

Twyborn? Tri-born? Or some lives as they might have happened?

Finding a way to read Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair*.

*The Twyborn Affair*¹ comes late in Patrick White's oeuvre. The only sizeable works that came after were *Flaws In The Glass* (1981), his autobiography, and *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986), which, the title page tells us, is by Alex Xenophon Demirjian Gray and edited by Patrick White. The editor's name is given in bold caps, to make clear who's in charge. There's also a fragment of a family chart to tell us who Alex Demirjian is, and we need it, because names fly thick and fast in the 'Editor's Introduction', a piece of deliberately unaccommodating writing, with Patrick letting the reader know how s/he will be treated for the duration of the book.

I mention this aspect of *Memoirs of Many in One* because it's a book that goes even further than *The Twyborn Affair* in rejecting much of what readers might expect a novelist to offer. In *The Twyborn Affair* White wrenched the novel onto the terms that it satisfied him to give us, and in *Memoirs* he went even further. My focus will be on *The Twyborn Affair*, but some of its tendencies, some of its behaviour, may become clearer if we keep the later book in mind.

What to say about *The Twyborn Affair*? It's been a different book each time I've read it; it's only as I get used to it and see what it isn't that I think I may be closer to understanding what it is. Each

of its three parts is centred on a person known as Eudoxia Vatatzes (Part 1), Eddie Twyborn (Part 2), and Eadith Trist (Part 3). When it starts, World War 1 is looming, and it ends, a generation later, with Nazi bombs falling on London. Eadith/Eddie is killed by one of them, bringing the book to an arbitrary but satisfactory enough conclusion. It can be said, I think, that it doesn't much matter how the book ends. Showing Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith has been its main task, and when Eadith is reconciled with her/his mother, there's nothing further for the book to do. The bomb rounds things off quite neatly.

I've mentioned *Flaws in the Glass*, an unsatisfactory offering because it offers us fragments rather than coherence, which White tires of long before the book has been achieved. It doesn't come naturally to him to satisfy the reader before himself. Indeed, I think that *The Twyborn Affair* is as much an autobiography as it is a novel. If we think of it as three lives that might have happened, many of its difficulties dissolve, as I will try to show.

Three lives that might have happened? Yes, and to some extent they did. Take Eudoxia. She is a foreigner – that is a non-European – living with a Greek in the south of France. A Greek? France? These present no problems to White's imagination. Take Eddie. He's Australian-born, back home with a problematic mother and a father who receives some admiration from his son. Eddie has been out of his parents' lives for years, and he's hardly home before he heads off to be a stockman – a jackeroo – on the Monaro: then, at

the end of Part 2, he disappears again. This section, showing Eddie as uncomfortable with people who are close to him and perfectly affable with those for whom he can afford to be indifferent, strikes me as being revelatory of White, the man and the writer. Most revelatory is Part 3, set in London, where Eadith Trist is running a high class brothel while not allowing herself – with one strange exception – to have a sexual life at all. Eadith Trist is White the writer. Her girls are treated tenderly, they show themselves, as do the various upper-class English people we meet, exactly as they are, and they exist within a most comprehensive and compassionate regard, however sharp it may be at times. Eadith is exploiting them, and yet she has a considerable feeling of responsibility, worrying as they don't for themselves when they are foolish, or likely to be. She cares for her girls and their clients as a novelist must care for the people in his books. I referred earlier to the bomb that kills Eadith Trist (the surname recalls the French word meaning 'sad'; I take this to be intentional). Bombs can kill novelists, but not their books, so in that sense the death is quite superficial; *The Twyborn Affair* is still with us today.

But why isn't it called *The Tri-born Affair*? It shows three lives, or variants of one. I don't know the answer to this question, but must assume that White means to remind us that there are two human genders, and doesn't believe, despite the evidence of his own life, that the in-between existence counts as a third. Perhaps I am wrong, or wide of the mark? Looking for an answer, I move to a passage in Part 1. Joan and Curley Golson, friends of Eddie/ Eadith's parents, are visiting France and have come across the

entrancing Eudoxia. Joan, who has at least some attraction to the life of difference, is fascinated, having no idea that the young woman who attracts her is in fact the son of her Sydney friends the Twyborns. The reader, too, at this stage, is far from certain which are the important connections to be kept in mind when reading this book. White sweeps such considerations away with an unusual passage, in which Monsieur Pelletier, a character we've never met before, and will never meet again, opens his beachfront kiosk at Saint Mayeul, then sees, at some distance, standing on rocks by the sea, a figure, turned away.

Man or woman? Monsieur Pelletier isn't sure, and is frustrated by a wave splashing salt water into his eyes.

