and the metaphysical gives his texts[…] their peculiar force”.

This is certainly true of The Solid Mandala, perhaps the most dun-coloured of White’s novels despite mysticism of its central mandala symbol and the presence of what had by this time become some of his trademarks; the pair of contrasting siblings, the outsider figure, the racially exotic characters, the magpie borrowings from religious, mysticel and psychoanalytic systems and schemes and the social comedy and critique of his by now well-established fictional Australian suburb, Sarsaparilla.

White’s next two novels, The Vivisector and The Eve of the Storm, mark one noticeable change in his work: his social critique—much of which had begun to look strident, dated, and less and less accurate in its aim—begins to give way to more complex and ambivalent characterizations. One-dimensional satirical representations of the hated suburbs with their bakelite telephones and pink chenille bedspreads like wise disappear and are replaced by a far more complex set of representations of urban Sydney.

White’s entire œuvre is marked by what Simon During calls his “rejection of community as a starting point for ethical and spiritual values as well as his emphasis on individual genius” (55); while his novels from The Vivisector onwards are indeed preoccupied with one or both of these issues, the first half of this observations is
debatable. As is emphasized by the contrasting of European with Australian characters in many of his novels and stories, an absence of any coherent sense of community in ordinary Australian life is one of the targets of White's social critique.

For the most part, his last five novels – The Vivisector, The Eye of the Storm, A Fringe of Leaves, The Twyborn Affair and Memories of Many in One – do all focus on questions and problems to do with individual subjectivity and individual consciousness, and with the transcendence of various forms of socialization and cultural differences. White's pre-occupation with class difference and with the triumph of individual genius or virtue over class origins, for example, impels him to rewrite Cinderella three times in a row: first in The Vivisector, then in The Eye of the Storm and finally in A Fringe of Leaves. In all of these novels the main characters are pulled free of humble class origins by mediocre people of a higher class who sense, and want to posses by marriage or adoption, higher superior qualities.

The Vivisector, The Eye of the Storm and to a lesser extent The Twyborn Affair, all in different ways, deal with a morally ambiguous and highly egotistical central character. But in A Fringe of Leaves, by way of his comparatively humble heroine White looks both forward and back: back to the good and evil preoccupations of Riders in the Chariot and forward to the theme of self-construction and self-destruction that is more fully explored in The Twyborn Affair.

Memoirs of Many in One is White's final novel. In The Twyborn Affair the fragmentation of subjectivity with which White experimented as early as The Aunt's Story is now treated with more directness and detail, with the main character split into three separate identities the course of his/ her life. It is also, as During argues the first
novel in which White "comes out of the closet" (55) and treats the subjective male homosexuality in, again, a direct and detailed way. Although the idea of "gay liberation" (55) was not one that appealed to White, it was inevitable that both his life and his work would be changed by the changing politics of and around, homosexuality.

Although White's work received some important early appreciations in Australia it was not until the overseas acclaim of The Tree of Man that it began to arouse more general, if still ambivalent, interest. Ambivalence, in turn, is also a dominant feature of White's response to Australia's exaltation of the average of "The Great Australian emptiness in which the mind is the least of possessions[...]. and [...] the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves" (740), he has emphasized the crucial link between the land and his creativity.

Only in Australia could he achieve "the state of simplicity and humility (which) is the only desirable one for artist of man." (740) Here he began to see things for the first time. Even the boredom and frustration presented avenues for endless exploration; even the ugliness, the bags and iron of Australian, life acquired a meaning. Much of the distinctive energy, dynamism and constructive conflict of his work springs from this source. In his early fiction White's debt to the European tradition, especially to such writers as James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot, are easy to discover, but from The Aunt's Story onwards his original talent has appropriated and shaped the novel in a strikingly distinctive way. He has described his writing as a "struggle to create completely fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words" (740), a struggle that each work resolves differently. White never
repeats himself, each novel creating a fresh perspective even while remaining faithful to his central preoccupations. The most immediately impressive features of his work are a protean, creative energy that releases itself in uninhibited confident play, mordant wit, sharp clarity of observation, zestful comedy and a sure grasp of a wide variety of idioms, people, places and incidents.

Particularly striking is his prophetic tone, that seems to enhance every powerfully seized detail with transcending significance. A novelist of dualisms, White combines Swiftian satire and Blakean vision, an ability to render the everyday in all its palpable and even sordid actuality and at the same time invest it with illuminating intensity. Although he belongs to no specific creed, he has frequently described himself as a religious artist whose intention is to "convey a splendour, a transcendence which is... there above human realities"(141). Concerned above all with consciousness, his work bears witness to the immanence of all worlds in the immediately apparent one, expressed most succinctly in the epigraph to The Solid Mandala. There is another world, but it is this one. Rational processes or a commitment to the material can only apprehend a fraction of the totality of being both the sterile intellectual and the shallow materialist are familiar figures in his fiction. Contrasting with these are the visionary few, those who are courageous enough to explore the non rational world and accept the inevitable suffering and solitude that the spiritual quest brings; "True knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind" (Voss 475 ). Necessarily set apart, that their unusual openness to experience frequently appears as outward eccentricity or even madness, the saints of White's world are nevertheless bound to the rest of humanity in their frailty and
capacity for evil. Failure, furthermore, is a necessary feature of the spiritual journey: "The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming" (277). Nor does spirituality preclude the carnal or the material; the physical existence both of objects and of the self, grasped in an intensely palpable way by White's visionaries, is frequently the means to their experience of heightened, psychic awareness. Thus objects often act as hinges between the worlds of consciousness, such as the butterflies in *Voss*, the cracks in the path or the gob of spittle in *The Tree of Man*, the glass marbles in *The Solid Mandala* and the little red-eyed hawk in *The Aunt's Story*.

