

The Eye of the Storm: but what is the storm?

A short answer and a long one to a tricky question.

It sounds easy; the storm is a tropical cyclone, it hits 'Brumby Island' off the coast of Queensland, destroying the house where Elizabeth Hunter is a guest. She shelters in a wine cellar the owners have dug in the sand, she shifts a row of bottles and lies on top of the racks until the storm blows over. Then she comes out ...

The long answer involves studying the techniques of Patrick White, and these, as we will see, can hardly be separated from the personality, the *man*, and this isn't easy, because if White feels free to treat his readers in ways that suit his moods, we, the readers, will have a range of reactions, some of them reactions we have previously thought unsuitable for literature.

Literature? It's not the same as 'writing', is it, or 'stories'. It's ...

It's ...

Well, what is it, this literature? Before attempting an answer, bear in mind that if you're good enough at producing the stuff, you may be awarded a Nobel Prize, and Patrick White, who dearly wanted the honour, was awarded it in 1973, for his life's work, really, but *The Eye of the Storm* in particular. What is the storm that gives the book its title? Yes, it's a tropical cyclone, it hits Brumby Island, et cetera ... but if the eye of the storm is its centre, then the storm, too, must be central because it gives the book its title. Name. Identity. Its guide to the meaning of what's contained therein.

Cyclones do occur along the Queensland coast as we know, but when a cyclone occurs in a book I think we can reasonably suspect that it has a metaphorical function. It's in some way representational. It's a force in the book needing expression which it's unlikely, otherwise, to get. The classic example – one that's appropriate for this novel – is the storm in *King Lear*. The old man's out on the heath, exposed to the elements, but the storm's raging in his mind as well. The inner and outer storms have need of each other. Neither could achieve full and proper expression without the other. Shakespeare's genius is so triumphant in the heath scenes that we can hardly draw a line between the inner and the outer cataclysm. The two storms are one, each an aspect of the other.

So what's the cyclone doing in White's novel? What elements of the book make it necessary for a cyclone to wreck the house where Elizabeth Hunter is staying, while she sleeps – sleeps! – in the wine cellar?

Before I try to deal with these questions, I want to draw the reader's attention to a conversation on an aeroplane much earlier in the book. Dorothy, Princesse de Lascabanes, and daughter of Elizabeth Hunter, is flying to see her mother. She and her brother, Sir Basil, an actor-knight who has played the role of Lear and is thinking about doing it again, regard their mother's household expenses as being too high. She should be moved to a Retirement Village. Brother and sister are not fond of each other and are travelling on separate planes. In the seat next to Dorothy is a

Dutchman, and some turbulence in the air causes him to say to Dorothy that he thinks the plane must be entering a typhoon. He goes on to tell her about an earlier experience.

‘Some years ago I was at sea – master of a freighter,’ the Dutchman was telling in his matter-of-fact, stubbornly enunciating voice, ‘when a typhoon struck us, almost fatally. For several hours we were thrown and battered – till suddenly calm fell – the calmest calm I have ever experienced at sea. God had willed us to enter the eye – you know about it? The still centre of the storm – where we lay at rest – surrounded by hundreds of seabirds, also resting on the water.’

The airy rubble over which the plane was bumping became so inconsiderable Madame de Lascabanes was made ashamed; she was saddened, also, to think it might never be given to her to enter the eye of the storm as described by the Dutch sea captain, though she was not unconscious of the folded wings, the forms of sea-birds afloat around them.

‘Sure, we had to take another battering – as the eye was moved away – and the farther wall of the storm rammed us – but less severe. You could tell the violence was exhausting itself.’

Patrick White’s novels take place in the world of his imagination. They vary from moment to moment, almost line by line, in their relation to the world dubbed ‘real’ because it is created and recognised by people other than White. Perhaps a comparison can be made, here, with the painting of a portrait. It is obviously possible to have any number of portraits, different in any number of ways, yet all of them sharing the same person as their subject.

Each of them makes reference to something, somebody, in the ‘real’ world, yet each has an existence, a validity, in some other realm. Variety of this sort is acceptable, in the world of painting, because we say that each artist ‘saw’ the subject in his/her own way. We are less inclined to extend the same freedom to writers. It is as if we expect our novels, our fiction, to conform to some sort of measurable, sociological truth. If other writers conform to this demand, as many do, then Patrick White is not among them. He insists that his books be read in surrender to his imagination. They contain little of the sort of detail that can be ‘recognised’, whereas they are extremely directive in the ways by which they should be imagined. Nor is it easy to check the movement of a White narrative against the measuring-sticks we use in everyday life.

