



## AND STOOD BREATHING PATRICK WHITE AND THE NOVELISTIC DISCOURSE OF MODERNISM

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*(For Melissa Pear, who asked)*

Not many sentences in English begin with “but”. Even fewer end with “but”. But two have done just that, it might be protested. Against which we would hardly need to explain that each of these “buts” functions not as a conjunction but as a nominative: how else could “but” be made plural? And this essay’s third sentence begins with “But”: a “But” to express an interjection, an objection that is also an interruption. That “But” is designed to indicate the reader’s interruption, and the writer plays unfair by ascribing to the reader an objection that is common enough in speaking – to begin an utterance “But” – yet which is not acceptable in prose. “But”, we might say, that “but”, like “and”, or “or”, is, as a mere conjunction, the antithesis of the Creator: none of them should ever, according to the strict guardians of prose, presume to an upper-case initial. And yet it is in the Book itself that an upper-case “And” is most frequently displayed: “And it came to pass....”

Stylists may worry about the proper place in a sentence of conjunctions and prepositions. Literary critics are familiar with the novel’s disdain for such lexical regulation and therefore tend to ignore the matter. Yet within the text as a whole, or within an entire volume, a conjunction can still be rendered prominent in its syntactical disordering or grammatical insubordination. There may be others, but I have read only one novel that begins with “But”: “But old Mrs Goodman did die at last.”<sup>1</sup> It is the more prominent since this one sentence is and fills the first paragraph of *The Aunt’s Story*, possibly the earliest written of all of Patrick White’s published novels. And this, a decade later, is the second sentence of *Voss*, itself filling the second paragraph: “And stood breathing.”

In 1929 the Russian thinker M.M. Bakhtin had made a remarkable observation: while everyone agreed that Dostoevsky was among the greatest

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<sup>1</sup> Recently noted, the opening sentence of Sam Selvon’s *The Housing Lark* [1965]: “But is no use dreaming.”

of all novelists, no critic was willing to praise Dostoevsky's style. Though not judged to be pretentious, it tended to be dismissed as often no better than hack journalism, or [to appropriate a later phrase] verbal sludge. That anomaly led Bakhtin to an enquiry that has revolutionised not just our understanding of novels, but of the very being of language in its written manifestations. Bakhtin's realisation was that novels are written in something whose layout on the page looks like prose but which is not prose. Where prose must, according to the canons handed down by Cicero and Quintilian, be – in Bakhtin's terms – monologic, since it is designed for the voice, fictional discourse is dialogical or polyphonic; this means that it cannot always be spoken by a single voice, for there need be no consistent register. Thus Bakhtin dissolved the problems arising from the "omniscient narrator" and framed narratives and metafiction, and from all the other epicycles that criticism, like pre-Copernican astronomy, had introduced in order to save the appearances: in this case the novel appearing to be prose. All those critical terms and entities endemic in the study of the novel are postulated on the assumption that fiction is written in prose and therefore belongs to a single voice and a single consciousness. After centuries of misapprehension, Bakhtin could at last dismiss Aristotle's *Poetics* as irrelevant to the novel, the novel being the one major genre unknown to classical antiquity.

Bakhtin further notes that the novel is the only major literary genre whose written exemplars have no un-written precursors: there is no oral tradition behind the novel. Moreover, the novel, being the only genre whose origins are in writing, in a text to be read, is also the only genre designed to be read in silence. Novelistic discourse resists voicing, the better for the reader to hear [inwardly] the polyphony of potential voices, whether in conflict or in harmony. In Dostoevsky's great works Bakhtin found a novelistic discourse that indulges all the possibilities of language once language has been absolved of its attachment to voice and person, and thus to the legal and moral responsibilities that come with ownership [LOCK, "Double" 71-87].

Novelistic discourse need stick to no single register and is under no obligation to the rules of prose. Rules such as these: the pronoun should not be used before its antecedent noun; a demonstrative should not be used before the word indicating that to which it points; no sentence should begin with a conjunction or end with a either a conjunction or a preposition; a pronoun should be used to avoid the repetition of the noun in a sentence. Break these rules and a Ciceronian might well describe the result as "illiterate verbal sludge".

