



PATRICK WHITE AND HIS BRAZILIAN CONTEMPORARIES

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1.

I am interested in the ways in which Western literature developed in the New World; I am interested in the historical processes involved, in their social and aesthetic products, and in how those processes and those products can best be evaluated and compared. If we are to understand literature in Australia [at least up until the present age, when air travel has broken down the old imperial geographies], then we would do well to consider it in relation to other parts of the globe where different but comparable circumstances were faced, regions where Western culture was established not merely through missionary or military conquest, but through the dispossession of prior populations by means of the massive movement of people from Western Europe itself, taking with them their languages, religions, attitudes, expectations, values and literary traditions. The three major facets of this experience are those that speak English, Spanish and Portuguese, the only three tongues whose Old World populations are now outweighed by substantially larger numbers of native speakers [and writers and readers] on the other side of the ocean.

I was born in Sydney and have now spent more than a quarter of my life in the southern Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, a few hours' drive from Uruguay and Argentina and culturally closer to them than to many parts of Brazil itself. As a result, my literary life sits more or less at the intersection of those three post-imperial contexts. Within the English-speaking world, Sydney is a significant city, but a long way from being central; it is on the second level, below the major metropolises of New York and London. Porto Alegre occupies the same sort of position within the Portuguese-speaking world: significant but far from central. It is the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, the southernmost state of Brazil, and one of the half-dozen largest cities in the country, but is clearly on a level below that of the two major centres, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Two languages, one Romance, one Germanic; two cities, both significant but secondary within their different linguistic spheres; two countries, both vast but essentially peripheral to Western culture, and often in opposite ways: as I read and teach, I cannot help but compare the

different ways in which their literary histories have occurred, have been imagined and are taught.

When I am asked, as I occasionally am, which Australian writers I recommend, Patrick White is usually one of my suggestions, but the question that frequently follows – “Which Brazilian writer would you compare him to?” – cannot adequately be answered without defining the terms and the context of the comparison. The inquirer’s focus may be more formal or more historical, but both versions of the question rest on more or less the same set of presuppositions. If the issue is one of literary forms, it tends to assume a certain sequence of phases, as defined by Paris, through which all of Western literature has moved, with the result that being, say, a neoclassical poet (or a romantic novelist or a symbolist playwright) in Australia would be more or less equivalent to being a neoclassical poet (or a romantic novelist or a symbolist playwright) in Brazil. We need only look at the intimate association between literary style and nationalist ideology in Brazilian Romanticism in the middle third of the nineteenth century to see that no direct parallels can be drawn with Australia in the same period. Even identical formal techniques could not fail to have different meanings in such vastly different contexts. When the questioner’s concern is primarily historical, the issue is typically one of a given author’s place in the development of a national literature, presumed to be more or less unified and more or less self-sufficient. As I would prefer not to argue for the existence of such a national literature in the case of Brazil, would find it impossible to do so in the case of Australia, and would not choose Patrick White as an example if I were forced to try, I am led back into the same issues of literary form in relation to historical process.

To take an example that is perhaps peripheral to White’s body of work, I would be tempted to compare his play *The Ham Funeral* with *Vestido de Noiva* (Wedding Dress) by his Brazilian contemporary Nelson Rodrigues (1912-1980), both of them written before the watershed of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Formally, there are many potential points of contact: their use of anti-naturalistic devices that could be traced back to German expressionism, their portrayal of different layers of social and sexual consciousness, their use of a split-level stage and of different linguistic registers, their flirtation with obscenity and broad humour. Historically, however, an enormous amount of contextualisation must be done before any meaningful comparison can be made.

Rodrigues’ play (his second) was written in Rio de Janeiro in 1941 and produced in 1943, whereas White’s was written in London in 1947 but only reached the stage in Adelaide in 1961. In 1941, when *Vestido de Noiva* was

composed, White was serving with the RAF in the North African desert, facing off against Rommel's troops; in December 1943, when it premiered, he was in Haifa, "quizzing refugees about bombing targets in the towns they had abandoned in Germany" [MARR 224]. On the one hand, then, White's writing career was interrupted, as Rodrigues' was not, by "the boredom and futility of war" [WHITE, *Flaws* 105]. On the other hand, in Rio de Janeiro during the 1940s there was no particular reason for animosity against either Germans or expressionism, whereas an abrasively anti-naturalist play in London in 1947 was likely to be neither comprehensible nor welcome. As Harry Kippax notes, "Expressionism had never made converts in England" [KIPPAX 4], and it was unlikely to do so in the aftermath of the Blitz. The Second World War – supposedly a world-historical event and certainly crucial in the life of Patrick White, in the history of the United Kingdom and of Australia, and in the relationship between the two countries – was an episode of only passing consequence for Brazil and for Nelson Rodrigues. Although the two authors were born only three months apart, perhaps they were not actually contemporaries at all.