Let me give an example. Late in the book, *Flora Manhood* (Did I criticise Alan Marshall for his choice of names?), one of the nurses looking after Elizabeth Hunter, or should I say attendant upon her, conceives the idea that she has conceived a child by Sir Basil Hunter, Elizabeth’s son. Menstrual bleeding puts an end to this conception, and Sister Manhood (that name!) is angry with herself for ‘kidding herself into a two-month pregnancy’. Two months? White has not given us any dates or names of months by way of allowing readers to know how long Dorothy and Basil have been back in Sydney, or, to put it more simply, the events of the novel have not taken place in calendar time. If it is now, in the latter pages of the book, two months since Elizabeth Hunter’s children returned, then the reader has been deluded, or perhaps deceived. Time, I think, has been elasticised somewhere in the 480 pages between Dorothy’s

flight, with its brief period of turbulence pre-Bangkok, and Flora Manhood's release, if that is the word, from the idea that she is pregnant.

Admirers of Patrick White may well think my observations pedantic, but I introduce them, and will introduce more in this sequence of essays, by way of trying to locate the plane on which the events he recounts are 'true'. Let us go a little further along this path. If Flora Manhood has had a two-month pregnancy, then she has missed a period. If this is the case, then the reader hasn't been told. So has she merely imagined the pregnancy? This is quite possibly what we are expected to believe, since White adds 'A nurse!' to 'kidding herself into a two months pregnancy'. But what about the two months? The events, visits and arrangements recounted in the novel don't appear to have been spread over two months; a few days would suffice, and the reader can only accept the novel as having a calendar-time of two months if the visit of Basil and Dorothy to 'Kudjeri', a former family residence in the mountains north-west of Sydney, occupies half or more than half of the two months. Reading the novel's account of the visit, this appears ridiculous, and is even more so if one imagines that the Hunter children would be welcome to stay with total strangers for such a time.

Once again, I am aware that analysis of this sort goes against the grain of White's style, but in the first of this series of essays I said that 'Fiction, like the symphony in music, is social' and it is obvious, to me at least, that my viewpoint is at war with the extreme subjectivity of Patrick White. One is simply not meant to check

the imaginative world he offers against the constructs we have developed, over time, of reality surrounding us. Marcel Proust, and Richard Wagner, come to mind as other artists who assert the claim of their created world to exist separately from the everyday world in which ordinary mortals wash their dishes, get phone calls, and talk to their children about the day's events.

Let us go back, now, to the in-flight conversation which Dorothy Hunter, Dorothy de Lascabanes, has with the Dutchman in the seat beside her. They don't look each other in the eyes, White tells us; though very close to each other, they are also very private, and Dorothy thinks of the confessional, which she has grown used to since her marriage to a Catholic.

For a moment she was tempted to pour out she didn't know what – no everything, to this convenient priest, till persuaded by his manner that he might not have learnt any of the comforting formulas.

So Dorothy is ready to talk, but it is the Dutchman who speaks, and it's about the eye of a storm. He has been a man of the sea. He might have been a man of the racing track – horses or cars, as you please – a surgeon, a pharmacist ... the list is endless, but he has been a man of the sea. Why? For no other reason than that he is there to introduce Patrick White's major idea.

Do not imagine that I am critical of this. Novelists do such things all the time, as any half-astute reader will know. Novels have to be constructed, and White has a mighty edifice in mind, one so big that a princess, an actor-knight, three nurses, an elderly family solicitor, and a Jewish cook who kills herself once her household

has lost its centre – the eye of the household, shall we say? – all these people, and others sucked in by the reminiscences scattered through the book, are tiny, are midgets, compared with Elizabeth Hunter, old, dying, blind, but still possessing, and possessed by, her perception. She is the central awareness of the novel, and White's major problem, in constructing his book around her, is to create her on the scale he thinks necessary.

He does this so brilliantly that I have to call his book a masterpiece even though any number of its features make me seethe, even though there are paragraphs, even pages, that I think should be torn from the book. What on earth were his publishers doing to let him present his readers – his public – with slabs of words that aren't prose because they aren't punctuated?

I could open the book in fifty places to find an example of what I mean, but if you've read it you've encountered these passages for yourself. I wonder did you also start to count, and then lose count, of the number of times a mention of fat, particularly mutton fat, indicates White's distaste for whoever or whatever's in his sights. Mutton fat and incoherence, a refusal to be coherent, are I think possibly no more than superficial indicators of his distaste for the idea, which may be located in the minds of you and I, dear reader, that he is writing for his audience. He isn't. He's writing for himself, as all writers are, to some extent, and he is asserting his self-given right to be subjective to any extreme.