Language in fiction thus acquires a life of its own, quite independent of plot or character, those features so important to the epic and drama. It is this independence, this freedom that inheres in novelistic discourse that must be betrayed by dramatic or cinematic adaptation. In his admirably thorough analysis, *The Rocks and Sticks of Words*, Gordon Collier recalls in his first encounters with White's novels "something thrillingly uncanny about the reading experience" and celebrates "the almost palpable density and enigmatic *ductus* of the language" [COLLIER 1]. That *ductus* is itself palpable, for *ductus* is a passage, a channel, a duct. In its Latin form its use in English is largely anatomical, although it is also a term for paleographers to describe the way in which the pen is led across the writing surface. Led, though not in English "ducted": we can be led "latinately" – conducted – only with an added prefix in or forward, towards or astray, or down or back, by induction, production, deduction, seduction or reduction. *Ductus* insists on the passage itself, rather than on its direction, or on the purpose or end to which it might lead. All the critical talk of self-referentiality and metafiction is rendered superfluous when we recognize the *ductus* as that which opens words to purposes other than the stylistic or even the semantic. For the paleographer the *ductus* leads the attention away from words as repositories of meaning, and even from the orthography of a set of letters in sequence. In the *ductus* we examine the shape and forming of the stroke that makes the letter. Meaning is sometimes made of words, words are always made of letters, and letters formed by the hand are made of minims. Minims are the smallest parts of written and literary meaning and, while they are not present in print, we may still invoke the *ductus* by analogy as naming whatever literary device draws our notice to the ways in which words are formed and opened by letters, and to the ways that words thus open to novelistic reading.

Such attention to language, to writing, to typography, is characteristic of Modernism, in Mallarmé, Ezra Pound and E.E. Cummings, in James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and William Faulkner. That Patrick White has a place in the history of Modernism should be obvious, to those who still read him and who read him outside of an Australian frame that would reduce him to an emblem of national significance. White himself acknowledged the importance of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. One could make further comparisons with William Faulkner and Saul Bellow, Vladimir Nabokov and Samuel Beckett, and investigate White's debts to English novelists among his contemporaries such as Henry Green, Elizabeth Bowen and Ivy Compton-Burnett [LOCK, "Patrick White" 72-84].

White's suppressing of *Happy Valley* has obscured the remarkable success which that novel enjoyed on publication early in 1939. The distinction of some of its admirers is still resonant: Elizabeth Bowen, V.S. Pritchett, Herbert Read, Graham Greene and Stephen Spender are all cited on the dust-jacket of the second printing in February 1939 [MARR 177-78]. Though these writers were influential in the 1930s and very much part of the London literary world, none was regarded as a modernist. Yet there was one distinguished modernist, far from London, who praised White at the very onset of his literary career. From Cornwall, in February 1939, Dorothy M. Richardson, the author of *Pilgrimage* (in reference to whose first volume, *Pointed Roofs*, May Sinclair had in 1919 given literary application to William James's phrase "stream of consciousness") wrote to a friend who was herself an aspiring novelist, Bernice Elliott (1896-1986)<sup>2</sup>:

If your book is finished & now being "considered," don't be discouraged by refusals. The best book, novel, I've read for some long time, Happy Valley by Patrick White, a young Australian, was refused by no less than eight of the leading London publishers before Messrs Harrap took it. [FROMM, *Windows* 370]

Though there is no further mention of Patrick White in Richardson's published correspondence, that should not diminish the significance of such recognition. Not least because Richardson's use of ellipsis is as characteristic as Emily Dickinson's use of the dash: both dash and ellipsis provide punctuational means of resisting the orders of syntax and the hierarchies of sense. Though White does not use ellipses he does challenge the conventions of punctuation.

We lack published evidence that Patrick White read any part of *Pilgrimage* or knew of Richardson's praise for his work. Yet it would be most unlikely that he had not for she was a close friend of Hilda Doolittle (H.D., 1886-1961) and Annie Winifred Ellerman (whose pen-name was Bryher: 1894-1983). It was Bryher who in 1935, on becoming the proprietor of *Life and Letters Today*, published in its pages both Dorothy M. Richardson and Patrick White [BRYHER xv]. H.D.'s letterhead was designed by a friend of hers, the American artist George Wolfe Plank (1883-1965), who was close to Pepe

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<sup>2</sup> See "Looking Out for Dorothy M. Richardson" for a brief account of Bernice Elliott by Harold Fromm: <http://hfromm.net/professional/>.