In terms of literary history, *Vestido de Noiva* is widely regarded as the beginning of a new phase in Brazilian theatre, of which Rodrigues himself is the central figure, whereas *The Ham Funeral* is not central to any tradition, and could hardly be called an Australian play: its history is shaped by all of the complexities of White's and Australia's evolving relationship with London. Had *The Ham Funeral* been a hit on the London stage, it is possible that White would have remained in England and might now be remembered as a London-born playwright who spent much of his childhood in the colonies, rather than as an Australian novelist who "introduced a new continent into literature" ["Nobel Prize"]. However similar they may be in form, any comparison of the two plays merely as texts would seem to miss the point, and in any case *The Ham Funeral* is not available in Portuguese. At present, Brazilian readers who prefer to approach White in their native tongue have just two options: *The Tree of Man*, translated for a Lisbon publisher in the aftermath of the author's Nobel Prize, and *Voss*, published in Brazil in 1985. The following two sections of this essay will focus on these novels, and the final section will examine some of the historical difficulties in finding Brazilian parallels for White's later work.

2.

One aspect of White's fiction could be set alongside that of João Guimarães Rosa (1908-1967), who served as Brazilian Vice-Consul in Hamburg between 1938 and 1942, helping his future wife, Aracy de Carvalho, grant visas to Jews hoping to flee the country, in defiance of both the Nazi regime and

Brazil's own immigration policy. After the war, Rosa drew on his experience of remote regions of the state of Minas Gerais to write a relatively small number of highly regarded works of fiction, including the novel *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (1956), which can profitably be compared with White's *The Tree of Man* (1955) in terms of their modernist technique and sympathetic portrayal of lives that are neither urban nor sophisticated. Had he lived as long as White, it is not unreasonable to imagine that Rosa might have become Brazil's first Nobel laureate.

The first two sentences of *The Tree of Man* present the Portuguese translator with such challenges as *stringybarks*, *bush* and *scrub*, but in the case of Rosa's novel, the difficulties begin with the title itself. Brazilian *sertão* could normally be seen as approximately equivalent to Australian *outback*, although the particular region dealt with in the novel is not especially arid and would perhaps best be rendered as *bush*. *Veredas*, on the other hand, could be small watercourses or networks of wetlands in otherwise dry country, which can become paths for wildlife or for human travellers, although they rarely lead very directly from one place to another. In the title, then, the term appears to reflect both the country where the story takes place and the extremely roundabout way in which it is told. The English translation, published in 1963 as *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, focuses on the story itself, rather than on the texture of Rosa's prose, and does not give a useful indication of the difficulties faced by the reader of the Portuguese original.

Rosa's narrator and central character is Riobaldo, a former *jagunço*, a member of [and eventually leader of] one of the many armed bands which survived into the mid-twentieth century in remote parts of Brazil's northeast. Relying on a combination of patronage from local landowners and violent acts of banditry, their social function was somewhere between that of a gang of bushrangers and a private militia, in a region where the rule of law had yet to take root. Towards the end of his eventful life, the relatively unschooled Riobaldo tells his story to a younger, more educated man from the city in a single 600-page flow of speech, unbroken by chapter or section divisions of any kind. His idiom is highly idiosyncratic: at once localised, archaic and neologistic, it is far further from the standard written form of the language than anything Patrick White ever published. Readers of Australian literature could perhaps imagine what Rolf Boldrewood's *Robbery Under Arms* might be like if there were no Captain Starlight, if the major conflicts were not between bushrangers and the law, but between rival gangs, and if it were narrated not by Dick Marston, but by Dan Moran. It is not light reading.

White took a different approach to authenticity in *The Tree of Man*, which tells the story of Stan Parker, the first settler in an area of bush near Sydney. The novel is chronological, unlike Rosa's rambling narrative, and is not presented as the actual words of the semi-literate rural man it portrays, being told by a third-person narrator. The author nonetheless strove to find forms of language appropriate to the characters and their story, believing that he could not "write about simple, illiterate people in a perfectly literate way" [WHITE, *Speaks* 20]; the result, although far more straightforward than *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, was famously described by A.D. Hope as "pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge" [21]. The poet's judgement is certainly extreme, but it is perhaps not completely out of tune with the taste of the common reader in a country where literary Modernism never quite became the norm. From the condition of lending library copies, White concluded that his previous novel, *The Aunt's Story*, "remained half-read" [WHITE, *Flaws* 14], suggesting that readers had not persevered with the more difficult, more obviously modernist second section, "Jardin Exotique." Whether out of a conscious desire to meet Australian readers halfway, or for whatever other reason, neither *The Tree of Man* nor any of White's subsequent novels seem to offer quite the same barriers to comprehension.

