

Strangely humble: *The Tree of Man* by Patrick White

In *Patrick White: A Life*⁽¹⁾ David Marr has given us a comprehensive account of the Nobel Prize winner's life: at the end of the book he describes his subject reading what had been written about him. 'He confessed he found the book so painful that he often found himself reading through tears. He did not ask me to cut or change a line.' White, who had spared nobody, least of all himself, in pursuit of what he needed to do, was big enough to grant his biographer the same freedom. This breadth, this acceptance, is something we have learned to expect of the novelist from Marr's pages; yet we have also been shown White in his tantrums and his way of being unable to restrain himself from thinking that his dramas were central to his time when for those who were not part of his circle, they were nothing of the sort. The public became inclined to think of White, towards the end of his life, as a genius (because people who seemed to know said he was), a generous if somewhat bitter-tongued addressor of public issues, and an egotist of torrential scale. Humility is not a word the public is inclined to fix on White, yet, as we have seen in an earlier essay⁽²⁾, White's pride needed the balance of humility, and frequently had it.

That lifelong, ever-present duality of pride and humility, is not, however, the point from which I wish to start my consideration of *The Tree of Man*. This book, the first of his works to bring him anything much by way of fame in Australia, comes from the time, beginning in 1948, when White and his partner Manoly Lascaris were working a tiny farmlet at Castle Hill (known to White's

readers as Durilgai and Sarsaparilla), north-west of Sydney. *The Tree of Man*, with its pioneering overtones in the early chapters, takes place within a cooe or two of Parramatta and other places which are almost synonymous with Sydney. This is an aspect of the book which I will take up later.

I want to begin, however, with an humility that isn't the pair or partner of high pride, but is of another sort. I refer to the fact that *The Tree of Man* is, although a long book, centred on the lives and circumstances of a man and a woman who are deliberately shown as Every-people, while their children, a boy and a girl, are almost anybody's kids, that is, the family is chosen for representation, not because they are singular in some way, but because they are not. It is the ordinariness of Stan and Amy Parker that causes White to choose them. His subject matter is the daily experience of humble people, sure enough of themselves to insist on the rightness of their ways, but modest, and poor, so that it would never occur to them that they were in any way representative, or models of a certain historical type. They are simply themselves, living quietly in a place that's only bush when they take it up, and thinly developed outer suburbia by the end of their lives. White needs his five hundred pages, so he can string out the markers and events of the Parkers' lives in a way that makes us feel that there's never anything much happening while allowing us to see, by the time the book ends, that a generation or two have done their work, the country's been

opened up, and any number of thoughts and events have sunk into the compost of their country's life.

Perhaps I should have said 'their country's *spiritual* life' because no consideration of White's methods in this book can ignore his aim, which is to rewrite something that other writers in his country have done before him. Let me make a comparison, though it may seem an unlikely one. I cannot imagine that Ben Huebsch, of New York, or the readers at Eyre & Spottiswoode in London, would ever have compared Patrick White's account of the Parkers with the people in Steele Rudd's *On Our Selection*, but writers like Rudd, Henry Lawson ('Water Them Geraniums') and possibly even Barbara Baynton, both are and are not the forebears of the Parkers. They are and they are not their literary ancestors, and I shall try to develop the themes of my approach by looking for the differences and the similarities, and what these tell us about White's intentions. Let us go to the opening of *The Tree of Man*.

A cart drove between the two big stringybarks and stopped. These were the dominant trees in that part of the bush, rising above the involved scrub with the simplicity of true grandeur. So the cart stopped, grazing the hairy side of a tree, and the horse, shaggy and solid as the tree, sighed and took root.

Took root? What on earth is White giving us? Horses don't take root, even though it's common to speak, as his book's title does, of mankind's life as being in some way tree-like. Horses aren't human, though dogs and humans share characteristics, as White shows us with the red dog and the man who is named 'Stan Parker' for us at the top of page three. White appears to be unaware that he's surprised us. He moves on without explanation:

The man who sat in the cart got down. He rubbed his hands together, because already it was cold, a curdle of cold cloud in a pale sky, and copper in the west. On the air you could smell the frost. As the man rubbed his hands, the friction of cold skin intensified the coldness of the air and the solitude of that place. Birds looked from twigs, and the eyes of animals were drawn to what was happening.