Mamblas, White's lover.<sup>3</sup> In *Herself Defined*, a biography of H.D., Barbara Guest, speaking of Bryher's editorial work, identifies White as "Bryher's discovery" [GUEST 223, 232]. In his memoirs, *Out in the Open*, Geoffrey Dutton records a meeting with H.D. in Zürich, around 1960, towards the very end of her life, in which she "talked acutely with me about Patrick White; she was a great admirer of his work." [DUTTON 235] No comment by Bryher is recorded by Dutton, though she was apparently present. Since Barbara Guest acknowledges Bryher as one of the chief informants for her biography of H.D., the claim that White was "Bryher's discovery" ought to be treated with respect [GUEST ix-xi].

Beyond the documentary evidence, the tracing of readings, and written mentions, the concept of influence is vain and all attempts at its establishing must prove ultimately futile. Yet one not only takes pleasure in recording these conjunctions, the names that "puff" *Happy Valley*, the modernists who admired White as well as those he admired; in doing so one discharges a responsibility to straighten out the record, both bibliographical and biographical. The claim made for Bryher would, if substantiated, further strengthen the case for White as a cosmopolitan writer whose scope cannot be contained within an Australian context [LOCK, "Continentially" 10-11]. Biographical connections create both webs and trajectories, contexts and narratives, though neither context nor narrative should be mistaken for explanation.

The names that form these biographical links are seldom those that have been mentioned by reviewers and critics of White's novels. They detect the delicacy of Virginia Woolf in the shimmering light that brings out the tactility of materials: they sense the barely breathable distensions of Faulkner, yet there's little if any documented acknowledgment of White's apparently obvious debts to either of these. James Stern, reviewing *The Aunt's Story*, invoked Virginia Woolf along with Henry James and Flaubert. There is no doubting Flaubert's importance to White, nor that of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Dickens, Hardy, Lawrence. While White's critics have sometimes cited modernists by way of comparison and analogy, it is an earlier tradition to which he is generally assumed to belong. The effect has been to push White back into the nineteenth century, there for the critic to speak in reassuring tones – to conflate a few phrases from the blurbs on the Penguin editions – of his epic monumentality, the grandeur of his vision, the panoramic sweep of his compassion.

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<sup>3</sup> Among the George Plank papers in the Beinecke Library at Yale is at least one photograph of White, possibly unpublished.

This reader would not wish such praise away. Yet such laudatory terms, if deemed sufficient to the case of Patrick White, may account for the present neglect. Modernism is marked by a consciousness of the linguistic devices by which the literary work achieves its representations. Words in novels can be voiced by more than one person because in our reading they are usually voiced by none. Silent reading may be what enables novelists to break the rule of prose or, if less conscious than a rule, its presupposition: that what is written is to be realised by voicing. Silence allows and admits a number of voices to inhabit or contest the occupation of a single set of words. An obvious instance is the opening sentence of James Joyce's "The Dead": "Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet." As the caretaker's daughter, Lily is described and identified from outside, for the sake of somebody who knows nothing of her. By contrast, "literally", and what follows, is a cliché in the words of Lily herself: words that no educated author or reader would be likely to use. The first part of the sentence can be voiced in a neutral tone, while the idiom of the second part would embarrass any educated intonation. Because there is no obligation to voice the words of a novel, those words can shift freely between all sorts of latent or potential voices. If an educated person were asked to report what Lily had said – though they may be merely her unuttered thoughts – he or she would probably word it approximately: "Lily says that she's very busy." Joyce's is an exceptionally cunning sentence, even in novelistic discourse, for it somehow deflects our attention away from its sheer badness as prose: using the word "literally" to describe a metaphor is as dead and dumb as language can be. The sentence combines, within perfectly correct syntax, two quite different voices each speaking in its own idiom and register. A novel by Virginia Woolf opens with a nod to "The Dead":

Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.  
For Lucy had her work cut out for her.