Aaahhh! He stood arrested, groaning and grinning with anguish, frustration, astonishment, and some measure of fear, all trickling water, grey stubble, mauve gums, and a few prongs of decalcified teeth. Only for an instant his disarray: intense interest made it necessary for him to locate the swimmer's head.

Man or woman, Monsieur Pelletier wonders?

... the swimmer was making for the open sea, thrashing from side to side with strong, sure, professional strokes. It must be a man, Monsieur Pelletier decided, and yet there was a certain poetry of movement, a softness of light surrounding the swimmer, that seduced him into concluding it could only be a woman.

This may be strange enough, but Monsieur Pelletier, whom, as I say, we have never met before and will never meet again,

masturbates himself inside his trousers. It's a sticky act of praise but, strange or silly as it may seem, I think White means us to see this action as ennobling, as illuminating (in the way of putting a halo around a saint's head) the swimmer we are observing from afar. White also says of his observer 'There was no real reason why Monsieur Pelletier should exist.' I don't think I've ever read such a line in a book before. No reason for a character to exist? White goes further, comparing the kiosk-owner to Joanie Golson:

Monsieur Pelletier and Mrs Golson had not met at any point; they would not want to meet; they did not credit each other with existence.

It was only in the figure now clambering down over rocks, that the two might have agreed to converge.

M. Pelletier (male) and Joan Golson (female) exist only to provide contrasting viewpoints on Eudoxia, and White's book exists only to present her in the three forms already mentioned. Eudoxia, swimming, is the most untroubled presentation we will get of this three-sided person, because she's shown at too great a distance to let us see any of the troubling thoughts in her mind, if there are any. At a distance, she's as complete as she will ever be. We will be much more moved by her in her Eadith Trist version, but her complexity as a person and as a collection of frequently contradictory attitudes will have grown so great by then that she will need a household of sexually active women and their clients to portray her, at least in reflection. It's worth mentioning at this point how many times in *The Twyborn Affair*, particularly in Part 3, the central figure sees herself in a mirror. *The Twyborn Affair* is an

endlessly continuing look at its central character, the character is at least to some extent the writer himself; hence my suggestion that we might entertain the idea that it is an autobiography of a life – three lives – that might have been led.

Back to Joan Golson. She has an important function in the book. She knows Eddie's parents, the Twyborns. She might realise who Eudoxia is, and tell Eadie, Eddie's mother. His secret might be out. Eudoxia and Angelos Vatatzes flee their house in the south of France because Eudoxia, as she then is, wants to prevent this happening. Joan Golson also knows the Lushingtons, the Sydney people who own the Monaro property where Eddie is jackerooing. She and Curley visit the Lushingtons, and what does Eddie do? He gets on a horse and rides off into unknown territory, determined to be unavailable. Marcia Lushington has told him that Joanie Golson wants to meet him, so he clears out. Joanie represents, I think, the possibility of the bisexual young man being found out.

There is, however, another Eddie in this three-times-imagined life, and he's kept almost entirely out of sight. Eddie saw action in World War 1. This Eddie, soldier Eddie, is kept from the reader. He appears only once in the book, very late, a sort of Monsieur Pelletier in reverse, when he recalls something told to him by 'an Australian captain, long forgotten'. The captain, in his turn, recalls a sexual encounter with a French farmer's wife. She understands that the soldier, who has just come out of a terrifying action, needs her and for some reason the same is true for her. They undress, though her children can be heard nearby and her husband can't be far away. They fuck:

'It was like as if a pair of open wings was spreading round the pair of us. Ever seen those white cockies pullin' down the stooked oats soon as yer bloody back's turned? Then sitting on a bough screechin' their heads off! Well, like the wings of a giant cocky, soft, and at times explosive. You heard feathers explode, didn't yer?'

This moment of recall is no quick flash. It brings to my mind the man from Deniliquin, breaking in with a narrative he needs to tell, almost as late in *The Tree of Man*; the Australian captain – and why it *had* to be an Australian is an interesting question – can't stop himself going on, though White makes it clear that he knows he might be thought mad.

'Don't know why I'm tellun yer this. About giant cockies. You'll think I'm a nut case.'

Eddie Twyborn had to rejoin his detachment down the road.

'An' don't think I'm religious!' The captain had followed him as far as the door. 'Because I believe in nothun!' he shouted after one he regretted taking for a temporary mate. 'NOTHUN!' he screamed.