What, exactly, was happening? White gives us three statements, complete with full stops and capitals as if they were sentences, when they are not. They are happenings:

The man lifting a bundle from a cart. A dog lifting his leg on an anthill. The lip drooping on a sweaty horse.

The first of these is a step in the man taking possession of this bit of bush; the second is incidental to it, the dog being part of the man, as it were; the third is merely an impression. Merely? White uses such impressions all the time to pull us away from conventional ways of seeing things, or expectations on our part, as readers, that he will give us expected, usual, things to sustain our interest. He has no intention of so restricting himself.

Then the man took an axe and struck at the side of a hairy tree, more to hear the sound than for any other reason. And the sound was cold and loud. The man struck at the tree, and struck, till several white chips had fallen. He looked at the scar in the side of the tree. The silence was immense. It was the first time anything like this had happened in that part of the bush.

'It was the first time anything like this had happened in that part of the bush.' This again is an impression; White doesn't tell us

how far we are from any earlier settlers, or even where we are. He gives us, instead, an almost biblical moment of beginning. It would be ruinous to the atmosphere he's creating to tell us about the activities and energies of the city of Sydney, which is not far away. Nor does he 'locate' Stan Parker socially; instead he reverts to a time before Stan was born, and his mother had thought to call him by another name, but her husband laughed, so Stanley the child became, because it 'was, after all, a respectable sort of name. She remembered also the explorer, of whom she had read.' Within a few lines we move on to his mother's reading, her timidity, and her making two requirements of her young son: he's to promise that he'll love God, and that he won't 'touch a drop'.

"Yes," said the boy, for he had experience of neither, and the sun was in his eyes.

So God appears on the third page of the book, and the fourth, and thereafter is never far away, no matter how worldly, or secular, the matters of the narrative. The book is famous for a passage close to the end, when a young evangelist breaks into the thoughts of the elderly Stan Parker to talk about the glories of salvation. Stan thinks to himself, though he doesn't say:

If you can understand, at your age, what I have been struggling with all my life, then it is a miracle, thought the old man.

Stan spits on the ground, and a moment later he points with his stick at the gob of spittle.

"That is God," he said.
As it lay glittering intensely and personally on the ground.

That would appear to conclude the argument, if it has been an argument, of the book, but there is a short final chapter, which begins: 'In the end, there are the trees.' It goes on: 'These still stand in the gully behind the house, on a piece of poor land that nobody wants.' We recall at once the trees at the beginning of the book. Trees there are at the end, and soon after a 'rather leggy, pale boy' comes into the bush. He is Stan Parker's grandson, disturbed by having been in the house containing his grandfather's body, so he has come down to the bush. He has it in mind to write a poem of death, but his mind changes and he decides what he wants to do:

So he would write a poem of life, of all life, of what he did not know, but knew. Of all people, even the closed ones, who do open on asphalt and in trains. He would make the trains run on silver lines, the people still dreaming on their shelves, who will wake up soon enough and feel for their money and their teeth. Little bits of coloured thought, that he had suddenly, and would look at for a long time, would go into his poem, and urgent telegrams, and the pieces of torn letters that fall out of metal baskets.

This book, forming in the child's mind, is, one feels, not at all far from the book we've been reading. The boy's thoughts develop:

He would put the windows that he had looked inside. Sleep, of course, that blue eiderdown that divides life from life. His poem was growing. It would have the smell of bread, and the rather grey wisdom of youth, and his grandmother's kumquats, and girls with yellow plaits exchanging love-talk behind their hands, and the blood thumping like a drum, and red apples, and a little wisp of white cloud that will swell into a horse and trample the whole sky once it gets the wind inside it.