To whom is she known as Mrs Dalloway, this woman who will buy the flowers? To Lucy, of course, her maidservant. It is a wonderfully subtle joke that the novel is entitled not by the heroine's name – as she thinks of herself, as she is known to family and friends: Clarissa, or Clarissa Dalloway – but as her servants would refer to her. And in the second sentence, which is also the second paragraph, we see a coordinating preposition without a preceding clause to coordinate. This "For", like "And" and "But", would probably attract editorial comment, even intervention. An editor intent on upholding the rules of prose would suggest that the two sentences should be one, coordinated by that "For", itself perhaps replaced by "as": "Mrs

Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself as Lucy had her work cut out for her." Or, even better, for prose does like to respect the order of events: "As Lucy had her work cut out for her, Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself." In the novel we should be stayed by the words: "Lucy had her work cut out for her." That is a middle-class idiom and may well represent the "translation" into reported speech of a more serventile idiom, such as "I'm all in a huff" or even "I'm literally run off my feet." Like Joyce, Woolf plays with the sheer oddity of novelistic discourse while allowing the inattentive reader to pass by with hardly a glance. The phrase "inattentive reader" is not introduced as a disparagement of others, but as a comment on this reader during previous visits: with each re-reading of Joyce, or Woolf, or White, one realises, yet again, that one has never been attentive enough, and that one never can be.

Theodora Goodman abandons her train journey across the United States by stepping out of the carriage, not onto a platform at a station, but most irregularly, at a siding:

Theodora trod down, out of the high, stationary train, on to the little siding.

A Negro with white eyes suggested that this was not the sort of thing that people did. [260]

These words are of course not what the man said, but rather the words that an educated person would report as corresponding "in sense or implication" to the presumably rather different idiom used by the Negro. We should note how "with white eyes" positions us outside the Negro just as much as "the caretaker's daughter" removes us from Lily's consciousness, her inwardness. This is Theodora's view, and the litotic and euphemistic wording must be ascribed to her.

Virginia Woolf was her own publisher so she would have had no trouble with the title of *Mrs Dalloway*. Nor did the publishers of the American edition of her novel make any objection. For the American edition of White's novel, however, Viking requested that the title be changed to "Theo's Story". White reckoned this to be not the sort of thing that publishers ought to do: "This is very distressing to me personally, for it is the first of my titles to please me. It fastened itself to the book when I first conceived it eight years ago, and somehow I can't think of one without the other." [MARR 253] The reason for Viking's unease with the title as we have it is that Theodora or Miss Goodman is an aunt only to her niece in Meroë. Once she has travelled to the "Jardin Exotique", she identifies herself thus: "I am a kind of

governess" and makes no sign of assent when the young girl Katina responds: "I would like you ... to be a kind of aunt" [143]. In replying to Wetherby, apologising for his confessions and alluding to a cactus with a wound, now subject to an invasion of flies, our heroine remarks: "For a long time now," smiled Theodora, "I have been an ointment. I was also an aunt once" [163]. Just as the title of Woolf's novel keeps the reader connected to Lucy, so as a title *The Aunt's Story* gives prominence to Miss Goodman's status at Meroë: aunt to her niece Lou.

The ambiguous possessive of the title – the story about the aunt, or the story told by her – draws our attention to the theme of dispossession, both her loss of Meroë and family, and Lou's loss of an aunt. Though Miss Goodman tells a number of stories, she tells only one, the story of Meroë, as an aunt. The other parts of the novel tell a story about a woman who happens to be somebody's aunt. Theodora accedes reluctantly to her niece's request to supply the matter that will fill the "Meroë" section: "Meroë?" said Theodora. "But, my darling, you have heard it, and there is very little to tell" [19]. Over one hundred pages later, the last, brief section of "Meroë" opens with the repeating of those words: "But, my darling," said Theodora Goodman, "there is very little to tell" [131]. This aunt's story is brought forth most reluctantly, if hers is the telling.

Theodora Goodman has already denied to somebody other than a niece that her life can be narrated. Pearl Brawne, a young milkmaid at Meroë who had been seduced, is now working as a prostitute. She invites Miss Goodman for a drink, belatedly recognising her and addressing her under a name that will quickly become familiar though apparently not, to Theo, offensively so:

"Theo Goodman, eh?" she said. "How about a drop to buck us up? Just one before they close."

