Grappling with Essential Reality at the Margins of Community: Identity, Alienation and Transcendence in Patrick White's *Voss*

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In his influential study of Patrick White, Brian Kiernan claimed that 'the basic situation in [Patrick White's] fiction is the attempt of individuals […] alienated from society, to grasp some higher, more essential reality that lies beyond or behind social existence' (1980, p.1). This statement, while pointing to a central theme of his work, is not entirely adequate as a description of Patrick White's novels. With particular reference to *Voss*,[1] this paper will show that, when seen to encompass the totality of White's work and its meaning, Kiernan's assertion obscures complexities operating on a number of different levels. While his statement certainly provides an apt description of a number of White's characters, it is reductive in that it fails to encompass the author's ironic overlay and often critical response to his characters' egotistical approach to transcendence. For White, identity and marginality are bound together in complex ways. Set in nineteenth-century Australia, *Voss* traces the explorer's tortuous journey through uncharted territories of mind and landscape towards an often ambiguous, flawed and even failed understanding of self and other. Voss sets out with a motley band of followers to cross the Australian continent, developing as he does so a telepathic relationship with Laura Trevelyan, the orphaned niece of a sponsor of the expedition. The extreme isolation of characters such as Voss and Laura facilitates their insight into the hypocrisy, hostility and stifling nature of the society from which they are alienated. However, rather than promoting a cult of the individual elite or the Romantic notion of self-sufficient genius, White focuses on the need for unity and interpersonal relationships in order to repair these social failings.

[1] Patrick White, *Voss* (1957; London: Vintage, 1994). All subsequent page references are incorporated in the text.

In *Voss*, the possibility of transcendence is not reserved for a superior, alienated elect: to varying degrees, each of the characters, such as Belle and even Harry Robarts, can be seen to experience moments of isolation and the desire for greater understanding. Rather, White makes clear the way in which 'higher reality' appears differently to each of those who grasp it — from Palfreyman's adherence to conventional Christianity to Judd's secular spirituality, embodied in his wife's baking and bosom — so that 'particoloured' (p.444) truth can be best approached through shared knowledge and insight. Thus, for White, true transcendence is not merely to go above or beyond mundane society to some mystical or higher plane, but to overcome the seemingly immutable boundaries of ego and personality that prevent genuine human relationships and exchange. Alienation and self-imposed marginality may lead to self-annihilation rather than transcendence. 'Essential reality' does not exist beyond or behind social existence, but within it.

In Voss's literal and metaphorical expedition into the desert interior of both country and mind, the transcendence he seeks (enthronement as divinity) is vastly different from that which eventuates (acceptance of that humanity in himself which he attempted to annihilate). His trajectory, and Laura's parallel journey through mortification, expiation and humility as she remains in the township to fear for his progress, are enabled largely through the fascination occasioned by their initially antipathetic relationship, and their subsequent telepathic or hallucinatory communication. In the fever of obsessive imagination, and on the margins of sanity, each constantly summons the absent other, pointing to the transcendental possibilities and 'essential reality' *within*, rather than beyond, social existence and interaction. Just as knowledge 'overflows all maps that exist' (p.446), so too are transcendental reality and social existence intermingled to the point of being indistinguishable. The new generation of 'discoverers' that Laura survives to inspire will not succumb to 'death by torture' (p.446) but will rescue the

frontier society from 'mediocrity', by exploring and expressing the 'endless variety and subtlety' (p.447) present in what humans have 'experienced by living' (p.446).

