

Patrick White, Sidney Nolan and Me

Tom Rosenthal

ONE EVENING IN 1957 I tuned into the Third Programme and caught a dramatised excerpt from a book. It was a party scene in which the authorial tone was so sardonic, and the petty snobberies and pretensions of nineteenth-century Australian society so hilariously exposed, that I knew I wanted to read it. The book was *Voss*, by Patrick White. Since I was a penniless undergraduate at the time, I borrowed it from the local public library and did not actually possess a copy until my mother gave me one for Christmas two years later. Thus I became a confirmed White addict.

Needless to say I borrowed all the earlier books and read the new ones as soon as they appeared. Then, as often happens in life when one is both young and receptive, two quite distinct but closely intertwined strands of my growing fascination with things Australian began to develop. In 1960, while working at the art book publishers Thames & Hudson on the first ever book about him, written by Kenneth Clark, Colin MacInnes and Bryan Robertson, I met Sidney Nolan and a friendship soon grew, culminating some four decades later with my writing my own book about Nolan and seeing it published recently [see Jaynie Anderson's review in *ABR*, April 2002].

In the early 1960s I also met the flamboyant Australian man of letters Max Harris. Man of letters is an old-fashioned description but the only one that will do for a man who was a poet, a critic, a bookseller and remainder dealer, and a founding editor and publisher of the leading Australian intellectual magazine of the 1940s and 1950s *Angry Penguins*. (One of the other founding editors was Sidney Nolan.) My wife and I took Harris and his wife to the Whitechapel Art Gallery, followed by an epic lunch at the now, alas, defunct kosher restaurant Blooms. Over hot salt beef and potato latkes, an enthusiastic argument over the novels of Patrick White took place, at the end of which Harris said that it might be interesting for an Australian audience to read the views of a Pommy critic on their greatest writer. Would I review White's books for *Australian Book Review*, a new but immensely distinguished Australian answer to the *Times Literary Supplement* and *The London*

Magazine. I was sufficiently flattered to respond positively, and asked who was the editor of this great journal. Harris waved his silver-knobbed cane in the air and said: 'You've just bought both of them lunch, mate.'

So I wrote long, impassioned reviews of White's books, first for *ABR* and then for *The Australian*. At the same time, my friendship with Nolan grew. Since art became the principal topic on which I wrote, I did several articles about his prolific work for British newspapers and for *The Listener*, of which I had become art critic.

Nolan did all of White's book jackets for something like a quarter of a century, but I was not aware until much later of the closeness of their friendship. As I knew White's then British publisher, the estimable John Bright-Holmes of Eyre & Spottiswoode, I told him that, if White ever came to London and could spare me half an hour or so for a drink, my cup would run over. One day John phoned to tell me that White was in town and that he'd given him my phone number but could do no more, as White was very busy. Despite that, White did phone me and, as it suited his schedule, said he would come for a drink before dinner to my Harley Street flat. This wonderfully grand address concealed a large, ramshackle attic floor above the medical rooms in a beautiful Georgian house, at a rent that even a tyro publisher could afford, as the whole building was condemned to imminent demolition. So the great man lumbered up some sixty stairs and, after he had noticed, but not commented on, the handful of modest works by such Australian painters as Arthur Boyd, Charles Blackman and others on the walls, a somewhat stilted conversation took place. I was overawed and shy, and White was reserved, even withdrawn, almost disengaged. After forty-five minutes, he left for his dinner. I felt I had failed in an encounter that meant so much to me. Over the next few years I came to recognise and dread those moods.

Clearly, that first meeting was not a total catastrophe because, on his next visit, he invited me to dinner at another defunct but rather quieter restaurant on Sloane Square, the Royal Court Grill. With White were his companion and lover,

the Greek Manoly Lascaris and the Australian-born, London-residing painter Roy de Maistre. This time White was in good form, ironical, reminiscing about his pre-war London days with not only de Maistre but also Francis Bacon who had designed a desk for him. The stiffness could still be sensed, but was largely hidden by a flow of scurrilous gossip and wonderfully acute views on art in general and Australian painting in particular. At least the glimmering of a friendship could be discerned.