By now we are within a few lines of the book's end. The boy can't, as yet, write these thoughts that are mounting in him, so he scribbles on 'the already scribbled trees', and goes back to the house where his grandfather has died, taking with him his thoughts – 'his greatness', White says – leaving us in the same bushland, considerably altered no doubt, where the book began.

So that in the end there were the trees. The boy walking through them with his head drooping as he increased in stature. Putting out shoots of green thought. So that, in the end, there was no end.

So we have an ending that is no ending, but rather an affirmation, not only of continuity, but also of the ephemerality of human life. White wishes us to know, I think, that, ephemeral, inconsiderable and frequently trifling as life may be, some grandeur can also be seen if we can only get back far enough to see it whole, as *The Tree of Man* has attempted to do. The book's claim may be huge but it has been modestly made, and this is consistent with its central characters, whose lives we have followed over many years. At this point the reader may reasonably ask why I linked this book to writings by Steele Rudd, Lawson, et al. I did this because I think there are places where White's deliberately modest approach to the lives of rather scatty early settlers is not so far from the writers named in my perhaps unlikely comparison. Take Chapter 10, where Amy Parker visits the O'Dowds in response to a note from Mrs O'Dowd, who isn't married to O'Dowd, but uses the name for convenience, because she isn't going to leave him, despite the querulous and sometimes dangerous nature of her situation with a

man who drinks himself crazy. O'Dowd, by the time Amy arrives, is reduced to drinking eau de cologne and clinging to a shotgun. This is only for show, Mrs O'Dowd says, but a minute later White gives us a farcical scene with Amy running around the house and its surrounds – *garden* is no word for the mess surrounding the O'Dowds' place – some distance ahead of her neighbour who is perhaps under more immediate threat, with the rear brought up by O'Dowd who has exchanged the shotgun for a cleaver. This continues until it occurs to the drunken man that if he turns in the opposite direction, those who are fleeing will be brought face to face with him.

And so it happens, and O'Dowd comes to something like his senses, and peace of a sort is restored. Amy tells Mrs O'Dowd that she wouldn't stand for such nonsense from any man, even her husband, but Mrs O'Dowd, who is apparently used to scenes of the sort, says that she likes her husband (who isn't her husband) and that they are suited to each other. It's a funny scene, White clearly revels in it, and in some sense it lies more easily within his range than another of the novel's major scenes, one which would apparently suit him better.

I refer to the bushfire that follows the floods in the area in the traditional Australian way, something White, not so long before an expatriate of many years' standing, accommodates easily. White keeps his distance from both these dramas, but not so great a distance that he can't show us, sometimes quite satirically, the ways of Durilgai-folk, especially the men, when handling, welcoming, these challenges. One bunch of men is fighting the fire with words

and vehement attitudes as much as with bags and sticks (!) but an old man called Peabody tells them there will be a change. The men see no sign of it:

“Change!” said somebody. “We shall be changed all right, with the fire lickin at our arses. We shall be changed into jumpin monkeys. Up the hill and over. With the smoke comin out.”

But Peabody is right, the wind changes, and the fire, turned back on itself, dies among some rocks. It would appear that normality will resume, but this fire has only been a prelude to another to follow, threatening Glastonbury, the large home of the ex-butcher Armstrong, who, with his wife, have important, meaning wealthy, connections in Sydney. The Armstrongs have a son who will die in World War 1, when the book gets that far into the century, but the son, Tom, is currently the fiancé of the beautiful but inexplicable Madeleine, whom we have encountered once or twice, riding through the district, something about her, high on a horse’s back, indicating her view of herself in relation to lesser beings, including Amy Parker who is in some way besotted with her, or perhaps with something Madeleine represents which Amy knows is beyond her.

