MODERN NOVELISTS

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PATRICK WHITE

Mark Williams

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General Editor's Preface

The death of the novel has often been announced, and part of the secret of its obstinate vitality must be its capacity for growth, adaptation, self-renewal and self-transformation: like some vigorous organism in a speeded-up Darwinian ecosystem, it adapts itself quickly to a changing world. War and revolution, economic crisis and social change, radically new ideologies such as Marxism and Freudianism, have made this century unprecedented in human history in the speed and extent of change, but the novel has shown an extraordinary capacity to find new forms and techniques and to accommodate new ideas and conceptions of human nature and human experience, and even to take up new positions on the nature of fiction itself.

In the generations immediately preceding and following 1914, the novel underwent a radical redefinition of its nature and possibilities. The present series of monographs is devoted to the novelists who created the modern novel and to those who, in their turn, either continued and extended, or reacted against and rejected, the traditions established during that period of intense exploration and experiment. It includes a number of those who lived and wrote in the nineteenth century but whose innovative contribution to the art of fiction makes it impossible to ignore them in any account of the origins of the modern novel; it also includes the so-called 'modernists' and those who in the mid- and late twentieth century have emerged as outstanding practitioners of this genre. The scope is, inevitably, international; not only, in the migratory and exile-haunted world of our century, do writers refuse to heed national frontiers – 'English' literature lays claim to Conrad the Pole, Henry James the American, and Joyce the Irishman – but geniuses such as Flaubert, Dostoevsky and Kafka have had an influence on the fiction of many nations.

Each volume in the series is intended to provide an introduction

to the fiction of the writer concerned, both for those approaching him or her for the first time and for those who are already familiar with some parts of the achievement in question and now wish to place it in the context of the total *oeuvre*. Although essential information relating to the writer's life and times is given, usually in an opening chapter, the approach is primarily critical and the emphasis is not upon 'background' or generalisations but upon close examination of important texts. Where an author is notably prolific, major texts have been made to convey, more summarily, a sense of the nature and quality of the author's work as a whole. Those who want to read further will find suggestions in the select bibliography included in each volume. Many novelists are, of course, not only novelists but also poets, essayists, biographers, dramatists, travel writers and so forth; many have practised shorter forms of fiction; and many have written letters or kept diaries that constitute a significant part of their literary output. A brief study cannot hope to deal with all these in detail, but where the shorter fiction and the non-fictional writings, public and private, have an important relationship to the novels, some space has been devoted to them.

NORMAN PAGE

Preface

When Patrick White died in 1990 he left a legacy of twelve novels, two volumes of short stories, half a dozen published plays and an autobiography. Since his death David Marr's major biography has appeared. It is possible, then, to see his work whole and to trace the intricate connections between the life and the work. It is also possible to arrive more securely at an estimation of his place in twentieth-century writing than it was while the work remained incomplete. This book offers an overview of White's development as a novelist from the late 1930s to the late 1980s and sets his work in the context of the modern novel.

Because the stress here is on the *overall* development of his art, particular attention is directed at the period before the Second World War when White, as a marginal figure in the 1930s English literary scene, set about learning his trade as a writer. Here we see White struggling to come to terms with various personal, ideological and formal problems. The formal and stylistic indecisions that mark White's early work are crucial to an understanding of his subsequent development. White did not emerge *ex nihilo* as a major novelist some time around 1957 on a small farm outside Sydney. His post-war writing cannot be divorced from his experience as a young man living as a kind of reverse remittance man on £400 per annum in the London of the thirties and soaking up the cultural milieu.

In White's first two published novels, *Happy Valley* (1939) and *The Living and the Dead* (1941) we see a young 'English' writer struggling to assimilate the various fashionable styles, literary and political, of the time. His very dissatisfactions with the culture in which he found himself are characteristic of young English writers in that period.

In the novels of the late 1940s and 1950s we see White, after returning permanently to Australia from Europe, setting out to relearn the business of novel-writing. As he puts it in his 1958 essay,

'The Prodigal Son', '[w]riting, 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'. In *The Aunt's Story* (1948) White farewells the European 'civilisation' towards which he feels powerful ambivalences and traces its breakup in the Second World War. The next two novels, *The Tree of Man* (1955) and *Voss* (1957), use the epic form as a means of encompassing the historical and imaginative experience of Australia.

In the novels of the 1960s White dramatises his divided response to Australia itself. *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), *The Solid Mandala* (1966) and *The Vivisector* (1970) include more and more of the Australian scene, even suburbia towards which White consistently expressed a profound antipathy. In this period we also find that varieties of religious thought and imagery assume a prominent place in White's fiction.

White's late fiction shows an increasing tendency towards a self-conscious manner and an unprecedented openness about the homosexual interest that had long informed his fiction, however unobtrusively. For White, homosexuality, which he associates with disguise and ambivalence, becomes a kind of metaphor for artistry itself. Yet, for all the playfulness with language and representation in his late fiction, White never retreats into postmodernist game-playing, if by 'postmodern' we mean that the writer snips the ties between art and life. In stressing the artificiality of fiction, he asserts its closeness to, not its distance from, life.

None of the familiar categories of current critical discourse – modernist, postmodernist, post-colonial – are adequate to a novelist like White. His work is rich and various enough to be interpretable in the terms of all of these, depending on the critic's interpretive scheme. White borrows where he chooses and takes elements from an immense variety of literary styles and fashions, linguistic registers and religious systems. But he keeps his distance from all, obliging his would-be exegetes to attend to that elusive, capacious, always ironic voice that moves through his fiction.

Neither an 'English' nor an 'Australian' novelist in any narrow sense, White has become a truly international writer, whose major fiction begs comparison with the work of contemporaries like Malcolm Lowry, Janet Frame and Salman Rushdie. Like these, White deals on equal terms with history and myth, fact and imagination, language as the vehicle of moral critique and language as play.