Certainly, the letters White began to write me were full of warmth beyond the usual sentiments of an author responding to long and favourable reviews. He commented on a joyous visit from Sidney and Cynthia Nolan, said he would be missing his usual European trip because he wanted to be in Australia for a major Nolan retrospective, and advised me to seek a commission from the BBC to cover the show and perhaps do a programme about twentieth-century Australian art in general.

In 1970 my friend Anthony Thwaite, literary editor of the *New Statesman*, said that it was time I wrote about White in England and asked me to review *The Vivisector*, which I did in what Anthony told me was the longest fiction review ever published in the *New Statesman*. White wrote me a long letter asking whether I'd seen the 'malicious outpouring' against *The Vivisector* in the *TLS*, whose reviews, in those days, were anonymous. He guessed that it was Robert Hughes, about whom he was fiercely uncomplimentary, and went on to wonder why I had noted, not with total approval, the book's reliance on coincidence, something that other reviewers had substantially disliked. It was a marvellous letter in which he not only defended coincidence as a literary plot device, but expatiated on the role of coincidence in his own and Manoly's lives, particularly their meeting, and the places and dates of various events in Patrick's life over which he himself had no control, including the fact that the house in which he and Manoly lived in Sydney was built in the year in which they were both born.

A couple of years later, White phoned to say that he and Manoly were in London. I invited them to dinner saying that obviously they would be spending time with the Nolans but perhaps they would like the Arthur Boyds or the John Percevals to come. Patrick demurred. I ran through several other London Australians whom we both admired, none of whom touched the right chord until I mentioned the poet Peter Porter. His name finally elicited White's approval and on the due date Patrick, Manoly and Peter came to the house (Porter's first wife had recently died). What should have been a tremendous evening quietly expired. My wife

categorised it as the most awkward evening our house has ever seen. I'd produced my best wine and Peter, one of Australia's and England's finest poets, is both erudite and a formidably fluent and witty talker. But Patrick was in one of his most depressive moods. Whatever my wife, Peter or I came up with by way of conversational gambits was not so much kicked into touch as ignored. Sometimes when great men sit at your table they disregard what you say because it isn't quite up to their speed but do at least conduct dazzling monologues *à la* Gore Vidal, so that everyone is delighted to sit more or less silently and be vastly instructed and entertained; but Patrick, whose capacity for disengagement I had observed many years earlier, contrived, while eating and drinking normally, to absent himself inside an invisible armoured cloak. Other friends have had similar experiences with him, but it was all rather eerie. As it happened, we were not to meet again.

Shortly after that evening, I left Thames & Hudson to become the head of Secker & Warburg, ironically because I had an urge to publish fiction rather than merely write about it. I resolved to give up reviewing novels to avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest. It was therefore an awkward decision for me in 1973 when Peter Porter, doing a brief stint as fiction reviews editor at the *TLS*, phoned to ask me to review White's latest novel, *The Eye of the Storm*. After some

hesitation, I agreed on various grounds. Peter reminded me that the last *TLS* White review had been severely negative — it was *not* by Robert Hughes — and he thought it appropriate to send the book to someone who knew White's work thoroughly and might be more sympathetic. Furthermore, I was just going on holiday and would have the time to read the book's six hundred pages with the care they deserved; I missed writing; and, because of the *TLS* anonymity rule, I would not expose myself to conflict of interest charges. So I read about the heroine of *The Eye of the Storm*, an appalling *monstre sacrée*, the once-beautiful, manipulative and seductive Elizabeth Hunter, and the dysfunctional family she creates and destroys. As I began

to write in the garden of our Spanish hotel, my holiday was more or less ruined because the living writer whom I admired above all others had, in my view, written a book that I did not even like, let alone admire. In the end, I wrote one of those long reviews that pays tribute to the genius of the whole *oeuvre*, gives a scrupulously comprehensive description of the new work, praises what can be praised and, then, inevitably, expresses one's reservations. Rereading today what I wrote twenty-nine years ago, I feel as any critic should in relationship to a great writer — a mere pygmy in comparison

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to White — and yet I still think, severe as I was, that I was right about this book:

... the eye of Mr White's storm is an eye at the best of misanthropy, at worst of hatred. As one surveys this book and its substantial number of characters, it is almost impossible ... to find a single human being who engages the reader's sympathy, let alone, and much more importantly, the author's.