By the time Stan Parker gets to Glastonbury, spectators have gathered to watch the efforts to save the grand home. One feels, as the flames approach, that the battle to save this place which only the Armstrongs care about is something of a set piece, and so it turns out, but in an unexpected way. The beautiful, the haughty – or is she? – Madeleine is still in the house as it starts to burn. Why she’s in the house, why she’s been allowed to remain there, is not

explained. There would be no such gap in Steele Rudd or Henry Lawson. White is quite extraordinary in his way of glossing over things he doesn’t want to bother about. Madeleine is in the burning house because Stan Parker, brave and cool-headed, is going to find her, to try to lead her out, to be blocked by flames in the back stairs, and then further flames on the grand front stairs, Madeleine is going to reveal something that lesser writers would call a death-wish, and she is going to be saved when Stan takes her in his arms and carries her out of the flames to a welcoming set of onlookers. This is when Tom Armstrong, who is to die in France a few years later, will rush up to claim his fiancé, only to find that something in her experience – something never really explained – has turned her life in another direction. She doesn’t want Tom Armstrong. She staggers into the darkness; White tells us that her hair has been burned off. This, like almost every ‘factual’ point in a Patrick White book, is an invention suddenly imposed by the writer. Many writers, one feels, perhaps one knows, are at the mercy of the subject matter they’ve gathered from here and there in their experience or imagination. In White’s case, his writing being as subjective as it is, the world he creates is something that’s been willed. One feels that the burning of the Glastonbury homestead is in some way a brief morality play enacted by White for insertion into the long stretches of narrative that lie between the trees that open the book and the trees that close it.

The mansion at Glastonbury has a further function in the book, something that White handles with extraordinary skill. Before the fire, it is the centre of social activity, not for people of the district,

but for upwardly mobile people from Sydney's social scene; after the fire, life's energies depart. Madeleine disappears from view, rebuilding ceases when Tom Armstrong is killed in war, Armstrong senior, his face disfigured by a stroke, visits only occasionally with his wife to collect a few roses and go away. Stan pays a brief visit to have a look, and finds a half built staircase leading to an open sky, vines growing inside the walls, sexual yearning scribbled near the ashes of a swaggy's fire, and excrement smeared on a wall. The Armstrongs have left a ruin, perhaps even the ruin of a folly, to be swallowed and regurgitated in Durilgai's folklore. We are a long way from such optimism as existed at the opening of the book, but White has ended a period and left room for the beginning of another, all this done with simplicity and ease, because he leaves it to the reader to see the implications inherent in his description. It is a pleasure to see him working with such breadth, and skill, just as it's infuriating to see him unable to prevent himself mentioning hairs on a man's belly or the backs of his hands as a sign that the character so described has incurred the novelist's distaste. He's also interestingly ambivalent when he shows Mrs Gage, the postmistress, showing her late husband's paintings to some friends. I find myself struggling to know how to read this scene, or the sequel to it, which is another visit by Amy Parker to the O'Dowds (of shotgun and cleaver fame).

Reading should be easy by this stage, because the book is beyond its halfway mark and its general movement appears fairly clear, then the oil painting scene draws out something almost malevolently satirical in White's presentation of his people,

something which all-female groupings seem to prompt him to write. Some of Mrs Gage's friends have no sympathy with or understanding of oil paintings (the word 'oil' appears to signal that the paintings lie between being pretentious and mysteriously significant), whereas Amy 'was opening to an experience of great tenderness and beauty'. Mrs Gage, having revealed the mind of the husband who hanged himself, appears to have reached some finality on the matter of the paintings, but they stir Amy on to another visit to the O'Dowds, who are drinking home-made rotgut, and somewhat later, to a brief sexual affair with a travelling salesman who visits the Parkers' home. My difficulty with these scenes is that they appear, to me, as rather arbitrarily chosen, partly to display satirical moods that weren't present at the beginning of the book and aren't present at its end, and partly because they cause me to think that what I'm reading is not so much a narrative as an agenda for later writing to explore. It is as if a different part of White's mind has taken over for a time, before he returns to his theme of life unfolding such shape and purposes as it possesses in his normally quite delicately observed writing.