White is preoccupied with the complex dualisms of existence on the one hand, and with totality and the possibilities of integration on the other. He sees ambivalence as present in everything; good and evil body and spirit, joy and suffering, love and hate, life and death, male and females, dream and actuality, time and eternity. For White's visionaries, however, in their fugitive experiences of the immanent spiritual world, the eternal coexistence of thesis and antithesis blends into a higher cosmic synthesis.

*The Tree of Man*-an Epic which is biblical in tone, narrates the lives of a pioneering couple, Stan and Amy Parker from youth to old age, from innocence to experience. White has said that he tried to suggest in this novel "every possible aspect of life, through the lives of an ordinary man and woman. But at the same time... to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary" (Tree341). The novel includes a representation of rural life as a felt actuality, but Stan and Amy's inner lives and especially the increasing conflict between Stan's intuitions of meaning and the outer
confusion are the centre of interest. The vision that is granted to him before his death comprehends both the unity of being and the inevitable isolation of the self—innocence to experience.

*Voss* turns back to the 1840s to the experience of a German explorer who has affinities with Ludwig Leichhardt. Moving with a deft wit between the complacent materialism of colonial Sydney and the stark agonies of Voss and his followers in the desert, White transforms the explorer myth into a metaphor of modern alienation and arrogant individualism. As Voss pits himself against the desert in an act of self-deification, Laura Trevelyan, his betrothed, commits herself to a struggle—trajectory to triumph—for his soul. The spiritual, emotional contest between the two, conducted telepathically and culminating in their marriage and mutual discovery of a higher but immanent reality, is counterpointed with actual events both in the wilderness and in Sydney.

*Riders in the Chariot*, White’s most controversial novel, introduces a wide range of modes and the sustained grandeur of his informing religious conceptions are impressive. Set in his imaginary Sydney suburbs of Sarsaparilla, Barranugli, and Paradise East; it is structured by a brilliant realization of the inner and outer lives of four illuminates; Miss. Hare, a spinster, Mordecai Himmelfarb, a Jewish refugee; Ruth Godbold, an Australian housewife; and Alf Dubbo, a tubercular Aboriginal artist, whose painting of the heavenly chariot finally expresses the transcending vision—paths to perception—that unites the four.

In terms of a country-old debate in his own country, Patrick White can be seen as both a ‘local’ writer critically engaged with his society, and a ‘universal’ writer,
whose concerns can be discussed as though unbounded by place and time and whose affiliations are more with the European rather than any distinctively Australian literary tradition. Recognition of his involvement with his own society, most importantly through his writings but also through public statements, can assist understanding of his work and its development as much as can awareness of the traditional nature of his imaginative search for transcendent values in a secular age. In beginning what is intended as a general introduction, it seems necessary to emphasise this underlying tension between the higher perceptions his characters seek and the mundane reality they inhabit, because it has dominated the critical reception of his work, determining different interpretations and evaluations.

Since the controversy in Australia that attended the appearance of The Tree of Man and Voss, critical discussion has developed considerably, in accordance with the body of White's work and international recognition of its importance. This is a process likely to continue.

Differences of opinions are most often encountered in terms, of whether he is essentially a simple and traditional writer who affirms a religious, even mystical view of life, or one who is distinctively modern, sophisticated and ironic, continually exploring transcendent possibilities but with detachment and even scepticism. Such issues are best raised in a more detailed discussion of the particular works.

The comment in Kunitz and Haycraft's Twentieth Century Authors (1942) conveys an impression White's first novel made on their appearance. Patrick White is not easy reading. He has gone to school
to James Joyce and almost to Gertrude Stein. He carries the 'Stream of consciousness method' to almost its ultimate extreme, and his main interests are in "deviations from the psychological norm. His first novel, ironically called *Happy Valley*, was a gloomy and scathing study of a small Australian Community. His second was equally naturalistic in theme and 'Ultra modern' in method... in other words, his plots are slight, and sometimes rather trite, but to them he brings a genuine and mordant literary gift. (151)

Today, although the debts to Joyce, Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot and others are readily apparent, the style of the early novels would not strike a reader as difficult, or 'ultra-modern'; rather it has, intermittently, a period modernism. Although 'naturalistic', with its implications of deterministic or behaviouristic assumptions seems inaccurate, it is appropriate for recognising a substantial element of realism.

Brian Kiernan aptly pointed out:

> With icy detachment and authority the author presents his scenes from provincial life and captures both the outer, social and the inner lives of his representative characters. The dramatic articulation the way in which he can present through psychological analysis and interaction a range of characters of different ages, sexes, social levels and temperaments, shows impressive technical proficiency. (15)