At the time, racked by guilt, I made a xerox of the corrected proof of my article and sent it by airmail to White — no e-mail or faxes in those days — knowing that he would therefore get it before the *TLS* reached Australia. I wrote him a letter explaining that I could have, but chose not to, hidden behind anonymity and that I desperately hoped that fifteen years of passionate support would not be wiped out by one unhappy review, and that our friendship would survive.

That was in September, and there was no reply. In my earlier piece about him for the *New Statesman*, I had suggested that one day the 'gnomes of Stockholm' — in those days, Britain blamed its current economic difficulties on Swiss bankers who were dubbed 'the gnomes of Zurich' — might make another of their often purely geopolitical decisions and at last give the Nobel Prize for Literature to an antipodean.

A few months later, I found myself at a dinner in Stockholm seated next to a rather austere member of the Swedish Academy, which dishes out the annual Literature Prize. His opening words to me were: 'So, Mr Rosenthal, you think we should award the Nobel Prize to Patrick White.' Apart from the unexpected realisation that the *New Statesman* was being carefully studied abroad, I had the grace, or was it just sheer embarrassment, to blush before at least sticking to my guns, and hoped that my enthusiasm for White's work might wipe out the insult to the gnomes of the Swedish Academy. It was in any case a great joy to learn in October 1973 that White had indeed won the prize. I wrote him an effusive letter of congratulation, obviously not mentioning my previous missive, and, on November 19, Patrick wrote me a letter that was, in all the circumstances, temperate, restrained and very human. He told me that he did not resent my review because it was reasoned criticism, not 'the malicious outpourings of Clive James and ... Paul Bailey'. But he also wrote: 'For you I think it must have been a personal shock, perhaps because of your

Jewish attitude to family relationships, and for having started a family comparatively recently.'

It was an odd comment in that, by then, my wife and I had been together for nine years and we had two children. But I understood it as a gentle way of saying that perhaps it was my fault and not his that I hadn't liked the book, and it was certainly an attitude that White was entitled to take. He ended by being magnanimous and saying that our friendship should not be spoiled by all this.

White, for various reasons, chose not to attend the Nobel ceremonies the following December and, unsurprisingly, he asked his close friend Sidney Nolan to put on white tie and

receive the Prize on his behalf from the King of Sweden. Their friendship was particularly close at that time, and unusually productive. Nolan had been one of White's most significant admirers, and had produced several brilliant jackets for his books. In a neat irony, it was Nolan, so much of whose work was inspired by historical and literary themes, ranging from Ned Kelly to Oedipus, from Gallipoli to Leda and the Swan, who, for once, inspired a great novelist. One of Nolan's most celebrated series of paintings deals with the true saga of Mrs Fraser and the convict Bracefell, who rescues her from the Aborigines who have killed her husband and enslaved her on

Sidney Nolan and Patrick White

a remote tropical island off the coast of Queensland. Nolan had picked up the story on a visit to the actual island, and had produced several major paintings on the theme in 1947–48. White had not known of the story until Nolan imparted it to him when they met by chance while both of them were travelling, separately, in Florida in the late 1950s.

White was understandably intrigued, but this tale of shipwreck, savagery, love and betrayal took many years to be fully realised by him. The wait was well worth it. *A Fringe of Leaves* is a masterpiece. Rarely can the totally different perceptions of a great writer and a great painter have been used to such spectacular complementary effect. Nolan's jacket was a painting of the naked Mrs Fraser arm in arm with her convict-striped rescuer. The novel was published in 1976, the year in which Nolan's second wife, Cynthia, committed suicide. In 1978 Nolan married an enchanting woman, Mary Boyd, the sister of his greatest friend and rival, the painter Arthur Boyd, and the divorced wife of John Perceval. For a man in his sixties, this was hardly an act of indecent haste, not least because they had been friends since Mary was a teenager.

Patrick clearly thought otherwise and in 1981, having perhaps been closer in spirit to Cynthia than Sidney, he wrote in his memoirs, *Flaws in the Glass*:

I have never been able to blame Sid knowing they were both, that we are all, always to blame. If I have not been able to accept him since Cynthia's death, it is from knowing the Cynthia in myself, and that I might have acted in the same way. What I cannot forgive is his flinging himself on another woman's breast when the ashes were scarcely cold, the chase after recognition by one who did not need it, the cameras, the public birthdays, the political hanky-panky.