Even so, I reassert the greatness of *The Eye of the Storm*. This is perhaps the moment to introduce another idea, one which may have occurred to other readers, but not one that I can recall seeing

in print. White's books were published in New York, or New York and London, and only later published in Australia. His New York publisher was Ben Huebsch, who believed in the young Patrick White, published him, and stuck by him, admiring his books as they came along, pleased, and I hope satisfied, to see a great talent realising itself. Huebsch was the publisher every young writer dreams of, but few ever find. The now-famous Patrick White is the creation of a Jewish New Yorker, and I find it hard to believe that any Australian publishing company at the time would have taken on his books. I think they were forced downwards onto Australian opinion because of where they came from, then enthusiastically received by those who found Australia's existing writers and traditions limited. In this argument, those in Australia who were sophisticated enough, or dissatisfied enough, to receive White's books with acclaim, were only ever a coterie, far too small to cause commercial publishers to think that a Patrick White manuscript should be printed and sold under their imprint. It wouldn't have happened. To me, this makes the Nobel Prize committee's judgement sound hollow:

He is the one who, for the first time, has given the continent of Australia an authentic voice that carries across the world ...

David Marr's admirable biography of White makes it clear how the writer hung on the judgements, the reading, of Huebsch. Huebsch was to White something like Tchaikovsky's Nadezhda von Meck, a distant admirer, and a lifeline, without which, without whom, he could hardly have gone on.

Mention of David Marr's biography leads me to ask another question. If Elizabeth Hunter is a fictional force created in order to allow Patrick White to deal with all the powerfully ambivalent feelings he had for his own mother, where, I would like to ask, is White himself among his cast of characters?

This, I think, is an easy one. He is all of them. That is why the book, despite its strange occurrences and not a few grotesqueries, is in such excellent balance. There are many people, but only two fields of force, one emanating from his mother and the other from White himself. Elizabeth Hunter is loved, and she enrages those who have to put up with her. She is divisive, yet she holds everything in the book together. How, then, can she be loved? David Marr has an excellent passage about Patrick White believing – or finding in himself, perhaps – that the finest kind of love is service. Not possession, please note, but service.

Now the three nurses and the cook – Badgery, Manhood, de Santis and Lotte Lipmann – take on a new meaning, or rather, they become a set of related meanings. Mary de Santis is the one nearest White's heart. He gives her two of the most wonderful moments in all his books – or perhaps it's one moment viewed twice, the first time a preview of what's to come, and the second time at the very end of the book when he must find some purity in the world, some glistening moment of joy to balance everything he finds displeasing.

The nurse recognized the silence which comes when night has almost exhausted itself; light still barely disentangled from the skeins of mist strung across the park; at the foot of the tiered hill on which the house aspired, a cloud of roses

floating in its own right, none of the frost-locked buds from Elizabeth Hunter's dream, but great actual clusters at the climax of their beauty.

Mary de Santis gets a basket and shears, determined to gather, to cut, 'the tribute of roses she saw herself offering Elizabeth Hunter.'

Pouring in steadily increasing draughts through the surrounding trees, the light translated the heap of passive roseflesh back into dew, light, pure colour. It might have saddened her to think her own dichotomy of earthbound flesh and aspiring spirit could never be resolved so logically if footsteps along the pavement had not begun breaking into her trance of roses.

'A man of dark, furrowed face and inquiring eyes was asking the way to Enright Street.' Sister de Santis directs the stranger.

When she had finished he smiled and thanked. They were both smiling for different and the same reasons. From his humble, creaking boots and still apologetic glance, he was not only a stranger to the street but to the country, she suspected. She was reminded of her own alien birth and childhood; whether the man guessed it or not, he gave the impression that he recognized an ally.

There is a brief further exchange, then the nurse says she must go in. The man, too, must go. He looks at her a last time, and says something in Greek. White makes us wait a page until he gives it to us in the language he and his readers are using.

The nurse ran to fetch the chipped, washstand jug. The resplendent roses scattered their dew their light their perfumed reflections over the sheet into the straining nostrils the opalescent eyes staring out through this paper mask.

'Look!' Mary de Santis forgot.

Elizabeth Hunter answered, 'Yes. I can see, Mary – our roses.'

And at once Mary de Santis heard in her mother's voice the words she had not understood when the peasant-migrant spoke them. 'What a sunrise we are making!'

