Negotiating an Autobiography: 
Patrick White's Flaws in the Glass

There are no texts, only readings of them. There are, perhaps, no 'authors' either, only Readers. We recall readings of texts, our own, of others; we don't recall texts which, if the enthusiasm of the foregoing 'heresy' is to be maintained, do not exist except in their realisation, their recuperation. This takes me to the title of my review: We negotiate texts and this negotiation is never totally removed from either our ideological stance or from the 'hypograms' (inter-textual systems of reference) that we create. But the act of negotiation (verb negotiate from neg - not + otium - ease; a business transaction, a treaty, a point of mutual agreement; to negotiate, hence an act of civic compromise, some yielding, some accommodation, etc.) also defines the text: no more than a site of various contestations (the agonistic spirit of the sememes is no coincidence here). And, of course, every negotiation is both parasitic and host; it breeds on another and becomes, in the process, a breeding ground for others. There are, clearly, false or wrong negotiations too, deconstructions that in making, say, an 'open' text too open indeed 'close' the openness of that text. Texts, then, outline what Umberto Eco calls a 'closed project', which is a part of its own textual strategy. Furthermore, texts carry, immanently, a structure of the Model Reader. A reading is no more than the production of the text's own Model Reader. We have, in one way, occulted the Reader here: the presumed privilege of textual discourse is replaced by a certain
narcissistic privilege of the Reader. But the Reader, unlike the text, continues to be capitalised - he is, as we said, a structural strategy. 'He' is, however, 'an act of labour' as well, the re-reader, who is an interpretant only upon a second reading of the text. He is, in fact, the Model Reader, a projection of text-mechanism. You cannot find a Model Reader in the street, just as you do not find a text in libraries: both exist only as a 'history' of reading(s).

The foregoing is in need of greater elaboration as the theoretical issues raised require much greater intellectual clarity. It is with some diffidence that I accept the constraints of brevity and move onto Patrick White’s Flaws in the Glass (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981).

What I offer below is a reading, a re-reading in fact, that becomes, ultimately, a parallel text constructed in the space that exists between a site of reading and the Model Reader. One of the cruel paradoxes of any reading (or criticism, itself an institutional ism that seeks to displace the relative autonomy of the Literary System) indeed is that it wishes to articulate an alternative discourse which vies for pre-eminence with its object, as parasite to host. There are dangers inherent in any exercise of this kind not least of which is an open invitation to the accusation that it lacks 'rigour' or that it is not 'tough' enough. I plunge my head into the cold waters of White 'criticism' nevertheless.

Both the title and the structure of Flaws in the Glass demand intertextual framing. Were it not for the subtitle ("A Self Portrait") one’s immediate reaction would have been to read it as fiction – and in a very real sense this work, if not the genre of autobiography generally, is fictional. But the sub-title is an essential corrective, both as a sign of immediate contestations and possible
valorization (other portraits, Patrick White the repressed painter, Van Gogh without his left ear, an image constructed from an equally flawed mirror) and as an ironic self-correction, this paradoxical historicization of fiction. 'Flaws' enters into syntagmatic relations with moral, spiritual, personal, perhaps in that descending order. Reflecting it to flawed (the plural noun adjectivised), we may speak of a flawed piece of work, a flawed creation or, somewhat enthusiastically, an artistic career remarkably flawed (the homonym floored adds to its ambiguity). Then there is the definite article: the glass that the artistic self always carries, his oeuvre perhaps. Whatever it is, the establishes a distinctiveness, a bracketing of the glass with a personality, with a literary corpus. A certain relationality is assumed: all glasses in Patrick White become important. In The Solid Mandala, Waldo, the normal of the Brown twins, discovers one of Mother's old dresses (an ageing man rummaging through a memory of boxes) and puts it on before a mirror (distance and difference destabilises the 'real'). This act of quasitransvestism is crucial. It is a metaphor that Patrick White carries with him, it is the construct of a modern androgyne for whom Ruth, the Mother in real life, is immensely significant.