Why was the man from Deniliquin brought in to what I am inclined to think of as his book? I can say no more than I said in the earlier essay. Why is the captain brought in to *The Twyborn Affair*? Like Monsieur Pelletier he's out of the book almost as quickly as he's in. He represents, I can only suggest, another way of thinking about human sexuality, a way which is probably instinctive for White, but which hasn't fitted into the tripartite scheme of Eudoxia/

Eddie/Eadith. The sexual encounter of the nerve-shattered soldier and the farmwife in need of an orgasm which only a stranger can give her exemplifies something – a surprising, completely unexpected intrusion of pure goodness which ordinary, rational life can't provide, any more than novelist White's acerbic methods can provide it unless he breaks out of the narrative rules he uses to write his books, and surprises us, and himself, by pulling in a revelation from wherever it is that revelations keep themselves from sight.

This awareness on the part of White that what he can pull out of his usual hats may not be enough, so he has to be brave enough to look elsewhere for what's required, is, in my view, the surest sign of greatness in his work.

Let us now return to a point made earlier about what the book is and isn't. It is about a person with a male body who lives as a female, then as a male, then a female again. Very late in the book, when its concerns have focussed almost solely on reconciliation with the mother, Eadith makes it clear to Eadie that she is not her son but her daughter. This pleases Eadie.

'I am so glad. I've always wanted a daughter.'

The strain goes out of the book at that point. Eadith completes the handover of the brothel to Ada, her ever-compliant and effective junior. Ada, dressed in ways that suggest she is a sort of nun (White calls Eadith Ada's 'Superior'), will manage at least as well as the former owner. The brothel has achieved a continuity that the world around it has not. War will rage, but the brothel, we may be sure, will go on. Why is this? I think it is because White sees sexuality as being one of the lesser strands of life, endlessly

intruding on other things that humans do, but only occasionally assisting people to gain those insights, those attributes of spiritual balance, which we are all seeking. Or should be. White can rarely restrain his contempt for those of his characters who are not aware of spiritual quest. This attitude of contempt is never unleashed on the girls who work in Eadith's brothel. Their beauty, the youth of their bodies, lends some quality of generosity, of luxury and helpfulness, to what they do for the men who come in. Nor are the men castigated too harshly for wanting the women; Gravenor, who pursues Eadith for years, is given great dignity by White, who feels for this man whose passion will never be satisfied because he doesn't understand the secret at the heart of Eadith's life. All the finer qualities of his love – his restraint, his unselfishness, his willingness to comply in any way that pleases her, and his eventual renunciation of a comfortable civilian life in favour of the war that's engulfing his country – would be tipped upside down if he realised the difficulties Eadith faces in dealing with him. White's treatment of Gravenor is unusual among the many character-creations in the novels, and it is also a way of preparing us for the reconciliation between Eadith and Eadie Twyborn which allows the book to end.

So much for the ending, but what about the endings of the book's three parts, and the silences between them? We enter now the territory of what the book isn't, and must move our thoughts away from its qualities and toward its strangeness. This will not be easy and I ask for the reader's patience. This may more easily be given if readers search for their own answers to the questions I raise; your answers may not be the same as mine.

When Part 1 ends, Angelos Vatatzes is dead, so Eudoxia is free to do what or go where she will. In fact, she disappears. It appears that she must have resumed her life as Eddie, joined the army, and fought in World War 1. Her parents appear to have known nothing about this. Now this may be a convenient place for White the novelist to have stored her for those years but everything we know about World War 1 tells us that nobody experienced it without being marked. It's fairly silly for a novelist to ask us to accept the absence of what were for most soldiers the inescapable effects of that dreadful conflict. If the battles of France didn't mark a man then he must have been well back from the line? Where, actually, did Eddie serve? White doesn't bother to tell us. Eddie/Eadith/Eudoxia spends most of his life as a woman; this cannot have been unrelated to his life as a serviceman, and it amazes me that White can expect us to take what he gives us without question.

When Part 2 ends, Marcia Lushington has lost another child. This will be the fourth time this has happened to her, and in writing to Eadie Twyborn she is implying, I think, that the child is Eddie's even though Eadie Twyborn doesn't take it that way, and pushes Marcia away out of her even greater sorrow, she feels, as a woman whose son has disappeared again. I think only the reconciliation between mother and daughter/son at the end of the book can do anything to heal this wound, and it's noticeable, when mother and daughter/son reach out to each other that there aren't too many probing questions asked or answered. The acceptance and/or forgiveness that's offered is mutual, and there's little enough 'information' exchanged. Mother and middle-aged child re-bond in a mood of unconditional acceptance. This is one of White's loveliest

moments, so perhaps it's crass to query it, but, conventional as it may be to think in this way, I can't help wondering about the transition back from Eddie to Eadith. Where, when and how did it happen? Who assisted, who got in the way? What had to be sorted out, fixed up, disguised? Such things can't be done all that easily? Considerable problems of credibility would have to have been solved to make these transitions between the three parts happen, so it's not hard to see why White didn't bother with them, but their absence does leave the reader struggling to work out the underlying logic of the novel. I said, very early in these essays, that the novel, like the symphony in music, is social, and White challenges this idea. His novels are acutely personal, his rules and needs prevail over those of his readers all the time, and he appears to take it for granted that readers will put aside their puzzlements and objections in order to stay within reach of what he's choosing to give them. I've made it clear in earlier essays that I think this presumptuous of him.