Theodora Goodman went with Pearl Brawne into the public house. [...]

Pearl said two ports. She said it would warm the cockles.  
[126]

We should note the ingenuity of this instance of reported speech. As with Lily's "literally run off her feet", this is clearly Pearl's own idiom, but the eliding of the phrase "of the heart" that completes the cliché "warm the cockles" serves as a knowing wink from narrator to reader, or even from Theo.



At the bar is a man who “had a talent for eating glass. He was munching slowly at his tumbler. It did not seem odd, though somebody screamed” [126]. This latter sentence twists itself around to be lodged awkwardly in that part of the reading mind that deals with syntax and semantics: to whom did it not seem odd, if one person did scream? We note how that one person is singled out as “somebody” and thus made “odd,” while not to find glass-munching odd is presented impersonally and therefore under the guise of objectivity and the presumption of normality. It must be Theodora who, identifying with glass as she so often does [even introducing herself to the Johnsons under the name of Pilkington], allows the narrative to speak on her behalf: “It did not seem odd”.

In the bar the spinster and the prostitute converse:

“Well, Theo, tell,” said Pearl, arranging her big white hands in front of her bust.

“There is nothing to tell,” said Theodora.

“Go on, Theo,” Pearl said, “there is always everything to tell.”

“I am forty-five,” said Theodora, “and very little has happened.”

“Keep that under your lid, love. It is something to forget,” said Pearl, knitting her hands.

“I am an aunt,” said Theodora. “I suppose there is at least that.”

“I could have guessed it,” said Pearl.

“Why?”

“Now you are asking,” Pearl said. [126]

To be an aunt is not a state to be actively attained; it is a passivity whose coming about lies entirely outside one’s own actions, powers, wishes and sometimes knowledge. For the aunt, there is nothing to tell. And yet, the only thing that she has to tell is that she is, at least, an aunt. There is no narrative to her becoming an aunt yet her only identity is in being an aunt. The novel thus acquires a chiasmic structure – like those hands knitting – in which the aunt who has a story to tell, of Meroë, becomes herself a story, of herself un-aunted. Thus the ambiguous possessive of the title is rotated and perhaps resolved. The last mention of Lou occurs just before her aunt leaves the train so unconventionally, somewhere between Chicago and California. Theo has written an eccentric letter to her sister Fanny. On its receipt Lou overhears the conversation between Fanny and her husband, and enquires: “Mother,” said Lou, “why is Aunt Theo mad?” Receiving no proper answer, Lou goes outside for a walk, “carrying her cold and awkward hands. She

thought about her cardboard aunt, Aunt Theodora Goodman, who was both a kindness and a darkness." [259] With the last appearance of Lou goes the last occurrence of the word "Aunt", here repeated and upper-cased, an aunt made of the cardboard that binds a book, and holds a story.

At the end it is only Lou who thinks of Theodora Goodman as an aunt. Thus the chiasitic structure is isomorphous with the novelistic discourse ("isomorphous" is pretentious, but "parallel" will not do when it is shapes that are under consideration and comparison). Words in a novel can move from one voice to another and in the process they can shift in both sense and identity. The plot of *The Aunt's Story* undertakes some sort of movement analogous to that which we can trace in novelistic discourse. Words in novels are unlike themselves elsewhere. And the novelistic characters who might be represented by those words, and at the same time speak and think those words – giving them both utterance and "innerance" – are rendered somewhat permeable. Whether cardboard or glass, the figuring of Theodora, or Aunt Theo, or Miss Goodman [what should *we* call her?], indicates fragility and transparency. All of White's novels point to the title *Memoirs of Many in One* which might have been the title not just of one but of many of them. Voices of many persons in one writing. What White often confessed as a psychological condition – sensitive, vulnerable to the many voices and desires within – was what made him a novelist, a purveyor of novelistic discourse.

Novelistic discourse breaks the rules of prose, rules designed to preserve the integrity and unity of the speaking voice. There is no prose, properly speaking, that is not the representation of a voice, that voice being unitary, identifiable and responsible:

Splintered the crystal of identity,  
shattered the vessel of integrity....