This leads me to ask myself for some judgement on his treatment of his themes. I've already referred to White's way of controlling what goes into his narratives and his exclusion of aspects which other writers would think needed to go in. It's interesting to me as a parent that he appears not to take up any position on whether or not Stan and Amy are in any sense responsible for the lives of their children, Ray and Thelma. I'm not suggesting that there are any simple answers to such questions, but it's a fact of parenting

that fathers and mothers are inclined to think themselves to some degree responsible or in some way causative of what their children are able to make of themselves. Everyone knows that some children 'copy' their parents, and others 'react', and doubtless there are any number of other set sequences that might be set out as applicable in this case or that. White's skill in showing the contrasting developments of Ray and Thelma, each of them contrasting with and occasionally continuing the characteristics of the parents, Stan and Amy, is considerable; what appears to me to be lacking is any great curiosity about how Stan and Amy deal with these matters of continuity and responsibility in relation to their children.

Let me take this matter a little further. At the beginning of chapter 19, Thelma and her husband – the Forsdykes – go to visit Stan and Amy. At the bottom of the same page we discover, as if it's a matter of little consequence, that Stan and Amy were not present at their daughter's wedding. Why not? White offers no more than this:

If they had not been to the wedding, it was because, obviously, it might have been embarrassing. But on an afternoon visit, alone, they were appreciative and hushed.

A chapter or so later, Ray marries Elsie Tarbutt, a devout Methodist. Stan and Amy, who have seen little of Ray over the years, attend this ceremony. Elsie has a child, also called Ray, who is, I think, a necessary creation because he will be needed for the very end of the book. At this point I begin to develop doubts about the nature of *The Tree of Man*, a phrase, quoted in the book, from A.E.Housman. Is it a book about the cyclical nature of human life, going on and

on, endlessly repeating, endlessly different, or is it something else? I have already said that I think some incidents are included in the book because they are agenda items for later writing by novelist or dramatist White. We have already met the O'Dowds; they are vulgar enough, in White's judgement, to allow him to deal with them in a prose where satire, savagery, contempt and an extra layer of human feeling can all come into play. Amy Parker makes a last visit to the O'Dowd's, and holds her once-friend's hand as she lies dying. White rises to the drama that he will enjoy creating:

Great gusts of wind rocked her in the little trap. Her cheeks were soon plumped out. Down the funnel of her throat poured the wind, till she was big with her mission.

Amy finds her friend, 'or what remained of her, on the high pillow of a bed.'

For Mrs O'Dowd had sunk in, and was all for dying, now that her body was a strait space. She had suffered that day – was it the worst? – she did not yet know. Although weak, her gums could still bite on pain and draw the blood out of it. Her cheeks were quite gone. But her eyes, to which the spirit had withdrawn, were big cloudy things. They were not her own, or rather they were that part of man which is not recognizable in life.

Clearly, we are in for a deathbed scene, but White redoubles the effect by introducing 'a fellow called Cusack', also called 'the man from Deniliquin', who makes just the one appearance in White's long novel, for no other reason – and no less a reason – than to tell the story of him accompanying his dead father home from a whore-

house on the back of a water cart. White seems to need vulgarity as a balance to his own refinement. Theatrical narrative, theatrical presentation, gives him a release that his normally allusive prose can't achieve. The man from Deniliquin's narrative is a phase of this novel where it forgets, or perhaps deliberately changes, its mode of presentation. The man from Deniliquin takes over, for two and a half pages, the management, the character of the book, and when he falls silent, and we return to Mrs O'Dowd, her hand held by Amy Parker, death is in the room. Is it a rule of White's writing that only when coarseness has been given its head that we can be sure that basic facts have been established? In the later chapters of *The Tree of Man* there are a number of passages, events, where I feel the satirical, scornful, some would say elitist, Patrick White is chewing on events, characters, details, which a part of him despises, but knows must be included if his book is to have the completeness that he'd planned to give it. Late in the lives of Stan and Amy, they go to Sydney at the suggestion of Thelma, their daughter, and they attend a performance of *Hamlet*, which Stan read as a boy. Seated high in the theatre, they watch the events of the famous play rather like the King and Queen watching the play within a play performed by the visiting troupe. In this way, and with enviable skill, *Hamlet* is turned by White into the play that is within his own ... play? *The Tree of Man* is a novel, but the novelist's methods, in the later parts of the book, are more dramatic than novelistic. Stan Parker, whose perception of God in the blob of spittle has already been discussed, died that same day. Mrs O'Dowd's death has already been described so Stan's death is brought to our attention, and

his daughter's attention, as the aftermath of a visit she makes to a concert. One notices White's surgical gloves being pulled on for his description of the concert:

There were several pieces of programme music that Mrs Forsdyke [Thelma] had learned never to listen to, and would treat even with disgust.

The main item is a violin concerto – whose, we aren't told – and it is played by a Jew. It's made clear that he gives a brilliant interpretation but there's an element of distaste in the prose each time he's mentioned that suggests some link between the vulgarities of the death-bed scene we've earlier witnessed and the musical farewell which Stan Parker, unaware because he's dead by now – is being given. Thelma goes home, she's met by the glow of her husband's cigar, and she hears that her father has died. The funeral will be the following afternoon, and Thelma, who was to attend a dinner at Government House with her husband, decides that Government House must take second place to her father. Elsie, Ray's partner – Ray is dead by now, having abandoned his moment of respectability with Elsie and their child – is already at Durilgai, with young Ray, her son, and the tree of Stan's life has been brought down, but the little boy discovers that there are still trees enough, and he realises that he will 'write a poem of life, of all life, of what he did not know, but knew.'

The Tree of Man is a most ambitious book, and has many marvellous passages, but such unity of vision as the book proposes – I use the word deliberately – seems to me to be more notional than actual. The beginning and the ending are as appropriate to

each other as two book-ends – I think Patrick might have liked that comparison – but it seems to me, as I’ve already said, that the many matters and incidents that separate these book-ends are not entirely or altogether of a piece. Sometimes, when White’s treatment of them seems appropriate, as when he turns savagely farcical for the O’Dowd scenes, I’m cheerfully accepting of the book finding a second, a separate, a new voice appropriate for its material. At other times, notably when the man from Deniliquin takes control of the narrative, or when the Parkers go to the performance of *Hamlet*, it seems to me that White is culling through some op-shop collection of materials he’s gathered in his mind to give variety to his vision, even though the way he begins and ends the book implies a unity of vision that he’s not yet able to display. This forces me once again to consider the opening: what is happening, and where? Something about the writing suggests that we are at the outer edge of civilisation, yet we are not terribly far from Sydney. White probably didn’t think, at the time he wrote the book, that Sydney was the centre of anything very much, because he was, I’m sure, acutely aware of what he’d separated himself from by returning to Australia. In putting Stan and Amy where he does, White is not really recreating the scenes of Steele Rudd, as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, he’s expressing an opinion, fiery of breath and scornful of brow, on the place where he is working ...

... with unusual humility to re-start his life and his writing career. In the years when he was writing *The Tree of Man*, he and Manoly were working long and hard on the tiny farm and Patrick was getting up in the night to do his writing. Lording it over

anybody who thought they were anything in Australian arts and society didn’t start until rather later. The early Castle Hill days were a time of austerity, work, and devotion, both to tasks and to each other. The best way to see *The Tree of Man*, I think, is to see it as the groundwork of the career that would make White famous. It resembles none of his later books, though it contains a good deal that would be developed later. The difference, the reason why I say the book doesn’t resemble those that came later, is that White, for the most part, disciplines himself to stay at the level of his central characters, to see the world in their way, and to restrict himself and his writing to the visions, enjoyments and pains of common people. In that sense, at least, the writer and his book are true to the breadth implied by his title.

- (1) *Patrick White: A Life*, David Marr, Random House Australia, Sydney, 1991
- (2) See ‘The Eye of the Storm: but what is the storm?’ in *The Well in the Shadow*, literary essays, Chester Eagle, worldwide web publication 2008 via trojanpress.com.au (see OZLIT menu item)