The novel, like the symphony in music, is social: do Patrick White's books disprove this idea of mine? Perhaps, but I am more inclined to say that White's writing contains an insistence that the reader, the public, will do any of the adjusting that's necessary to make his books social. It's the reader, the surrounding world, that must budge, not Patrick or his pages of prose. I find myself wanting to accuse him of *lèse-majesté*, but Patrick is bold enough to assert that the majesty is on his side. Something about White, his books and their reception in this country suggests that he has found a hole in the assertively democratic fabric of our society, a way to maintain social and artistic dominance over people who

believe themselves to be lesser because he tells them they are. This is a throwback to the patrician origins he both accepted and rejected in becoming a homosexual, a writer and a small-time farmer. He appears to have believed that a certain grandeur was his natural gift, then transferred it to circumstances that were entirely new in the life of his family; transferred it, too, to a public which saw his books arriving from time to time when Ben Huebsch in New York and Jonathon Cape in London put them before the public. Most writers are desperate in their search for a public; Patrick never. This gave him a considerable advantage, and one he knew how to live up to. If you think you are superior, you must never show doubt.

The paradox is that White himself was racked with doubt. Three versions of the one life! A lifelong struggle to reach an accommodation with Eadie Twyborn, a woman that wouldn't terrify too many of his readers. Months of being loved by Gravenor without being able to get their relationship onto some basis of truth! Then the mind wanders through all the other novels, all the other discomforts and avoidances, finding great writing all over the place but peace and spiritual poise only rarely. White needed his hauteur because it was almost the only base he had for locating his talents; in *Memoirs of Many in One* he offers no spiritual poise at all, only the carryings-on of a silly old person. The thing isn't even credible in parts, but who cares ... when Patrick raves, his audience laughs with him, because he's won them onto his side. 'The novel, like the symphony in music, is social'; but what about when the novelist is very close to anti-social in himself? What will his novels be like then?

We have an answer in the novels of Patrick White, a self-hating man who did his best to relieve himself of the troubles buried deeply inside, and frequently did so, by forcing himself to accept whatever it was his great talents told him to write down. He wrote, and, amazingly, the people who read books in his own country, responded, as well they might; I hope that by now, after writing five essays about this remarkable writer, my own admiration is clear.

And yet something in me, the straight man, rejects the claim that White is our most special writer. I have already quoted Hal Porter in these essays, writing about the young Alan Marshall, whom he described as a very special man because, although crippled, he was, like a beautiful woman, too clever to be limited – trapped – by the way those around him saw him (her). Marshall may have escaped this trap but White did so only partially. In full flight he wrote superbly but there were only certain high points that he could rest on, certain peaks that he could make for in a storm. Ownership of White's world had to be restricted to White himself; the reader could be allowed to recognise features of this world but could never be allowed to feel that it was also his or hers. It wasn't. Is there something wrong with this? Yes, there is. I think that the intrusions I have already referred to – the Australian captain describing the French farmer's wife in terms of a giant cockatoo; and the man from Deniliquin's anecdote about the watercart (a Furphy, no doubt!) and the whorehouse – are, in part, a warning signal from White's psyche that something is wrong and something else is needed. That extra something is brought in by a character from outside to get the book back on its feet again.

This ending to the fifth of my essays on Patrick White may surprise the reader but I offer it respectfully because I think the man is such a phenomenon that we have been inclined to snatch at ways of seeing his work, some of us feeling – and some of us not – that an extra respect is due to an unusual genius, this respect being far better than the usual Australian indifference to oddball figures. I think the best way to safeguard ourselves against misjudging Patrick White, with all the difficulties he brings, is to read him alongside those other writers who've created our literature, and not to see him as something apart. Hence my placement, side by side, of this last essay on White with a second essay on Frederic Manning, another Sydney man, insofar as he came from anywhere in particular, another outsider, a weak man troubled by illness, a man who never married, yet enjoyed the company of women, a man whose mother was also central in his life, a man who against all likelihood became a soldier for a time, but – *but* - a man who adopted society's voice as his own when he came to put his experiences on paper. I am in no doubt, none at all, that Manning surpasses White as a writer by several country miles, but if you think otherwise I invite you to set out your case by way of responding to the viewpoints I've expressed here.

Why else are we reading, and writing about, our writers, if it's not to try to make ourselves understand them?

1. *The Twyborn Affair*, Patrick White, Jonathon Cape, London, 1979