Voss is certainly not presented without recognition of the deeply flawed nature of his approach to transcendence, as During attests (1996, p.31).[2] He is, instead, scorned and parodied by a multiplicity of voices of other characters and indeed the narrator, who asserts that 'altogether, he was unconvincing' (p.69). His alienation is, to some extent, inevitable due to his marginal status as 'a kind of foreign man' (p.7) in a society of rigid definitions and distinctions. It is heightened by his lofty ambition to explore the interior of a country around the edges of which materialistic, colonial society 'huddles' (p.11) in fear of the scope of possibility. On another level, his extreme isolation is portrayed not as a result of superior genius but as a pathological symptom of his arrogance and personal failings. White has commented that Voss was based not only on the 'unusually unpleasant' explorer Leichhardt (ed. Marr, 1996, p.107), but was also inspired by the perverse madness of 'that greater German megalomaniac' Hitler (White, 1998 – 1981, p.104). In this light, it is Voss's extreme egotism and 'brutality' (p.14) which 'had made him reject' (p.36) the material world, in order simultaneously to 'enjoy the private spectacle of himself' (p.41) and protect his fragile, unhinged mental state. To Voss, 'thirst, fever, physical exhaustion' are much less destructive of personality than other 'people' or 'words, even of benevolence', which leave him 'crazed' and 'half-dead' (p.18).

The alienation of both Laura and Voss encompasses the traditional sense of man's separation from God and loss of faith, as well as the modern connotation of loss of community. Laura, a social outsider by virtue of her status as orphan and, 'worse still' (p.57), a woman with intellect, has begun to doubt the relevance of religious faith in a setting where 'the sermon and bonnets' (p.25) are discussed over morning tea as matters of equal

[2] Simon During describes White as a 'modernist transcendentalist', stating that 'for him [as for Voss], "being human" is not a value in itself'(1996, p.31).

importance. From the moment they 'flounder into each other's private beings' (p.90) in the intimate darkness of the garden, she realises that it is only in the 'extreme agitation and exhilaration' (p.88) of a relationship with Voss, her own 'desert' testing ground, that the movement from destructive 'self-pity' (p.90) to the love and concern which restores conviction, and eventually humility, will be possible. Despite recognition of their shared marginality and isolation, each initially challenges rather than affirms the other's self-perception, so that 'all their [defensive] gestures had ugliness, convulsiveness in common' (p.89). Ironically, Voss's conception of Laura's atheism as a result of her 'so lacking in magnificence [that she] cannot conceive the idea of a Divine Power' (p.89) is set in stark contrast to his arrogant assurance of his own absolute magnificence, to the extent that he has a contempt not only for all humanity but particularly 'God, because He is not in [Voss's] own image' (p.50).

Indeed, the higher reality that Voss seeks is not an egalitarian vision of hope for all humanity but an intensification of his delusion of 'self as God' which, in the context of his bitten fingernails, frayed cuffs, and a smile with all the emotional sincerity of a grimace — 'the skin […] tight against his teeth' (p.45) — is hardly presented by White, or accepted by the reader, as a satisfactory 'essential truth'. As Laura, his anima or unconscious, perceives, 'everything is for yourself' (p.88). In the symbolic last supper at Topp's house, Voss, in a prefiguring action, fails to give his fellow explorers the 'crumbs' (p.39) of love they require for sustenance. Ironically, his desired transcendence as saviour is on purely selfish terms. Voss feels that his companions, and even the practical necessities provided by his patrons, act as a restraint upon his 'pure will', so that 'it would be better […] that I should go barefoot and alone' (p.69).

Voss sees people such as the Bonners, who sit 'at meat in their houses of frail stone foundations', as 'unseeing'; and, by becoming familiar with 'each blade of withered grass […] even the joints in the body of the ant',

he seeks to assure himself that 'knowing so much, I shall know everything' (p.27). As the novel unfolds, it becomes apparent to the reader that a knowledge of myriad shifting fragments will not be as revealing as the comprehension of a lesser number of these fragments within a meaningful order. It is this unstructured overload of microscopic detail that prevents Voss's experiences of illumination from rising beyond mere delusion. Before long, the desert he explores is no longer that which exists but the realm of unreality, and the landscape becomes 'increasingly hallucinatory through Voss's perception of vegetation as torn and bleeding flesh' (Kiernan, 1980, p.54). He is, until the last moment, prevented from grasping 'essential reality' due to his very failure to recognise the nature of the prison constraining him, previously identified by Willie Pringle as 'his own skull' (p.64).