When, on the last page of the book, Mary de Santis enters the garden, the peasant-migrant is replaced by 'an early worker (who) stared as he passed, but looked away on recognizing a ceremony.' The nurse has a can filled with seed for the birds, and they flutter about her, their excitement as they batter the air at once as simple and as mystical as the morning light.

And there is a rose: 'A solitary rose, tight crimson, emerged in the lower garden; it would probably open later in the day.' Elizabeth Hunter is dead by now, and Sister de Santis has accepted a new patient, an unhappy girl called Irene Fletcher. It occurs to the Sister that she should return and cut the rose before leaving, and give it to her new patient, 'perfect as it should have become by then.'

I think it should be clear by now that White's story, perhaps all White's stories, is/are not in search of an ending – a death, a marriage, a falling in love – but in search of illumination. White is acutely honest in this regard, and not at all the snob he might have been, given his family's wealth and the social position his mother claimed. Illumination may come to the humblest of people in the most unexpected circumstances. There is an interesting passage a

little before the halfway mark of *The Eye of the Storm*, when someone mentions the family lawyer:

As for Arnold Wyburd, he realized that he had lost his faith in words, when his life of usefulness had depended on them: they could be used as fences, smoke-screens, knives and stones; they could take the shape of comforting hot water bottles; but if you ever thought they were about to help you open a door into the truth, you found, instead of a lighted room, a dark void you hadn't the courage to enter.

Perhaps he had come closest to illumination ...

Rather to the surprise of most readers, I would imagine, Arnold Wyburd's encounter with what matters most in the world of White's fiction takes place by the fireside at 'Kudjeri' in the days when it was held by the Hunter family; Bill, Elizabeth Hunter's husband, is still alive, and he's telling the family solicitor about an earthquake in Baluchistan ...

After Bill had come to the end of his 'story', you both remained precariously suspended, it seemed, while dark fingers still raked and clawed at your ankles from the smoking chasm. Words, as Bill had already realized, were pitiful threads to dangle above those whom actions had failed, and God was swallowing up.

I'm not quite sure why Bill Hunter's experiences in an earthquake-ravaged part of the world are brought into the novel, but they certainly resonate against the greater and more detailed presentation of his wife's encounter with the cyclone. One thing that should be said about White's technique is that although his

books may infuriate a reader in their details, his structures, the general flow or movement of his proceedings, are normally very clear. In the case of *The Eye of the Storm*, I think it can be said that the reader can always locate him/herself by taking a reading from the major landmarks placed to indicate the novel's stream. I have already pointed to the two moments when Mary de Santis is illuminated by the understanding of love which comes from its placement, side by side and hand in hand with service. These are two moments when the book's underlying purposes come to the surface, and in each case there is a total stranger, an accidental human, there to be witness, before, in each case, again, Sister Mary goes back inside the house. But if there is love in service, there must be pride to be served, demand, exaltation in rank, urgency, wealth and expectation of obedience from those whose job, whose place, it is to serve.

Elizabeth Hunter commands, calls, refuses, listens or turns her attention elsewhere as she sees fit, and pleases. She is the mistress, the empress, the ruler of the book. Everything revolves around her, approaches her, or moves away. She is consulted, deferred to, feared and admired. Sightless by now, her mind penetrates the mind of anyone who comes near. She is, by analogy, the equal of any god-like novelist and it is likely that she is a portrait of the person from whom White gained most of his habits of perception and perhaps of character too.

He understands her well, concedes all she claims and surrounds her, as stated earlier, with aspects of himself. Hence, and again as stated before, the remarkable unity of the book. How to portray

her? White reaches for the irresistible force and the immovable object, and brings them together, head on, toe to toe, as the saying has it. The cyclone encounters Elizabeth Hunter. It no longer matters whether Sir Basil has another go at Lear because, if you think about it, his mother has been there before him. On Brumby Island ...

Patrick White is a theatrical writer and the brumbies on the island are not entirely necessary. They are a force of nature that nobody's even trying to control. I suppose they're best seen as another statement of wildness in nature, indifferent to mankind, not specially dangerous so long as you keep out of their way, but a reminder, as they dash about unchecked, that humanity hasn't got everything nailed down securely.

Not that nailing things is much use. When the eye of the storm reaches Brumby Island, Elizabeth Hunter comes out of her cellar.

She waded out of the bunker through a debris of sticks, straw, scaly corpses, a celluloid doll. Round her a calm was glistening. She climbed farther into it by way of the ridge of sand and the heap of rubbish where the house had stood. At some distance a wrecked piano, all hammers and wires, was half buried in wet sand.

