

Introduction

In 1981 Patrick White published an autobiographical book called *Flaws in the Glass*; the *Melbourne Age* commissioned two reviews, one of them from Hal Porter, who said, among many things unflattering to 'Mr White':

Writers of my sort can be said not so much to read as to examine another writer's work rather as one car freak examines the vehicle and driving of another car freak. One says, "Splendid vehicle! Superb driving!" Or, "Nice vehicle! Ghastly driving!" Or, "Can't stand that kind of clumsily pretentious vehicle! And what bewildering and erratic driving!"

Hal confesses that the third attitude is his to the novels and plays of 'Mr White'. I will say no more at this point about Mr White or Mr Porter, but I quote this comparison of writer and car freak because in the essays that follow I am the freak who comments on others of his kind. I know I can't see my essays as others will see them but I imagine some readers accusing me of many things, and others, well trained, perhaps, in one or another school of literary or social criticism, who will think my observations no more than shallow or ignorant. To such people I can only say that these essays offer whatever it is that a fellow-writer can offer, and don't pretend to offer anything else.

A well-informed literary critic, bringing years of training to the consideration of books, may offer an historical understanding

which a writer cannot provide. The critic is likely to have chosen his or her reading shrewdly over many years in order to have a vast and well-judged background against which to form opinion. The fellow-writer's reading, if I am any example, is more likely to be sporadic, with gaps all over the place, unlikely ever to be filled in. Almost any professional operates within a framework, a discipline, to which the individual is responsible, whereas a writer may, by comparison, be quite cavalier with his or her procedures of thought, believing, most of the time, that it doesn't matter if 'rules' are broken so long as the newly offered insight has penetration. Is memorable. Bites. Shows something new, or something old in a new way. I think that I am arguing, in this comparison, that a professional critic's responses to a book are likely to be more reliable, because resting on a wider base.

What the fellow-writer has to offer, on the other hand, is not reliability, but the insight that comes from having been in the same place, at the heart of the risky business of creating and imagining. Writers can see what other writers are up to because they face the same problems and use the same tricks. Like Hal Porter's car freaks, they too have put their vehicles together and pulled them apart; they too have gone looking for weaknesses and failings, and they've fixed them, or they've disguised what they can't make better.

So the following essays are written in the spirit of the enthusiast who is wary, experienced, amateur, but knows he's limited too. Perhaps the only other thing I want to say about these

essays is that I have written them on the assumption that anyone who reads them is already familiar with the works and writers under discussion. The essays are not introductory. I consider them rather as a sharing of one writer's reflections with the thoughts of readers who are looking for something new to affect their thinking. I hope that readers of this sort will find something of interest here and there.

C.A.E.