

Silver Mysteries

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James Bulman-May
Patrick White and Alchemy
 Australian Scholarly Publishing
 \$29.95pb, 332pp, 1 74097 002 0

ONE OF MY favourite books is Ben Watson's *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* (1994). Over five hundred densely argued pages, Watson scrutinises Zappa's music in light of Plato, Marx, Freud, Joyce, Adorno, Philip K. Dick, various postmodern and feminist positions, and a great deal more. Towards the end of the book, Watson has a series of meetings with the musician. During one of these conversations, Watson discusses Fido the poodle (a recurring figure in Zappa's oeuvre) as a reworking of Plato's *Phaedo*. Zappa objects that he has not read Plato, and that what Watson is saying cannot be true. Watson counters that artists deal intuitively with philosophical concepts, and holds to his Fido-*Phaedo* argument.

I was reminded of this while reading James Bulman-May's interpretation of Patrick White's novels as extended meditations on the principles of alchemy. Bulman-May's goal is to show that the major novels are in fact comprehensively based on this particular branch of medieval enquiry. Now, given that none of the biographical material indicates that White had any particular interest in alchemy, the reader may be forgiven for approaching this book with a degree of scepticism. I suspect that White, if he was still alive (and cared enough), would probably dismiss it as so much academic pseudo-intellectualism, just as he objected to David Tacey's Jungian approach in *Patrick White: Fiction and the Unconscious* (1988) on the grounds that it restricted his novels to a particular frame of reference, and that he (White) had not even read Jung until he came to write *The Solid Mandala*. Like Tacey and Watson before him, Bulman-May could respond with the 'universal impulse' defence: alchemical principles are submerged in the universal unconscious, and emerge from time to time in the work of outstanding artists.

Indeed, Bulman-May does appear to be opting for this position early on. He cites a letter written by White at the age of ten, in which the future author describes a waterfall as looking 'like silver in the moonlight' (silver being a key alchemical compound). Acknowledging that the young White would not have known much about alchemy at this stage, Bulman-May suggests that this shows that 'alchemical mythology is a formative aspect of the unconscious'. (Does it need to be said that a ten-year-old comparing a waterfall to

silver is hardly a demonstration of the universal presence of the alchemical impulse? What colour are waterfalls if they're not silver?) Later, however, he appears to believe that White is *consciously* basing his texts on alchemical principles and ideas, and that he got these ideas from Jung. White, we are told had a 'lifelong dedication to the alchemical process'. Frankly, I don't believe this, and no evidence is proffered in support of the contention. White's imagery is a hotchpotch of religious, philosophical and literary themes and motifs, some of which are played out at some length and with some conviction. However, Bulman-May is entitled to his arguments, and there is no reason to assume that his approach will not lead to new insights into White's fiction.

Certainly, White's dense, allusive, symbol-rich narratives are ideally suited to those interpretive approaches that seek to align the fiction with an existing conceptual framework. Jung, Jewish Mysticism, Christianity, the holy fool tradition, Gnosticism — all these and more have been explored in articles, books and theses over the past half-century. There is no doubt that White was well-versed in European humanist culture, and that his expansive modernist fictions reflect this cosmopolitan engagement on many levels. The major novels are drenched in rich and suggestive imagery, some of it clearly drawn from existing frames of reference (Homer in *The Aunt's Story*, the Kaballah in *Riders in the Chariot*, Shakespeare in *The Eye of the Storm*, Dostoyevsky in *The Solid Mandala*), and some of it probably based on nothing in particular. White was clearly drawn to the suggestive, talismanic power of objects, whether they be natural (stone, water, trees) or artificial (a hat, a shard of glass, a nutmeg grater), and this symbolist technique naturally encourages critics to scour the literary tradition for sources and influences.

Alchemy, of course, was that area of speculative thought that sought to find a way to transform base metals such as

lead or copper into silver or gold. (Other alchemical concerns included the search for cures to diseases and for ways of extending life.) At one level, then, it is very much a *questing* enterprise, and there is no doubt that this motif is central to White's texts. Bulman-May notes that, according to Jung, the material outcome of the alchemical process (the gold, in other words) is less important than the quest itself. Again, this accords with White who, throughout his work, approves the *search* for spiritual enlightenment over the attainment of that goal. Bulman-May draws attention to the key alchemical axiom that 'gold is found in filth', and quite correctly argues that this can readily be applied to specific incidents, as well as to the general tenor, of White's work. At a general level, then, we can acknowledge that it is possible to talk about a correspondence between alchemy and the novels.

Most of the book, however, is given over to drawing parallels between specific scenes in the novels and aspects of alchemical lore. Thus, the travelling salesman in *The Tree of Man* is an alchemical figure because he is en route to the Gold Coast; any reference to water is a reference to alchemy, because water is a key alchemical symbol — and so on. Predictably, the tree motif is held up as a potent alchemical symbol, notwithstanding the fact that trees, along with water and circles, appear as symbols in just about every mythological-religious system ever devised. There is no doubt that Bulman-May's exhaustive compendium of perceived correspondences represents some sort of achievement, even if many of these claimed parallels are a little hard to credit. But there remains a nagging feeling that it is all just cleverness and ingenuity. (Similarly with the Jungian approach: unless you are prepared to buy into the whole panoply of symbols and meanings, it remains a type of intellectual game.) You could take any elaborate religious or mythological tradition, preferably one with plenty of symbols, gods, and so on (Hinduism comes to mind), and try it out on White's novels. This is not to belittle Bulman-May's project — his command of his subject is not in question — but merely to emphasise that he is constructing a literary jigsaw puzzle: first identify a piece in White's novels, then find where it fits in the alchemical schema.

The work of significant artists are inevitably surrounded by a large and diverse body of interpretive material. The more this accumulates, the more difficult it is to find new and revealing things to say. One can only admire students of Shakespeare and James Joyce in this respect. (Sure enough, a quick Google search revealed *Alchemy and Finnegans Wake*, by Barbara Di Bernard, 1991.)

Australian Scholarly Publishing should be applauded for offering a diverse list of titles that might not otherwise have been published. If you have a particular interest in alchemy and enjoy White's novels, this book is for you. Students and scholars of White — are there many around these days? — will no doubt assess it according to their own particular inclinations and interests.