I have already commented, fiercely enough, about White's flaws as a writer; his treatment of Elizabeth Hunter at this moment shows how well he can write when he is in a state of awed respect for the matter in hand.

Without much thought for her own wreckage, she moved slowly down what had been a beach, picking her way between torn-off branches, great beaded hassocks of amber

weed, everywhere fish the sea had tossed out, together with a loaf of no longer bread, but a fluffier, disintegrating foam rubber. Just as she was no longer a body, least of all a woman: the myth of her womanhood had been exploded by the storm. She was instead a being, or more likely a flaw at the centre of this jewel of light: the jewel itself, blinding and tremulous at the same time, existed, flaw and all, only by grace; for the storm was still visibly spinning and boiling at a distance, in columns of cloud, its walls hung with vaporous balconies, continually shifted and distorted.

Immediately after the passage I've quoted, Elizabeth Hunter takes the wet loaf of bread, 'the disintegrating foam rubber', and feeds it to some swans: something in the way they treat her implies that she has reached a state of equality with these majestic birds. This brings me back to the question which opened this essay – 'What is the storm?'

It is several things, I think. It is first a challenge, then it becomes a test of Elizabeth Hunter. She survives both challenge and test, and when the storm abates, temporarily, allowing her to come out, she rises to the challenge, and passes the test. In feeding the swans she attains equal status, not only with the swans – quite an achievement – but also with the still-threatening storm. This causes the storm to change its character. Instead of challenging, testing, her, it becomes a response to her, and, as the eye begins to move, and take its attention off Elizabeth Hunter, I think we can go so far as to say that the storm is finally an expression of this remarkable woman.

You may reasonably say that no storm, no cyclone, could or would ever be this but let me refer back to something said early in

my essay, that is, that a storm in a book (or play, any work of art) is not the same as a storm in reality, in nature.

... when a cyclone occurs in a book I think we can reasonably suspect that it has a metaphorical function. It's in some way representational. It's a force in the book needing expression which it's unlikely, otherwise, to get. The classic example – one that's appropriate for this novel – is the storm in *King Lear* ...

I went on to say that Shakespeare's storm is two storms, giving support to each other, one inside Lear's mind, one surrounding him. I don't think we can apply that observation here. The storm, the cyclone, in White's book is the book itself, twisting and writhing to make itself apt to deal with, to respond to, to challenge – et cetera, see above – the equal and opposite force let loose inside it. It is as if the bottle containing a genie became aware that the genie was all but out, and had to become something more than a bottle, something other than a bottle, to contain what was on the verge of escaping. But let me take this notion a little further, by turning to the genie – to Mrs Hunter – herself. We are dealing, not with explosive forces, as in nineteenth century physics, but forces that adapt, and transform, in heightened circumstances. Elizabeth Hunter herself must change, affected by the storm. She does. She moves from one end of the scale that measures pride and humility to the other. We have already spoken of White's idea – a necessity for the man – that love and service belong together; now we reach another of his central tenets – that pride, however excessive, does not have to destroy the one who possesses it. The destructive aspects of pride

can be not only overcome but transformed into something beautiful if a way can be found to bring humility into play.

In *The Eye of the Storm* this is the role of the swans. Seven swans, White tells us, counting:

Interspersed between the marbled pyramids of waves, thousands of seabirds were at rest; or the birds would rise, and dive, or peacefully scabble at the surface for food, some of them coasting almost as far as the tumultuous walls of cloud; and closer to shore there were the black swans – four, five, seven of them.

The swans, as beautiful and proud as anything in the world, invite humility as a response, and this is what Elizabeth Hunter offers.

Expressing neither contempt nor fear, they snapped up the bread from her hands, recognizing her perhaps by what remained of her physical self, in particular the glazed stare, the salt-stiffened nostrils, or by the striving of a lean and tempered spirit to answer the explosions of stiff silk with which their wings were acknowledging an equal.

For me, this is White's finest hour, and it lies across, at right angles to, the other miraculous moment with Sister Mary de Santis, already referred to, a moment repeated to bring the book to its close. Pride and humility are one continuum, love and service are another, and the two of them, the two continuities, are the two energising principles of *The Eye of the Storm*. Something so simple as deference to his readership was not always available to Patrick White, and I think there are usually as many readers offended by his manner as there are admirers, but, infuriated as one may

be by his performances from time to time – page to page, line to line – there's no avoiding the fact that when White sets himself to scale the most difficult peaks, he gets to places where nobody else has been. We shouldn't grudge him an admiring wave from our position on the plain.