Transcendence of individual limitations will only be possible following the recognition of their existence, and the very notion of grasping some 'higher reality' suggests the discovery of something new and unexpected, entailing an opening out of the previous conception of self. White's positioning of Voss as engaging in an increasingly intense internal struggle to convince himself of his right to deification, and conceal his growing doubt from others, provides an ironic commentary on the absurdity of, and indeed stasis occasioned by, Voss's proclaimed self-sufficiency (p.15). Voss's ambition is not merely to transcend superficial social existence but to transcend humanity by renouncing human impulses to love: seeking and embracing an unnatural marginality. His mortification, viewed through the lens of extreme egotism, is not intended to lead to humility but exaltation — 'it was good that he should suffer, along with men' (p.284), as a Christ-like figure, rather than one of their company. It is this unnatural intention that makes Voss such a tortured figure, and although he admits at times an almost unbearable 'hunger' for human community, he refuses to sit at a 'round table' (p.36) in equal communion with other men. Even the gift of

some stale bread from an archetypal stranger is an insult to his arrogant pride, requiring as it does the act of humble acceptance.

To Voss, all beauty is 'intolerable' (p.15), and all momentary enjoyment of it requires harsh punishment of self and others in an effort to deny any reminders of his (inter)dependence. Voss will not allow himself to be 'drowned' in the 'pure gold' of lived pleasure but, in a telling image, clings to the 'calamitous raft' (p.128) of his pure will which, ironically, carries him downstream closer to his death. Only a very damaged and fallible human would be capable of viewing vibrant life, and immersion in human emotion, as a temptation directly occasioning death; and Voss is viewed objectively by the Sandersons in these terms even before the expedition proper has begun.

Voss is compelled to kill his dog Gyp rather than respond in a personal way to Palfreyman's intimate confidence about his sister — even riding back for company was 'wrong' (p.265). He is similarly determined to ignore the drowning goats, preferring to 'make every member of his party hate him' (pp.276-77) than allow them to witness his human distress at their fate. He remains, however, secretly tormented by the 'soft coat of love' (p.267). He cannot so easily obliterate the persistent image of Laura, whose imagined presence both comforts and challenges the explorer, echoing the insights of Frank Le Mesurier's poetry. Such insights, ironically, will only be those that Voss has 'given' (p.271) Frank, but not yet experienced himself: that Voss is 'not God, but Man', that true strength springs only from humility, and that 'love is the simplest of all tongues' (pp.296-77).

Voss's petty attempts to undermine his sacrificial companions (such as planting the compass in Judd's bag, and sending Palfreyman, unarmed, to his death in an attempt to prove that faith in a Lord who competes with Voss's supremacy is an illusion) reinforce the vast chasm between Voss's perceived 'essential truth' of self as heroic creator and the starkly opposed reality of insecure, grotesque destroyer. When, stepping forth from the cave

to create the first sunrise, Voss's delusion is momentarily punctured by the half-formed, 'gelatinous mess' (p.282) which results, his purported power is further juxtaposed against his crushing of a defenceless earthworm in a fit of pique. Perversely, Le Mesurier's diarrhoea is a vindicating reward (p.283) when Voss perceives his heroic function in treating the sick man to have been undercut by Judd's assistance. It is a brilliant final irony that Voss has not only failed in his quest to usurp the Christian throne, but, with the passing of the Comet, is also revealed as a 'fraud' (p.390) in the Aboriginal tribe's — and by implication, any — system of belief. Importantly, having been rejected by some members of his own party, and disappointing the expectations of those who invested their belief in his delusions until the end, Voss is made to recognize his humanity and admit to his mortal fear (p.390). Only then, truly humbled, is he able to 'ascend' (p.387).