There was more in the same vein. Unsurprisingly, the book was irreverently known as *Claws in the Arse*. As a matter of fact, White's invocation of Hamlet's funeral baked-meats speech is singularly inappropriate considering Sidney and Mary's joint and separate life stories.

Nolan was understandably hurt, but was never the sort of man to retire to his tent and sulk. Instead, while doing some paintings sparked off by D.H. Lawrence's Australian novel, *Kangaroo*, and inspired particularly by Lawrence's account of the humiliations of Army medical examinations in the 'Nightmare' section of the novel, he produced a large dyptich called, simply, *Nightmare*. It consists of a giant flea, with a large brown alimentary canal and the head, quite indisputably, of White's lover, Manoly. On the side of the body, Nolan has superimposed a Greek crucifixion. It is there because Nolan was reported as saying that 'Sir Steven Runciman maintained that Manoly Lascaris comes from a family of Byzantine princes'. If Nolan was accurately reported, that sounds suspiciously like irony, a medium of which Nolan, as much as White, was always a master in both words and image. But it is the vision on the left that sets the seal on the end of a notable friendship. It is a savage caricature of White in rather scruffy other ranks Royal Air Force uniform, face wizened, eyes staring madly, sad mouth downturned in a rictus of distaste. It is particularly cruel because Manoly met Patrick when he was indeed in the RAF in Egypt. Like any RAF Intelligence Officer, educated at Cheltenham and King's College, Cambridge, White would have been immaculately turned out in the uniform of a behind the lines officer in Alexandria in the 1940s.

As satire, *Nightmare* is far from subtle, and is done with the viciousness of a George Grosz or a Gillray. Yet, as an uxorious blast of public revenge, it is surely legitimate and few great — and highly productive — friendships can have ended

so publicly and so finally. I observed all this, somewhat bemused, at a distance.

In fact, I never spoke to White again after this, not because of what he had written about Sidney and Mary, but simply because we never met. The closest was when, walking past Hatchards Bookshop in Piccadilly, I saw him striding alone along the pavement, his face so ravaged by some strong emotion that I would have felt like an unwelcome intruder had I broken into his reverie and, therefore, simply passed by.

I had not seen Sidney for some time in London, although we had met in Australia. One evening, we went separately and alone to the opera at Covent Garden, met and had a drink together in the interval. Given his then feelings about Patrick, I thought he would be interested in my *TLS* review saga, which I had not previously mentioned to him. Having known Sidney for over twenty years, I understood his moods. I saw in his eyes that what I was saying was familiar. But I knew that I had never mentioned it before. So I lumbered on to the end and waited for his response. 'Yes,' he said. 'I know.' 'But how?' I asked. 'I was staying with him when your letter arrived.' 'And?' 'Well, he wasn't happy. I can tell you that.'

As we sipped our drinks, I knew there was more to come. 'No, he wasn't happy at all. But what you probably don't know is that it got worse. I was staying there again, about six months later, when he got the *New Yorker* review from George Steiner. He used to admire Patrick a lot, but he didn't like *The Eye of the Storm* either.'

I subsequently looked up George's review, a far more magisterial piece of criticism than my own, which contained phrases like 'Too often the prose mushrooms into something like self-parody', or 'And when melodrama blazes in this work, it does so gratuitously'. And, towards the end of a piece that, like my own, repeatedly drew attention to some of

the high points of White's genius: 'There is, in fact, not a touch of redeeming elegance, of disinterested humanity in *The Eye of the Storm*.' Steiner's piece, from a critic infinitely more distinguished and influential than me, must have hurt a lot more.

Back, as it were, in the Crush Bar, I asked Sidney what Patrick had said after he had read the Steiner article, coming so soon after my own lack of enthusiasm. Sidney grinned wickedly and asked if I was sure I was ready for it.

'Come on, Sid. What did Patrick say?'

'He said, "Those fucking Jews — they're all the same. They all want to kill their bloody mothers but none of them has the guts to do it."'

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