In his discussion of modernist fiction in *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, John Carey describes an essential duplicity at the heart of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. On the one hand, it shows that an ordinary man such as Leopold Bloom "has an inner life as complex as an intellectual's," while on the other hand, "the complexity of the novel, its avant-garde technique, its obscurity, rigorously exclude people like Bloom from its readership" [CAREY 20]. Like *Ulysses*, both *The Tree of Man* and *Grande Sertão: Veredas* revel in the complex inner life of ordinary men. In fact, one of the abiding impressions that they leave is of the abyss between what Stan Parker and Riobaldo feel and what they are able to express to the women they love. Both novels would be heavy going for their semi-literate protagonists. But whereas White's would probably be perfectly comprehensible to a reader such as Leopold Bloom, Rosa's almost certainly would not. Questions such as these were not, however, a part of the initial reception of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, in part because by 1956 Modernism had established itself as the prestige style among the arbiters of Brazilian literary taste, but also because the country's low levels of literacy meant that the very concept of a common reader would only have begun to become relevant during the author's own lifetime. It is not just that the two novels were received differently: the specific historical contexts in which they were initially read ensure that both their non-urban subject matter and their modernist narrative approach have distinctly different meanings.

Brazilian and Australian nationalism, and thus the idea of a Brazilian or an Australian literature, have historically distinct origins. In 1808, the Portuguese royal family fled Lisbon before the arrival of Napoleon's troops; for the next decade, they ruled their empire from Rio de Janeiro. In 1822, with most of the royal family back in Europe, the Portuguese Empire was split in two: Lisbon retained control of its colonies in Africa and Asia, while Rio became the capital of the new Brazilian Empire. Had the empire not split, the administrative elite of Rio de Janeiro would have been returned to the status of a mere provincial capital. For this reason, Brazilian *independence* and Brazilian *nationalism* were initially nothing more than a desire on the part of the elite to retain its privileges. For inhabitants of the other provinces, there was very little to choose between being a subject of a global empire run from Lisbon, of a global empire run from Rio or of a merely South American empire run from Rio; provincial revolts against imperial rule regularly occurred (and were routinely crushed) in all three phases. The imperial regime and its apologists used the nationalist rhetoric of European Romanticism to foster a sense of Brazilian identity, but that identity remained firmly centred on the urban sophistication of the imperial capital. In an awkward balancing act, *Brazilian* was required to mean *not Portuguese*, but also *not provincial*, a kind of cultural hotline from Rio de Janeiro to Paris, without having to wake the operator in Lisbon.

In Australia, on the other hand, nationalism was not based on a rejection of Britain, nor was it essentially urban or imposed from above. While the elites of Sydney, Melbourne and the other colonial capitals grumbled away at each other, ordinary working Australians on the other side of the Great Dividing Range had a far clearer perception of their basic similarities. (It is worth remembering that until the end of the 1880s millions of ordinary working Brazilians were slaves.) In 1900, Australian nationalism was strongly rural, decentralised and bottom-up, and the concept of Australian literature reflected that. Books portraying the lives of ordinary working people, especially in the country, were central to how the young nation saw itself. At the same time, Brazilian nationalism was essentially urban, centralised and top-down. The concept of Brazilian literature reflected that: *Brazilian* literature was the literature of Rio de Janeiro, while works that depicted the provinces or rural life were seen as regional, not national, and thus of little consequence. Even if the *Bulletin* could have existed in Brazil, it could not have been seen as representing the nation.

The first quarter of the twentieth century in Australia was shaped by the Great War and by the 60,000 or so young men who had failed to come home from the trenches of Anzac Cove and the Somme. The shell-shocked country that emerged from the conflict was not exactly abuzz with a desire for avant-

garde modernity. In Brazil, by contrast, the war had led to just a handful of casualties, resulting from influenza contracted in an African port. At the same time, the country was modernising rapidly. The old Brazil, with its economy based on slavery, sugar, gold and taxation, had been centred on Rio de Janeiro. The new, more entrepreneurial Brazil would be focussed on São Paulo, an emerging industrial centre initially fuelled by income from coffee plantations. With the 1922 Week of Modern Art, the city mounted its aesthetic challenge to Rio de Janeiro. As Luís Augusto Fischer suggests in a recent article, São Paulo could legitimately have made a case for a separate literary tradition, embracing the “regionalist” literature that had seemed so insignificant to the imperial elites, but what the modernists wanted was to take on the old order on its own terms: to be seen not in opposition to the tradition of Rio de Janeiro, but as its next step; not as the vigorous flower of the *sertão*, but as the sophisticated heir of the plantation [FISCHER 70]. If Brazilian Romanticism was Rio de Janeiro saying to Portugal “We are more like Paris than like you,” then Brazilian Modernism was São Paulo saying to Rio “Now we are more like Paris than you are.” By the 1950s it had come to be seen as the official style of the new Brazil.