Rather than viewing Voss as some kind of Nietzschean 'superman' (McCulloch, 1980, p.318), it is possible to view Laura as the 'heroine' of the novel (Brady, 1975, p.16). While Voss finally gains wisdom through suffering and comes to accept that he is not God but man, it is Laura who survives to share this knowledge or 'reward' (p.74), and on whom the future depends. It may be the case that 'true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind' (p.446); yet, paradoxically, this knowledge of self and other will be a tragic one if it does not survive to be translated into the terms of the living, or brought from lonely margin to the centre of community. As Voss realises moments before his death, the main purpose of Laura's prayers (envisaged as nourishing lilies) was not to support his 'coronation' but rather, upon the inevitable 'cancellation of that ceremony', to 'tide them over the long journey back in search of human status' (p.393). While it is true that genius and transcendence may often be 'choked by the trivialities of daily existence' (p.35), it was Voss, not White, who previously made the mistaken assumption that this unfortunate reality inevitably requires a superior elect to 'discard the inessential and […]

attempt the infinite' through self-elected marginalization (p.35). It is, after all, the facts of social existence — relationships, childbirth, breaking bread in community — that endure through time. Laura survives her empathetic brain fever to raise adopted child Mercy and, fittingly, assume the role of teacher; Voss's head, for all the new-found insight it contained, lies in death on the dry earth as insignificant and as empty of blood and dreams as 'any melon' (p.394).

Indeed, it has been Voss's conception of 'essential reality' as something situated behind or beyond — in any case, quite separate from — social existence that has caused him to fashion a simplistic dichotomy between the mundane social dimension that is so fraught with anxiety and the vast desert interior in which he seeks escape and self-justification. The purpose espoused by less egotistical explorers, such as Colonel Hebden, will, after all, not be simply to escape the constraints of social existence (represented by the built environment) but to expand and enliven its present boundaries, an aim expressed in different terms by the figure of the unappreciated artist, Willie Pringle. Voss has been fascinated by the destruction and sublimation of all that he does not understand within his own reductive vision (and so, in a sense, is only capable of discovering what he already knows), admiring the way a fly-eating plant disposes of 'those detestable pests' (p.13). Willie Pringle has understood that essential reality exists *within* the social, even the trivial, so that 'the blowfly on its bed of offal is but a variation of the rainbow. Common forms are constantly breaking into brilliant shapes. If we will explore them' (p.447).

The view that it is White's alienated, and somehow superior, protagonists who are best equipped to engage in emotional or spiritual quests for truth, and, particularly, that the site of their self-realization exists *beyond* the society from which they are alienated, has been central to preceding readings of his work, perhaps contributing to its recent neglect. During's analysis of White's oeuvre, like Kiernan's, includes the assumption

that a major purpose of his fiction is to celebrate the alienation of the elect. In fact, in the context of White's self-professed identification with outsiders (as both artist and homosexual), this celebration is interpreted by During as indicative of White's own egotism. Such a view fails to recognize the more complex approach to transcendence, identity and marginality embodied in White's fiction. By no means are 'the humble […] always other to, and finally lesser than, the author and his readers', as During maintains (1996, p.46). While Belle Bonner may be aware of the existence of 'rooms that she might not enter' (p.115), and is viewed by Laura as 'oblivious' to the transience, even the 'myth' (p.331), of all happiness, she too qualifies as a 'discoverer' (p.446). Belle's moments of heightened perception are brought about by the very crucible of mundane experience, the often thankless tasks of raising children and performing household chores. While heroic death in the searing interior may appear more immediately impressive, it is ultimately of no greater worth. Belle's own expeditions under the cabbage tree at the bottom of the garden are 'so little adventurous that nobody else wished to share them' (p.429), but this is, indeed, 'their virtue' (p.429). While there will be no bronze monuments erected to exalt Belle and her kind, she is able to create a less tangible but more enduring temple, inspiring joy in 'a great train of worshippers' (p.65). Belle is acutely aware of the location of essential reality *within* the community. Conscious of the possibilities not yet born of the 'solid egg of lamplight' (p.81) in which social interaction takes place, she seeks to erect 'an umbrella in the middle of the desert' (p.437) of the frontier society she inhabits. Belle may be seen as working towards an egalitarian vision that challenges those superficial social constraints within which she herself is immersed and esteemed, rather than alienated: 'is it not possible for each to discover, and appreciate […][some particular] quality in his fellow-guests, so that we may be happy together?' (p.435).