As a young boy of seven (?) Patrick White spits in her face but she in turn (the causality implied here is only psychological) banishes him to an English school, the experience of which conjures strange phantoms in the writer's mind later in life. He returns to the Mother again, we discover upon reading Flaws, in The Eye of the Storm. But Elizabeth Hunter, unlike Ruth who dies in self-imposed exile away from the country she has always hated, in a cold, alien, London flat, at least has the security of Centennial Park, Sydney. And, furthermore, she can still recall an epiphany on an island off the Queensland coast which, in its spiritual intensity, establishes over-arching concordances: the moment of
Illumination justifies life, or (to construct a typical Patrick White parenthesis) death.

The title has its range of literary and quasi-literary significations. Yet on neither of these scores has the significations been exhausted. 'Glass' remains polysemic, the mirror, that transitional stage between the narcissistic and the love for the other (le stade du miroir is, I believe, the Lacanian phrase), is overtaken by the 'marble' and this in turn by Jung and the mandalas of the collective consciousness. The mirror that reflects and distorts (the self as object) unites with the archetypal 'marble', the symbolic totality of an otherwise fractured self. No wonder the other in Patrick White's life, displacing perhaps the hermaphroditic Mother, Manoly Lascaris, is defined as 'this small Greek of immense moral strength, who became the central mandala of my life's hitherto messy design'.

The face in this glass - it is in the flaws, the cracks, that refraction diffuses light - is unfolded through a narrative of three parts. This tripartite structure is itself informative. It establishes connections with other similarly structured works of White: The Aunt's Story, The Solid Mandala (Mrs Poulter's Zeitgeist is a coda here), and The Twyborn Affair. The self-portrait has been played out fullest in these fictional works. First as the spinster Theodora Goodman, then as the ageing twins Arthur and Waldo Brown and finally as the transvestite/heterosexual/whore Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith. ('In my own opinion my three best novels are The Solid Mandala, The Aunt's Story, and The Twyborn Affair', writes White). These are the crucial inter-texts for the framing to be complete. Throughout the self-portrait assumes complete knowledge of the White oeuvre and without access to that corpus, the self-portrait is only partly accessible. Flaws is then part of a heterogeneous text, part of an ongoing set of exploratory works (in one important sense,
All literature is autobiographical) whose meaning can be recovered only through continuous contextualizations.

All this perhaps begs the question, who is the real Patrick White? My reading has provided no answers. It has only suggested that perhaps he exists at the interface between an outwardly fictional corpus and an outwardly factual autobiography. Yet there is a dominant mode of articulation in 'Flaws' a mode of self-justification, an attitude which is consistent. It is the mode of Romantic discourse - the artist presented as the individual in isolation, the 'slasher' apart from society who is impetuous, irascible, contradictory, in short ambivalent. This individual (the act of individuation is itself central) has access to truth, to 'sincere values' lost to those not elected to the status of the artha-deva, the demigod-cum-Romantic artist. We look for frames outside the corpus now. We examine Wordsworth's The Prelude; we read Walter Pater; we pore over the contributions to The Yellow Book; familiarize ourselves with fin de siècle dandyism and so on. As meta-texts we read Frank Kermode's Romantic Image and A.J.L. Busst's 'The Androgyne' in Romantic Mythologies. As an 'anti-text' to White we read Jean Genet's The Thief's Journal. Through them we reconstruct our Romantic paradigm, through them we gain entry into Patrick White's trapped consciousness, into an ideological system still lost in petit bourgeois values of truth, honesty and morality. Too involved in these values, Patrick White, the mirror in the glass, the flawed mandala, never transcends his self-reflexivity. Hatred of adultery (he sees Sidney Nolan's second marriage as an act of quasi-adultery), hatred of the 'waxwork so many Australians become' (he has Dobell in mind here) only lead to personal frustrations, to irrevocable schisms, to even mindless accusations. Patrick White, the child of a wealthy grazier, secure with a fixed income, never really transcends the ideological system which traps
him. The self-portrait points at the absences, the conflicts, the contradictions in society at large, but refrains from any real commitment. The Romantic distanciation transforms vitality into sculpture, truth into a Grecian urn.