It is into these two distinct worlds that Guimarães Rosa and Patrick White launched their novels, and it is these contrasting contexts that establish the initial meaning of their works. In Australia, tales of ordinary men and women were central to a national tradition, but it was a tradition that White did not know well and did not instinctively feel himself to be part of. In 1958, he described the typical Australian novel as “the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism” [WHITE, *Speaks* 16], and his own approach as a desire “to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable” the lives of ordinary Australians [15]. White’s early masters were Lawrence and Joyce, not the dry, subtle Henry Lawson or the rambling, ingenious Joseph Furphy, and the fiction of his middle phase is based as much on this essentially European literary sensibility as on his deep love of Australian landscapes and his fascination with the people who inhabited them. In Brazil, on the other hand, avant-garde technique was highly valued, but rural subject matter was treated as almost an embarrassment. Antonio Candido, an impressive critic but firmly aligned with São Paulo Modernism, consistently identifies *regionalism* as a form of sub-literature, associated on the one hand with non-urban subject matter and on the other with picturesque or documentary technique. In order to find a place in the modernist canon for a novel like *Grande Sertão: Veredas* [unswervingly non-urban, but too sophisticated to ignore], he resorts to terms such as “surregionalism” and tautologies like “the universality of the region” [CANDIDO 195].

To compare two novels from such different traditions is to compare the traditions themselves and thus the contexts within which the texts are expected to make meaning. For all their similarities, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* and *The Tree of Man* could be said to make their meanings in almost opposite ways. Australia's mainstream tradition was quite at home with rural themes. White's innovation was to deal with them using modernist techniques. Brazil's mainstream tradition, on the other hand, was quite comfortable with modernist techniques. Rosa's innovation was to use them to depict the country's vast interior. It is impossible to read any work of literature without placing it in some kind of context. In the absence of more appropriate information, the automatic response is simply to assume that a work fits the patterns and expectations of what we already know. Just as an ordinary Australian reader of *Grande Sertão: Veredas* would naturally approach it as if it were an Australian novel that happened to be written in Brazil, and would thus find it difficult to imagine how its subject matter could be in any way revolutionary, so Brazilian readers of *The Tree of Man* would instinctively understand it in relation to their own national literary tradition, as a regionalist novel whose technique is perhaps insufficiently extravagant to elevate it above its subject matter. Whether in the original or in translation, to offer *The Tree of Man* to Brazilian readers without this kind of contextual parallel is to deny them an important part of the experience of literature: the chance to look at the world from a new angle and see our own experiences and expectations from a vantage point beyond ourselves.

3.

The parallel between White and Guimarães Rosa implies a relatively straightforward comparison of national literatures, Australian and Brazilian, within an abstractly international literary space, but in fact literary space is not abstract, and nations and national literatures are not simply equivalent. Most Brazilian literature is written in Portuguese, and over 90% of the world's native speakers of Portuguese are Brazilian, which makes it very easy for them to confuse the literature of their language with the literature of their country. It would be extremely hard for any Australian (or Canadian or Mexican or Argentinean) to confuse the literature of their country with the literature of their language. On the other hand, writing in English potentially gives Australian authors access to hundreds of millions of non-Australian readers who are either native speakers of English or have it as their second or subsequent language. Portuguese does not offer the same advantage. It is only a slight oversimplification to say that unless they are translated, Brazilian books will only be read by Brazilian readers who are taught to expect those books to make sense only within a Brazilian national

tradition. As a result, most Brazilian readers would instinctively read Patrick White merely as part of a national (Australian) tradition, rather than in any broader context. The approach which merely impoverishes Brazilian literature would make White almost incomprehensible. Charles Lock describes two consequences of this sort of restrictive framing: a “critical provincialism,” which assumes that his works should “be measured and justified only by Australian standards and terms of comparison” and “an anachronistic sense of his biography,” [LOCK 10] which forgets that there was nothing either quirky or contradictory in White seeing himself as both Australian and British.

Australian and Canadian literature fit into the broader literature of English in similar ways, just as Mexican and Argentinean literature fit into the literature of Spanish. Brazilian literature simply does not *fit into* literature in Portuguese in a comparable manner because Brazil is unique in a number of important ways. First, Portugal always had far less depth to its canon than either Spain or England. So readers of Portuguese were always aware that they had to look beyond their own language for literary riches. Secondly, Brazil is alone in the Portuguese-speaking New World, which means that *international* literary debate has never taken place as part of a discussion with a like-minded neighbour, but always either in translation or with the increasingly embarrassing former colonial power. Finally, Brazil is now overwhelmingly larger than Portugal, a position unlike that of any other country in the New World. If all of Spanish-speaking America were a single country, from Tijuana to Tierra del Fuego, then the effect would be similar, but Spain would still have Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Calderón, Góngora and Quevedo. Even if the United States included Canada, Australia and New Zealand, it would still have to deal with London as a major financial and cultural centre and England as the land of Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens and Woolf. Throughout the nineteenth century, both Portugal and Brazil were too busy imitating France to spend much time on each other, with the result that Brazilians in the twenty first century typically do not even think of themselves as part of a Portuguese-speaking world.