In a sense, *all* individuals are depicted by White as alienated from society, although this isolation occurs in varying degrees and manifests itself

in different ways. Those most isolated break away completely and retreat inward; others seek to mimic the forms and practices of social behaviour they do not completely understand or admire. At the Pringle's picnic, Mr Bonner resorts to making 'subtle attempts openly to condemn what is precious' (p.61) in order to maintain his position in a social tableau characterised by defensiveness, where the whites of eyes are exposed in an expressionistic, almost surreal watch for the gendered 'ammunition' (p.35) of male conversation or the 'insipid malice' (p.59) of female socialites such as Una Pringle. It is only in genuine interaction and reciprocal acknowledgement of fear and weakness that individuals may 'rescue' (p.357) one another from the isolating distances of the emotional desert landscape. Growth and transcendence in *Voss* are characterised by a process of people gratefully sensing that, as humans, they are 'equal in each other's eyes' (p.138), despite their superficial differences.

Even Harry Robarts, viewed by Voss as a 'superfluous' (p.21) if devoted simpleton, grapples with issues normally associated with a separate 'higher plane', illustrating the way in which essential truth may be accessed by all of humanity, and not only those marginalized or alienated individuals who position themselves as belonging to some kind of self-professed elite. Harry, at times, is possessed of 'disturbing and opaque thoughts […] What am I? What is it necessary to be?' (p.37), although 'such glimpses are, of course, [often] a matter of seconds' (p.96). Judd is also deeply rooted in the physical world, and his soul achieves fulfilment 'not by escaping from his body, but by returning to it' (p.243). Twenty years after the expedition, he admits to tiredness but certainly not confusion — impressed by the 'great simplicity with which everything had happened' (p.443), he is perhaps not wrong in suggesting that Voss did in fact die, like Palfreyman, 'with a spear in his side', having finally recognised that he is 'not God, but Man' (p.297).

Laura foresees that Voss's legend will be written down 'by those who have been troubled by it' (p.448), and McCulloch has identified a

corresponding 'sense of agony of White, the artist […] preoccupied with the problems of [his own] artistic alienation […] who sees but cannot express the meaning of man' (1980, p.319). However, what is important is the continuation of this perpetual struggle, as 'the mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, […] in becoming' (p.271), and White implicitly positions the reader with the new generation of 'discoverers' (p.446) addressed by Laura; although, ironically, even she grows hoarse — no one voice can speak for all humanity.

It has been claimed that the 'aesthetic principle' of *Voss* 'can […] be seen as that of a complex interrelationship of parts in the service of the destruction of meaning' (Macainsh, 1982, p.441). The novel is certainly characterised by a multiplicity of voices and the dissolution of previously stable entities (such as the human form after death or, as experienced by Laura at Rose's funeral, even in life: 'my understanding seemed to enter into wind, earth, the ocean beyond, even [the souls of others][…] I was nowhere and everywhere at once' (p.239). This, however, does not represent a destruction but an intermingling — the ultimate communion of all physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual 'matter' — so that the totality of human experience is contained in the 'air' (p.448), and may be apprehended not as 'facts' (p.448) but through intuitive wisdom. There is, thus, no 'higher, more essential reality […] beyond or behind social existence' (Kiernan, 1980, p.1). Rather, in *Voss*, both the physical and metaphysical/spiritual planes of 'essential' reality are all-pervasive elements *within* social existence. If this social existence is fraught with anxiety, mediocrity, superficiality or hypocrisy through materialism, White's argument is not for a transcendence of alienated or marginalized individuals above this unsatisfactory state of affairs, but for its very transformation through the transcendence of those personal limitations which prevent social relationships and the genuine intersection of society, faith and fulfilment in 'every moment that we live and breathe, and love, and suffer, and die' (p.448).

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