

The Prodigal Son

Patrick White*

This is by way of being an answer to Alister Kershaw's recent article "The Last Expatriate," but as I cannot hope to equal the slash and dash of Kershaw's journalistic weapons, I shall not attempt to answer him point by point. In any case, the reasons why anybody is an expatriate, or why another chooses to return home, are such personal ones that the question can only be answered in a personal way.

At the age of 46 I have spent just on twenty of those years overseas. During the last ten, I have hardly stirred from the six acres of "Dogwoods," Castle Hill. It sounds odd, and is perhaps worth trying to explain.

Brought up to believe in the maxim, Only the British can be right, I did accept this during the earlier part of my life. Ironed out in an English public school, and finished off at King's, Cambridge, it was not until 1939, after wandering by myself through most of Western Europe, and finally most of the United States, that I began to grow up and think my own thoughts. The War did the rest. What had seemed a brilliant, intellectual, highly desirable existence, became distressingly parasitic and pointless. There is nothing like a rain of bombs to start one trying to assess one's own achievement. Sitting at night in his London bed-sitting room during the first months of the Blitz, this chromium-plated Australian with two fairly successful novels to his credit came to the conclusion that his achievement was practically nil. Perhaps significantly, he was reading at that time Eyre's *Journal*. Perhaps also he had the wind up; certainly he reached rather often for the bottle of Calvados in the wardrobe. Anyway, he experienced those first sensations of rootlessness which Alister Kershaw has deplored and explained as the "desire to nuzzle once more at the benevolent teats of the mother country."

All through the War in the Middle East there persisted a longing

* Reprinted from *Australian Letters* I (April 1958): 37-40; Copyright © Patrick White 1958.

to return to the scenes of childhood, which is, after all, the purest well from which the creative artist draws. Aggravated further by the terrible nostalgia of the desert landscapes, this desire was almost quenched by the year I spent stationed in Greece, where perfection presents itself on every hand, not only the perfection of antiquity, but that of nature, and the warmth of human relationships expressed in daily living. Why didn't I stay in Greece? I was tempted to. Perhaps it was the realisation that even the most genuine resident Hellenophile accepts automatically the vaguely comic role of Levantine beachcomber. He does not belong, the natives seem to say, not without affection; it is sad for him, but he is nothing. While the Hellenophile continues humbly to hope.

So I did not stay in my elective Greece. Demobilisation in England left me with the alternative of remaining in what I then felt to be an actual and spiritual graveyard, with the prospect of ceasing to be an artist and turning instead into that most sterile of beings, a London intellectual, or of returning home, to the stimulus of time remembered. Quite honestly, the thought of a full belly influenced me as well, after toying with the soft, sweet awfulness of horsemeat stew in the London restaurants that I could afford. So I came home. I bought a farm at Castle Hill, and with a Greek friend and partner, Manoly Lasearis, started to grow flowers and vegetables, and to breed Schnauzers and Saanen goats.

The first years I was content with these activities, and to soak myself in landscape. If anybody mentioned Writing, I would reply: "Oh, one day, perhaps." But I had no real intention of giving the matter sufficient thought. *The Aunt's Story*, written immediately after the War, before returning to Australia, had succeeded with overseas critics, failed as usual with the local ones, [and] remained half-read, it was obvious from the state of the pages, in the lending libraries. Nothing seemed important, beyond living and eating, with a roof of one's own over one's head.

Then, suddenly, I began to grow discontented. Perhaps, in spite of Australian critics, writing novels was the only thing I could do with any degree of success; even my half-failures were some justification of an otherwise meaningless life. Returning sentimentally to a country I had left in my youth, what had I really found? Was there anything to prevent me packing my bag and leaving like Alister Kershaw and so many other artists? Bitterly I had to admit, no. 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 schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes, in which human teeth fall like autumn leaves, the buttocks of cars grow hourly glassier, food means cake and steak,

muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves.

It was the exaltation of the "average" that made me panic most, and in this frame of mind, in spite 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.

So I began to write *The Tree of Man*. How it was received by the more important Australian critics is now ancient history. Afterwards I wrote *Voss*, possibly conceived during the early days of the Blitz, when I sat reading Eyre's *Journal* in a London bed-sitting room. Nourished by months spent traipseing backwards and forwards across the Egyptian and Cyrenaican deserts, influenced by the arch-megalomaniac of the day, the idea finally matured after reading contemporary accounts of Leichhardt's expeditions and A.H. Chisholm's *Strange New World* on returning to Australia.

It would be irrelevant to discuss here the literary aspects of the novel. More important are those intentions of the author which have pleased some readers without their knowing exactly why, and helped to increase the rage of those who have found the book meaningless. Always something of a frustrated painter, and a composer manqué, I wanted to give my book the textures of music, the sensuousness of paint, to convey through the theme and characters of *Voss* what Delacroix and Blake might have seen, what Mahler and Liszt might have heard. Above all I was determined to prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism. On the whole, the world has been convinced, only here, at the present moment, the dingoes are howling unmercifully.