But then again, there are Brazilians and Brazilians. Portuguese-language parallels for Patrick White’s place in the English-speaking world can be found within Brazil itself, not merely because of its physical size and cultural diversity, but because it is an empire that simply transformed itself into a republic without any substantial change to the asymmetrical relationships between the centre and the provinces. At its simplest, we could think of Brazil in terms of three zones: the equatorial North, centred on the Amazon basin; the coastal East, built on plantations and slavery, reaching its cultural peak in the old imperial capital, Rio de Janeiro; and the vast Centre-

South, dragged into the empire by bands of pioneers from the trading town of São Paulo. The subtropical southern fringe of this third zone was shaped by generations of border wars, resulting in a society that was both highly militarised and heavily influenced by its Spanish-speaking enemies. It is this southern fringe, and especially the state of Rio Grande do Sul, which offers the most interesting parallels: between Rio Grande do Sul as part of the Brazilian Empire and Australia as part of the British Empire, for example, or between Porto Alegre in relation to the Portuguese-speaking world and Sydney in relation to the world of English. If we add up the English-speaking populations of the British Isles and the colonies of settlement in North America and Australasia, then Australia represents around 5 to 6% of the total; similarly, around 5 to 6% of the world's native speakers of Portuguese live in Rio Grande do Sul.

This slipping back and forth between political and cultural units is not arbitrary. Australia is an independent country and Rio Grande do Sul is not, but political independence is not the same as cultural divorce. The flag of the United Kingdom still sits in the top corner of the Australian flag, indicating a continuing connection despite political separation. The state flag of Rio Grande do Sul, on the other hand, emphasises difference in relation to the country of which it is a part, bearing the words *Republica Rio Grandense* and the date *September 20, 1835*, in memory of the ten-year period when it fought an unsuccessful war of independence against the Brazilian Empire. Regardless of their political status, Rio Grande do Sul and Australia are both cultural provinces within their respective spheres, cultural provinces whose distinctive characteristics can go unrecognised or undervalued in a wider context, but which would be stiflingly small if they were to try to be quite autonomous, and are therefore inevitably drawn towards the larger centres that both attract and threaten them.

In the 1950s, A.A. Phillips described Australia's asymmetrical cultural relationship with England as follows: "The numbers are against us, and an inevitable quantitative inferiority easily looks like a qualitative weakness. [...] We cannot shelter from invidious comparisons behind the barrier of a separate language; [...] and the centrifugal pull of the great cultural metropolises works against us" [PHILLIPS 2]. This description could equally be applied to the relationship between Rio Grande do Sul and the major centres of Brazil. Phillips' focus is the relationship with England, but the equation could be expanded from two to three terms. Australia's position within the English-speaking world is now negotiated not only in relation to the UK, but also to the USA, which broke free from London and is now substantially bigger and wealthier. In the Brazilian case, this triangle would be represented by Rio Grande do Sul in relation to Rio de Janeiro and São

Paulo: Rio, the sophisticated former imperial centre, and São Paulo, the young upstart that moved from hick province to economic centre without quite losing its own sense of cultural debt. It is in terms of these two triangular relationships that I would like to consider Patrick White, who spent most of his writing life in Sydney and is one of Australia's most celebrated authors, and the novelist Erico Verissimo (1905-1975), who spent most of his adult life in Porto Alegre and is perhaps the most famous author from Rio Grande do Sul.

It may not matter much to the individual author in the act of writing, but in terms of the institutions of literature – school and university curricula, literary prizes and histories, national canons – it certainly makes a difference whether the three points of the triangle lie in three separate countries, or in three states within the same country. The United States is quite happy to think in terms of an American literature that has some sort of historical relationship with English literature, and Australia can think of its own writers in relation to both of them (Patrick White's publishing history in New York and London and his distinct reception in the three countries being an interesting example). São Paulo, on the other hand, chose to struggle with Rio de Janeiro in order to establish its control of a unified Brazilian literature, leaving Rio Grande do Sul (and all of the other states or regions of the country) more or less marginalised in a national debate that is carried on as if it had only two participants. If Rio Grande do Sul were a separate country, Erico Verissimo would undoubtedly be as crucial to its national literature as Patrick White is to Australia's, but that would merely compound his semi-visibility in the wider Portuguese-speaking world.

As told by São Paulo, Brazilian literary history tends to be divided into three components: a long period that reached its peak in Rio de Janeiro, described as a succession of styles (Baroque, Neoclassical, Romantic, Realist, Parnassian); a more recent period dominated by São Paulo, commencing with the 1922 Week of Modern Art and described as a succession of generations of Modernism; and a parallel sub-tradition, termed Regionalism, consisting of works from the provinces that do not fit easily into the major sequence and are typically treated as being of little consequence to the big picture. Apart from serving to place São Paulo at the centre of Brazil's literary history, this division is based on the assumption that true literature concerns itself with big cities and makes use of the most avant-garde techniques available. This has made it very difficult to adequately classify writers such as Rosa (avant-garde but not urban) and Verissimo whose early fiction deals neither with the country nor with a major city like São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro, but with medium-sized Porto Alegre, and whose techniques were neither old-fashioned nor avant-garde.

In his memoirs, published two years before his death, Verissimo describes his early books: *Fantoches* (Puppets, 1932) is “a collection of stories, mostly in the form of small plays, influenced by Ibsen, Shaw, Anatole France and Pirandello”; *Clarissa* (1933) is “a short novel virtually without plot, a kind of slice of life,” which he associates with the style of Katherine Mansfield, some of whose work he translated; *Caminhos Cruzados* (1935, translated as *Crossroads*) is a “simultaneist novel” that grew out of the experience of translating Aldous Huxley’s *Point Counterpoint* [VERISSIMO, *Solo* 250-256]. Attempts have been made to count him as a second-generation modernist, but the fact is that his work owes little or nothing to the São Paulo movement. Historically speaking, he should be recognised as a major figure in the development of literature in a Brazil that was only just beginning to develop a broad readership – as with the White of *The Tree of Man*, his writing was pitched to extend the possibilities of his common readers – and yet the way the country imagines its literary history leaves him in a kind of limbo. There appear to be two principal modes of reading Verissimo’s work: the most common of them accepts that Brazilian literature is as São Paulo defines it, and finds a minor [and distorted] place for him in the Brazilian tradition; the other one resents São Paulo’s dominance of the national canon and constructs a local one, squeezing him into a central place in a sub-national tradition that is simply too cramped for him.

One way of contextualising White for Brazilian readers is by drawing parallels with Verissimo’s 2800-page trilogy *O Tempo e o Vento* (Time and the Wind, 1949-1962), cited by Gabriel García Márquez as one of the three principal influences behind *One Hundred Years of Solitude* [COMPARATO 12]. Published between 1949 and 1962, its vast scope could be compared to the four novels that White wrote while living at Dogwoods: *The Tree of Man*, *Voss*, *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Solid Mandala*, published between 1955 and 1966. Of Verissimo’s trilogy, only the first part, *O Continente* (The Continent), has been translated into English, although, unhelpfully, it was given the title *Time and the Wind*, thus creating the false impression that it is the whole trilogy. (The title refers to *O Continente de São Pedro*, one of the early names given to the territory that now forms the state of Rio Grande do Sul). Even in Portuguese, however, *O Continente* does stand somewhat apart from the remaining volumes and is often read in isolation from them and even at odds with them. Like *Voss*, it is a historical novel; as with *Voss*, this makes it atypical of the author’s fiction, but (again, as with *Voss*) this has not stopped it from casting a long shadow over the other novels. *O Continente* deals with events that take place in the 150 years from 1745 to 1895; *Voss* with the period between the 1840s and the 1860s. Together, *O Retrato* (The Portrait) and *O Arquipelago* (The Archipelago) depict the fifty years from

1895 to 1945, focussing on the more recent development of the family that is at the heart of the earlier volume. Taken together, *The Tree of Man*, *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Solid Mandala* deal with a similar period of time, although the continuity between them is more a matter of space than of characters.

The end dates of Verissimo's novels are historically significant: 1895 marked the end of a two-year civil war in Rio Grande do Sul, with the victory of the Republican Party of Rio Grande [PRR] which, through a combination of modernising policies and electoral fraud, would continue to rule the state for decades to come. Getúlio Vargas, the PRR candidate for the Brazilian presidency in the 1930 election, was defeated at the polls but took power through an armed uprising. The resulting dictatorship was a period of extreme centralisation, not only in terms of political power, but in terms of cultural symbolism, with the abolition of state flags and the use of the radio to promote samba, a musical style from Rio de Janeiro, as the authentic soundtrack of a unified Brazilian identity. Like the trilogy, the Vargas police state came to an end in 1945. Brazil was then governed by a series of elected presidents until the military coup of 1964, two years after the publication of the final volume of *O Tempo e o Vento*. Verissimo's trilogy was thus written in a period of political stability and constitutes, among other things, a critical analysis of the social forces that had produced Vargas and his regime. White's Dogwoods novels were all written during the long prime ministership of Robert Menzies, and could equally be understood as an analysis of the historical, cultural and psychological formation of that conservative society and what the author once referred to as "the Great Australian Emptiness" [WHITE, *Speaks* 15].