So opens section 21 of "The Walls Do Not Fall" [1944], the first part of H.D.'s *Trilogy*, a poem with which we have biographical reasons to suppose White would have been acquainted. Though cardboard is not mentioned, there is much concern with the materiality of books and writing surfaces. While books are being burnt by the Nazis, in Britain people are being asked to contribute books to aid the war effort, not as reading matter for our boys, but as ammunition against theirs:

Thoth, Hermes, the stylus,  
the palette, the pen, the quill endure,

though our books are a floor  
of smouldering ash under our feet;

though the burning of the books remains  
the most perverse gesture

and the meanest  
of man's mean nature,

yet give us, they still cry,  
give us books,

folio, manuscript, old parchment  
will do for cartridge cases; [section 9]

It was often remarked during the Blitz that the walls did not fall; they sometimes remained standing amidst ruin, displaying intimate domestic interiors "where poor utensils show / like rare objects in a museum":

yet the frame held:  
we passed the flame: we wonder  
what saved us? what for? [section 1]

The walls of the human bone-house may also survive, though those who are saved may be rendered permeable, both insecure and of a heightened sensitivity. During the War, Patrick White spent periods of leave in London. The Blitz remained vivid, as is evident most memorably, indeed climactically, in *The Twyborn Affair*. It is invoked as cause of emigration and as a boy's memory (albeit invented, or presumed) in White's last, unfinished novel *The Hanging Garden*. In his essay "The Prodigal Son" White recalled: "There is nothing like a rain of bombs to start one trying to assess one's own achievement" [WHITE, *Speaks* 13]. Yet it is not only White's experiences of wartime London that shapes these passages; it is also H.D.'s *Trilogy*, arguably, or unarguably, the greatest poem to emerge from the ruins of the Blitz.

A city is where synchronicity can be represented, as it is in *Mrs Dalloway* by the chimes of Big Ben. Two separate temporalities, or plot sequences, can be measured by one clock. Such a unified space is disrupted by the Blitz. For H.D. the bombs and the ruins open London spaces to vertiginous displacements and anachronicitities, in ancient Greece, Egypt and Palestine. In 1925, the very year that saw the publication of *Mrs Dalloway*, a Russian

literary critic, Viktor Shklovsky, brought out his *Theory of Prose*, a title somewhat misleading now since Shklovsky was writing just a few years before Bakhtin's essays made it clear that prose should be distinguished from novelistic discourse. Shklovsky's concern lies with the difference between oral narrative and the novel. He identifies a marker of that difference in indications of time, arguing that the novel makes possible new forms of synchronicity. There can be leaps of time in an oral narrative: "and then, after some years had passed, the little princess grew up to be a beautiful woman." But there can be no going back to fill in one of those leaps. Such a recursion in our own oral narrative practice would be prefaced by a phrase such as "Oh, I forgot to mention" or "I ought to have said". Oral narrative cannot tolerate silence, nor recursion to fill in a detail. Shklovsky claims that the novel, as a genre, begins when Don Quixote meets Sancho Panza, where paths cross, because only in a written discourse can we first read of one character and then of another before the two have met each other. There can be – and usually is – more than one temporal sequence in a novel. It is as though time represented in writing can be spatially contained, extended or contracted, and being contained can be held in waiting, while other events catch up. The adverb "meanwhile" [or its variants] is very seldom used in oral narratives. It is virtually absent from Homer, or rather absent from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* until we get to the most novelistic part, the suitors of Penelope: a story about waiting in one represented time for the arrival of our hero from another. Allowing for a convergence between Shklovsky and Bakhtin, we can see that "meanwhile" is the characteristic adverb of novelistic discourse.

As long as a narrative is spoken, the speaking must continue. There can be no silence. Time is not represented, cannot be in itself represented but is occupied by the speaking voice. The time of narration seldom if ever – in an oral narrative – corresponds to the time taken by the events described. But whatever the ratio between the time narrated and time narrating, there can be no interference. The voice speaking has to go forward: And then. And then. The next day. The speaking voice cannot go back, for that would be to double time: to say "Meanwhile" or "However, little did he know what was going on back home." To make these conceptual distinctions requires that they be written. This has much to do with silence. As a reader one can allow the narrative about one character to "go silent" while one hears about another. One keeps silently in mind what is known about character A while reading about character B. The narrative use of "meanwhile" involves a sophisticated cultivation of inwardness, of inner consciousness. Imagine a "primal meanwhile" in an oral narrative. We are stopped in our narrative

tracks, frustrated, for we want to go on. We might cry out: "Don't leave us here, we must find out what happens next. And we don't care about those other people. Our hero is in danger." Laurence Sterne, apprehending his freedom in writing, plays games by anticipating these responses and in the process still yields us lessons in the potentials of novel-reading.

These days one tends to read in silence, and alone. In solitude one is accustomed to silence and inwardness. By contrast, the response of an audience to a spoken tale is collective; one does not listen alone. Every "meanwhile" implies an "until" and learning to read fiction involves mastering the "until", recognising that narrative desire will be satisfied when two temporal sequences coincide. Any two sequences within one novel must coincide. That is the contract between the novelist and the reader. In waiting for the other we must learn to be silent. It is not only novelistic discourse but also the multiple temporalities that enjoin the reader's silence. We must be silent because we cannot articulate the voice or need or desire – not even the thinking – of those not being currently narrated.

Two distinct sequences must meet according to the contract of a written discourse, whether fictional or not. The reader should have managed the suspense, mastered the "until" in the expectation that this sequence, a theoretical "meanwhile" should at last intersect with the promised yet suspended account of Patrick White and novelistic discourse. The frustration of a listener to an oral discourse, fictional or otherwise, is not felt by the reader, who – here, now – can skip a paragraph and skim until the name of Patrick White is again registered. This has been a meanwhile of theoretical reflection or diversion.

Not all novelists know what they are doing, nor could they explain their practice in theoretical or linguistic terms. Charlotte Brontë attempts thus to justify her sister's creation of Heathcliff: "the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master – something that at times strangely wills and work for itself" [BRONTË 310]. Patrick White draws attention to his own sudden appreciation of Dickens during the Second World War, in the heat of conflict, at Tobruk:

Detesting, misunderstanding Dickens when I was a boy, I had suddenly cottoned on to him. As blood flowed, and coagulated in suppurating wounds, as aircraft were brought down in flames and corpses tipped into the lime-pits of Europe, I saw Dickens as the pulse,

the intact jugular vein of a life which must continue, regardless of the destructive forces Dickens himself recognised. [WHITE, *Flaws* 96]

Literature gives evidence of a capacity to represent an evil more intense than any that the author can have experienced. That is Charlotte Brontë's reservation about Heathcliff, and White's about Dickens, until White's own experience encounters the destructive forces that Dickens himself was able to represent even though they were alien to his own experience. White tells of his "novels for which my conscious self can't take full responsibility." [WHITE, *Flaws* 182] Of his late attainment as a political protester and agitator, White remarked that "public speaking is much like writing: some other person is responsible for half of what comes out" [223]. Yet when we come across a novel that begins as *The Aunt's Story* does, we must allow that this writer understands the power of the novel as a written genre, and knows how to exploit the characteristics and potentials of novelistic discourse.

The opening of *Voss* – "possibly", White tells us in "The Prodigal Son", "conceived in the early days of the Blitz," [WHITE, *Speaks* 15] – still shocks, even after fifty years and a putatively experimental phase in the history of fiction:

"There is a man here, miss, asking for your uncle," said Rose.  
And stood breathing.

A sublime response to "The Dead," this is White's tribute to Joyce, as a Rose pays tribute to a Lily. This, the second sentence, and second paragraph, is where and how, forty years ago, I learnt to read novels, that is, to be stayed in reading; even before the story has begun, to ignore the sequence and the consequence, and to hear and sense, with more than hearing or sight, the double axis of articulation of those three words. Who notices what they describe, or what they express? Who gives silent voice to these words? Is Rose in her own view standing and breathing, breathing heavily out of impatience, or, as we later learn, because she has a hare-lip, or because, as we learn later still, she's in the early stages of pregnancy, or out of a theatrical sense of servile irritation? Are her feet planted, in defiance, as if refusing to move unless ordered? Or is it "miss" [Laura, in lower-case] who sees Rose standing and breathing, and feels contempt, or irritation, or perhaps some sense of intimidation? There is a special teasing for the grammarians in that the conjunction elides the subject. This is perfectly acceptable when the conjunction conjoins, as in: "She spoke some words, and stood breathing." To insert a full stop where there should be a comma is to upper-case the "and" and to undo and's work of elision, or to deny the

conjunction the right of elision: "And" now stands in for the subject and could even be parsed as such. Yet these three words can never be contained within only one voice or one subject: each can shift from inward to outward. The variety of possibilities turns out to be endless, as should be our attention.

"Pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge": A.D. Hope's verdict, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* 16 June 1956, is just, according to the canons of prose.<sup>4</sup> But White's is novelistic discourse, deliberate and assured of its powers. *Voss* also aspires to make new the "meanwhile." For this is a novel in which Voss and Laura never meet again. Letters are written, but none is ever delivered to its addressee: "With great dignity and some sadness, Dugald broke the remaining seals, and shook out the papers until the black writing was exposed. There were some who were disappointed to see but the pictures of fern roots. A warrior hit the paper with his spear" [219]. In writing that letter, Voss had "touched the L gently with his pen" [216]. There, precisely, graphically, is the *ductus*: that attentiveness to the shape of letters, to the form of letters by which epistolary letters are formed, and all literature. While the traditional literary genres achieve realization in the voice, the novel is born of silence, and is smothered by voicing: only in the novel can the letter L retain, unheard, its shape.

Voss writes to Laura: "I send you my wishes, and venture by now also to include my love, since distance has united us thus closely. This is the true marriage, I know. We have wrestled with the gristle and the bones before daring to assume the flesh." [217] We should not let the pretentiousness obscure the question that pertains to texts and genres: what happens to a proposal that is not received? Or to a love-letter that is not read? What we have in the story of Voss and Laura is a love in which the separation is never ended, nor ever mediated by any representable communication, oral or textual, a story whose "meanwhile" knows no "until".

The genius and the wit of Patrick White might be more clearly recognised did not readers take seriously those playful hints of telepathy, mysticism and archetypes, thus transforming a novel into some sort of esoteric text of cultic initiation. One might in passing [for in *Voss* there's not much intersecting] note that White admired Nabokov's *Lolita* which deploys a similar device: Humbert sees Quilty everywhere, yet he's not there, for Quilty is pure mirage. They meet only for the murder scene [Ch. 35] in

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<sup>4</sup> This, the most cited of all hostile verdicts on White, is itself hardly just to A.D. Hope whose view of White was often admiring.

which Quilty is anything but guilty: “a quarter of his face gone, and two flies beside themselves with a dawning sense of unbelievable luck.” It might be those same flies that get lucky again in *Voss*, when the blade enters between Palfreyman’s ribs: “His blood was aching through a hole which the flies had scented already.” [343] *Voss* fits neatly between Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) and *Pale Fire* (1962), the latter published in the same year as *Riders in the Chariot*. All four of these novels aim – chiastically – to do without a centre, to enact a narrative of two or more strands which proffers a meeting that will never be achieved. These novels are not without precedent. Both *Bleak House* and *Anna Karenina* test the reader’s faith in the convergence of “until”: Lyovin and Anna never meet though they are once, on a single occasion, in the same room. *Voss* is a novel in which, to recall Shklovsky, Laura and Voss are both on their converging paths, but....

Their “meanwhile” is, like many of ours (outside texts), impervious to any “until”. Indeed, in the absence of “until,” even of the next letter’s delivery, the “meanwhiles” must be two, not one: one for each who waits. For want of closure, let us resort to the last words of *Voss*, indifferent as any to the rules of prose: “By which time she had grown hoarse, and fell to wondering aloud whether she had brought her lozenges.” Instead of “until”, or a decision, or a consequence, just that undetermining phrase “By which time”. Laura is hoarse from having been obliged to speak. Now she falls from the silence appropriate to the inner discourse of wondering; she falls into wondering aloud, as the reader must, after four hundred pages of silent reading, being so caught up in a silence of exceptional intensity. This reader awaits the resolution each time and is, each time, most disconcertingly denied: And stood breathing. Laura’s last uttered words: “The air will tell us.” It is the air that mediates, in silence, between the inked *ductus* and the absorbed reader.

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