Yet in all these there is a petulance, a sensibility which is ultimately androgynous. It is the figure of Boehme's Adam, of Simeon Solomon's *Night and Sleep* of de Vinci's *Saint John the Baptist* that we ultimately discover. The crucial word here is *ambivalent*. If light and refractions, silence and hands are the crucial signifiers in White's fiction, then the word *ambivalent* is the crucial one in *Flaws*. It is this ambivalence which affirms androgyny, the Romantic artist's sexual equivocation, the *entropic* pull against differentiation. And for those who refuse to recognise this equivocation, who impose rigid limits on White the jab is telling: 'Instead, ambivalence has given me insights into human nature, denied, I believe, to those who are unequivocally male or female — and Professor Leonie Kramer'. Ambivalence (defined as the androgynous psyche) gives Patrick White a space, a mobility otherwise absent in others. In this concept (transformed often into characters who are neither male nor female) we find the kernel of Patrick White's art. It is a structure which leads to endless variations as the 'Twyborn' (the 'twice born', the *dvija-janman*) and which ultimately affirms, in the Nietzschean sense, life.

We therefore return to the text: to the artist's relationship to his Mother (there is a murderous impulse hidden somewhere here), to his god (on a wet, rainy day the artist cries out to his god and receives, characteristically, no reply), to his 'spouse'. These relationships dictate the narrative, they dictate, at least insofar as the spouse is concerned, the central journeys to the Greek islands (*Ulysses* with his Penelope, or is it Penelope with *Ulysses*? Hawthorne's Rome, White's
At the level of ambivalence (for they constitute his ambivalence), they dictate a temperament which accepts and rejects, consummates but is horrified, conceives but aborts.

As I write, this text continues to be negotiated in my consciousness through other memories. I recall White's latest work of fiction, The Twyborn Affair, and find that in retrospect Flaws has become somewhat redundant. The androgynous artist, comfortable only with passive sexuality (feathers always overtake dresses and hairy armpits and crotch) had in that work made his own sexuality the central theme. And I have other memories too. Of 'Gerontion': "Here I am, an old man in a dry month, being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.' The old man, getting on to seventy, walks through Centennial Park and talks to children. A version of the myth of the loss of the golden age is being replayed, the myth of artistic immortality being affirmed through the simple utterances of children. The institution Patrick White becomes Patrick (in answer to the child's 'What's your name?') The child, incredulous that he does not have a wife, is still comforted by the thought of Patrick's cats and dogs, Ugly and Gough, Nellie and Eureka. And the Romantic artist once again, staging his own death, recalls life poetically ('the false dawn', 'blaring hibiscus trumpets as well as exhausted phalluses'), obliquely framing it in Stan Parker's own dying vision in The Tree of Man and hopes for the 'Twyborn' moment of grace. 'Twyborn' - capitalised and with its archaism intact - the state accessible only to the twice-born, signals the last phrase of the text. But it also signals an endless replay. As an androgyne, hasn't life already been a 'Twyborn affair'? But demigods too need immortality, a hope, however much a "periphrastic study in a worn out poetical fashion" - that grace that comes ever so fleetingly to his riders in the chariot. The inscription is complete, the subject lost in a maze of other equally obscure subjects, all part of an endless series of mirror images, the writing carefully placed within a mise-en-abîme.
All that this reading of Flaws in the Glass can claim is that the Model Reader has simply recuperated some of the strategies of reading present in the text. As a contribution to White, it is yet another attempt to give textual status to the work - my Flaws exists only in this reading of it, not independently of it. And, finally, it may be seen as part of an 'écriture' of reading, more or less legitimate, but all co-extensive with a history of White reading. At this juncture no more can, or need be said, or claimed.

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