Of all of these novels, it is the historical ones, *O Continente* and *Voss*, which have acquired mythical status and become fodder for operas and television mini-series. White got so sick of immoderate praise for *Voss* that he "began to experience revulsion" [WHITE, *Flaws* 235], while *O Continente* is often read in isolation from the ironic context of the trilogy as a wide-screen celebration of the origins of Rio Grande do Sul. On first reading, its narrator is unidentified and apparently omniscient, but *O Arquipelago* reveals that the narrator of the earlier volume is actually a specific individual, Floriano Cambará, who throughout that novel struggles to discover an appropriate way to write the story of his society and his own family. Far from being a simple circular structure, where the final sentence of the trilogy leads us back to the start, a second reading of *O Continente* reveals a quite different and more complex narrator, with personal and ideological axes to grind. On the one hand, the trilogy represents the historical context that produced the Vargas dictatorship, with which Floriano has a particular ideological relationship, being at odds with both the dictatorship itself and its

communist opposition. On the other hand, *O Retrato* and *O Arquipelago* focus on Floriano's father, Rodrigo Terra Cambará, a supporter of the dictatorship, who at one point accuses his son of cowardice for refusing to shoot a man during a rebellion. At the end of *O Continente*, when Rodrigo is a young boy, the narrator Floriano gets his revenge: his father's final words are "I'm afraid" [VERISSIMO, *Continente* 2:396].

As stories, *Voss* and *O Continente* are not especially similar. The former is about an expedition; the latter about the development of a town, a society and a family. *Voss* begins with a family in a house in a town and splits geographically: alternate chapters deal with those who remain and those who move away from them in space, into the interior of the country. *O Continente* also begins with a family in a house in a town, but splits historically. Alternate chapters deal with those people in that house and with the previous generations who move towards them through time, through a series of long flashbacks. In terms of their analysis of the formation of their respective societies, however, one way in which the two works can profitably be compared is in terms of their depiction of three broad sets of social relationships in the relatively recent New World societies of south-eastern Australia and southern Brazil: those between settlers and people taken to the colony against their will (African slaves, in the case of Rio Grande do Sul, British prisoners, in the case of New South Wales), between settlers and indigenous peoples, and between settlers and the parent society at the imperial centre. This analysis was the subject of my Masters research and need not be examined in detail here. Despite the quite different historical contexts of White's and Verissimo's novels, their depiction of these three relationships is remarkably similar. Understandably, the similarities are slightest in the case of the descendants of slaves in Brazil and of convicts in Australia. After all, the convicts had committed crimes and their children were born free, whereas the slaves had committed no crime, yet their children were born enslaved.

Benedict Anderson identifies three types of nationalism that are relevant to Western cultures in the nineteenth century (New World republican, Old World republican and Old World imperial), but leaves Brazil as an "interesting exception" [ANDERSON 46] and fails to account for Australia at all. If the standard model of New World nationalism is based on the idea of independence from an empire, neither Australia nor Brazil fits the mould: Brazil became independent *as* an empire and Australia became independent *within* an empire. Neither White's novel, nor Verissimo's, is overtly concerned with issues of nationalism or the relationship between empires and their provinces. Yet both *O Continente* and *Voss* represent societies undergoing different forms of transformation between what we could call a

local or provincial nationalism and an empire-nationalism. In White's novel, this means a feeling of belonging to New South Wales (or potentially Australia) in relation to the British Empire; in Verissimo's, it implies Rio Grande do Sul in relation to the Portuguese and later the Brazilian Empire.

In the second volume of *O Continente*, set after the failure of the 1836-1845 Republic of Rio Grande do Sul and its re-absorption into the Brazilian Empire, there is a persistent contrast between the pinched local nationalism of the characters who were born in Rio Grande do Sul and know that they have moved further from having their own nation-state, and the expansive [Brazilian] empire-nationalism of those who have come from other parts of the Empire and identify themselves with it. The opposite path holds in *Voss*, where the final chapter takes place after the gold rushes and the rebellion at the Eureka Stockade, which prompted Britain's imperial administration to introduce a degree of popular self-government in the Australian colonies. This chapter portrays a society which appears, unlike that of Rio Grande do Sul at the same moment, to be moving slowly away from a (British) empire-nationalism and closer to a local nationalism and a nation-state. As a result, a proper contextualisation of *O Continente* for Australian readers and of *Voss* for Brazilians (and especially those from Rio Grande do Sul) offers useful insights into the ways in which the two cultures do not quite fit into one-size-fits-all notions of nationalism and national literary canons.

4.

I have concentrated on *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* because they are the only two of White's novels available in Portuguese. My arguments have developed as a way of contextualising them for Brazilian readers. If and when further translations become available from White's later work, *The Twyborn Affair*, perhaps, or *The Eye of the Storm*, different political and economic circumstances would require less straightforward parallels. In October 1963, Patrick White moved from Sydney's north-western fringe to a house within walking distance of the city centre, where he lived until his death. At around the same time, presumably no later than the federal election of November 1963, he also started voting for the Australian Labor Party, while Menzies, the long-serving Liberal Prime Minister, still had Australia "in his grip" [WHITE, *Flaws* 225]. In 1972, White became involved in environmental activism, and in 1974 he campaigned publicly for the Labor Party. He describes himself during this period as moving "always farther to the left" [226]. In 1975, Australia suffered its deepest political crisis when the Governor-General dismissed the Whitlam government and called fresh elections to replace the deadlocked parliament. On more than one occasion White referred to this dismissal as a "coup" [227, 231]. He appears

to have disliked becoming involved in political issues, but evidently saw it as unavoidable, asking “how is it possible for any but a superficial artist to live and work inside a vacuum?” [226]. How indeed? And yet the novels of White’s late phase are no more political than, say, *Riders in the Chariot*. He remained a writer whose works examine whole lives rather than issues such as the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, or universal taxpayer-funded health care.

In the early 1980s, while writing *Flaws in the Glass*, White described a nightmare, based on his experiences in Greece. He dreamt that Australia was under military government and soldiers “stationed at a bend in the red road I have known all my life” stopped him and demanded to see his papers [WHITE, *Flaws* 209]. White recognised the unreality of the situation. Part of the horror of the dream was that “what can’t happen here had happened” [209]. Despite the rhetoric surrounding the Whitlam dismissal, White regarded an actual coup, an actual failure of Australian democracy, as inconceivable. In Brazil, the situation has been very different. After the end of the Second World War and the fall of the fifteen-year dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas, there followed a period of democratic stability that lasted almost two decades during which Verissimo wrote his trilogy and Guimarães Rosa published all of his major fiction. Then, on the first of April, 1964, what couldn’t happen in Australia happened in Brazil: the generals deposed President João Goulart on the grounds that he was planning to establish a communist dictatorship and promptly set up a dictatorship of their own. In 1973, when the Nobel Committee for Literature recognised White for his “epic and psychological narrative art” [“Nobel Prize”], his Brazilian contemporaries were living through the Years of Lead under General Emilio Medici. By 1985, when the country’s adult population was again allowed to choose its own government, Verissimo, Rosa and Nelson Rodrigues were all dead and White had written his last novel.

Rodrigues supported the dictatorship, whereas Rosa died in 1967, having published no long fiction since the release of *Grande Sertão Veredas* in 1956. Other authors, such as Clarice Lispector (1920-1977), focussed on the inner life. Verissimo, on the other hand, published three novels between the coup and his death in 1975, all of them dealing at least obliquely with the political situation. *O Senhor Embaixador*, (1965, translated as *His Excellency the Ambassador*) deals with corruption, social inequality and political instability in the fictitious Latin American republic of Sacramento. *O Prisioneiro* (The Prisoner, 1967) deals with the psychology of war and torture in an unnamed Asian country. His final novel, *Incidente em Antares* (Incident in Antares, 1971), is set in a fictitious Brazilian town in the months before the 1964 coup. The incident of the title is a general strike during which the gravediggers

refuse to bury the dead, who wander the town, revealing the rottenness of Brazilian society with a liberty that the living are denied.

None of White's fiction has anything like this kind of focus. In order to contextualise his late work, it is necessary to remind the Brazilian reader not only that there was no dictatorship in Australia, but that there was no plausible risk of one. In the Australian context, *conservative* may suggest an unsuccessful attempt to ban the Communist Party, whereas in Brazil, it may well recall the actual arrest and torture of its members. It might also help to explain that the economic instability that contributed to the downfall of the Whitlam government (inflation peaked at over 13% in 1973) was simply not on the same scale as Brazil's woes, as the country frantically printed extra zeros on its banknotes and went through six different currencies in the period between the military coup in 1964 and Patrick White's death in September 1990.

I like to think of literary history as a question of translation, as the comparative analysis that must be done before an adequate translation can be produced, and as the context within which such a translation can be most richly understood. Literary history then means finding ways of making *Voss* and *The Tree of Man* comprehensible for Brazilians raised to expect Erico Verissimo or Guimarães Rosa, readers for whom those books would otherwise be too opaque. But that should also have the effect of making White's novels strange for Australian readers, for whom they may have become too transparent, by showing how comparable writers worked in different circumstances. In a period of calm after fifteen years of dictatorship, for example, or in a language that is virtually unread outside one's own country, or in a literary tradition where the voices of ordinary people have barely been heard, or in a state that, even in 2012, has yet to go fifty years without a war, an invasion, a coup, or an armed revolt.

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