What, then, have been the rewards of this returned expatriate? I remember when, in the flush of success after my first novel, an old and wise Australian journalist called Guy Innes came to interview me in my London flat. He asked me whether I wanted to go back. I had just "arrived"; who was I to want to go back? "Ah, but when you do," he persisted, "the colours will come flooding back onto your palette." This gentle criticism of my first novel only occurred to me as such in recent years. But I think perhaps Guy Innes has been right.

So, amongst the rewards, there is the refreshed landscape, which even in its shabbier, remembered versions has always made a background to my life. The worlds of plants and music may never have revealed themselves had I sat talking brilliantly to Alister Kershaw over a Pernod on the Left Bank. Possibly all art flowers more readily

in silence. Certainly the state of simplicity and humility is the only desirable one for artist or for man. While to reach it may be impossible, to attempt to do so is imperative. Stripped of almost everything that I had considered desirable and necessary, I began to try. Writing, which had meant the practice of an art by a polished mind in civilised surroundings, became a struggle to create completely fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words. I 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. As for the cat's cradle of human intercourse, this was necessarily simplified, often bungled, sometimes touching. Its very tentativeness can be a reward. There is always the possibility that the book lent, the record played, may lead to communication between human beings. There is the possibility that one may be helping to people a barely inhabited country with a race possessed of understanding.

These, then, are some of the reasons why an expatriate has stayed, in the face of those disappointments which follow inevitably upon his return. Abstract and unconvincing, the Alister Kershaws will probably answer, but such reasons, as I have already suggested, are a personal matter. More concrete, and most rewarding of all, are the many letters I have received from unknown Australians, for whom my writing seems to have opened a window. To me, the letters alone are reason enough for staying.

Patrick White

Patrick White*

Religion. Yes, that's behind all my books. What I am interested in is the relationship between the blundering human being and God. I belong to no church, but I have a religious faith; it's an attempt to express that, among other things, that I try to do. Whether he confesses to being religious or not, everyone has a religious faith of a kind. I myself am a blundering human being with a belief in God who made us and we got out of hand, a kind of Frankenstein monster. Everyone can make mistakes, including God. I believe God does intervene; I think there is a Divine Power, a Creator, who has an influence on human beings if they are willing to be open to him. Yes, I pray. I was brought up an Anglican. Oh, then I gave that away completely. After the war I tried to belong to the Church of England, but I found that so completely unsatisfactory. I wouldn't say I am a

* Reprinted from *In the Making*, ed. Craig McGregor (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1969), 218-21; Copyright © Craig McGregor 1969.

Christian; I can't aspire so high. I am a very low form of human being; in my next incarnation I shall probably turn up as a dog or a stone. I can't divorce Christianity from other religions. The Jewish, for instance, is a wonderful religion—I had to investigate it very thoroughly for *Riders in the Chariot*. In my books I have lifted bits from various religions in trying to come to a better understanding; I've made use of religious themes and symbols. Now, as the world becomes more pagan, one has to lead people in the same direction in a different way. . . .

I'm really more interested in things urban than things country, in the more sophisticated aspects of Australian life . . . though I come from the country, it's in my blood. The novel I am working on now is set mainly in Sydney. It's about the life of a painter. I've known many painters myself. One of the first I knew was Roy de Maistre: I feel he taught me to write by teaching me to look at paintings and get beneath the surface. I've seen a lot of Nolan on and off, he's a friend of mine; and Lawrence Daws, Rapotec. I like some of Fred Williams's paintings very much; I think he gets closer to the essence of the Australian landscape than most. Why can't a writer use writing as a painter uses paint? I try to. When I wrote *The Tree of Man* I felt I couldn't write about simple, illiterate people in a perfectly literate way; but in my present novel the language is more sophisticated. I think perhaps I have clarified my style quite a lot over the years. I find it a great help to hear the language going on around me; not that what I write, the narrative, is idiomatic Australian, but the whole work has a balance and rhythm which is influenced by what is going on around you. When you first write the narrative it might be unconscious, but when you come to work it over you do it more consciously. It gives what I am writing a greater feeling of reality. When I came back from overseas I felt I had to learn the language again. That is one of the reasons I work in Australia. I write about Australia; you have to do a certain amount of research; and I think it's a good thing to be close to one's roots. It's a good thing, too, to spend some time away from them; it enriches your work. Martin Boyd, Christina Stead—*Cotter's England*, that's a terrific novel. They went away and stayed away. The essence of what you have to say you pick up before you're twenty, really, so it ought to be possible to go away and draw on that. I came back. I work better here because there are no distractions. It would be so boring if I didn't write I would go mad. . . . I have been working on this present novel for three years. Oh, and I've written the first draft of a novella as well. I always like to write three versions of a book. The first is always agony and chaos; no one could understand it. With the second you get the shape, it's more or less all right. I write both of those in longhand. The third draft I type out with two fingers: