

Chapter 5

A FRINGE OF LEAVES

A Fringe of Leaves, Patrick White's tenth novel, is relatively short in its text and, seemingly, in substance and speculative thought, after the complexity of such novels as *Voss* and *The Vivisector*. But this is a superficial conclusion, as a close reading reveals the author writing in his maturity and exploring some of the most basic issues confronting mankind. White's earlier novels deal with his central characters over long periods of time, indeed, of a lifetime, as they try to understand their personal circumstances and life patterns and then to make appropriate moral/spiritual judgements; for many who search are ultimately granted deep insights or epiphanies and these 'major' novels deal with their response and reactions to these cataclysmic spiritual moments.

The main character, Ellen Gluyas, is a simple Cornish girl, raised on a farm with a considerable degree of intuition and romantic imagining. She has an innocence in her understanding of people and animals that resembles Thomas Hardy's heroines, for example the character Tess Durbeyfield in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. As a consequence of family poverty Ellen is close to the earth and the rhythms and cycles of nature, allowing her to accumulate knowledge and understanding, so that she can confidently say to the man she will later marry:

Strength - yes! That's about all I've got to my name. And must depend on it. (p. 52)

This form of understanding contrasts with the harsh, two-dimensional knowledge of Ellen's mother-in-law, the 'old Mrs. Roxburgh', whose knowledge was of a worldly type, for she was used to managing a large house and encompassing 'the customs' that Ellen now 'was expected to adopt' (p. 63). Ellen's innocence however is detected by the servants who 'despise' her (p. 64).

Ellen moves from farm life, where 'it was all she knew' (p. 42), to a higher social class, but she does not lose her sense of wonder. Additionally she maintains her strong imaginative sense focussed upon the mythical Tintagel, 'depend[ing] on it for sustenance, and legend for hope' (p. 50). Her strength is perceptively recognised by the sibyl, Miss Scrimshaw in the carriage (p. 11), at the beginning of the novel so that she states, with reference to Ellen:

'I will tell you one thing', Miss Scrimshaw vouchsafed. 'Every woman has secret depths with which even she, perhaps, is unacquainted, and which sooner or later must be troubled'. (p. 17)

These 'depths' in Ellen are sensed by others in the carriage, especially Mrs. Merivale, who being unable to comprehend them, dismisses them as 'a mystery' (p. 17). It is an irony that the very subject of their vituperation, Ellen Gluyas, also finds her inner self a mystery and the novel, in large part, is an exploration of the theme of self-discovery by Ellen. For her husband, Austin Roxburgh, his journey, his 'Odyssey' (p. 34), is limited to classical literature, in particular Virgil, which he quotes to Ellen, then condescendingly and ironically comments on her lack of understanding (p. 30). For it is really Austin who has failed to understand his revered Latin scholar, since:

... he said almost immediately, 'The light which prevails in

Virgil makes that black streak seem blacker'. (p. 30)

But whilst Austin may deride Ellen's lack of formal education he knows and understands some aspects of her character. Explaining how a grand European tour had failed to enlighten him and that Ellen had achieved this with her marriage - 'I was sent abroad', Mr. Roxburgh repeated, but was cured at last, cheaply, and at home', (p. 60) - the depth of her understanding is likened by him to wasps invading a soft fruit and being associated with a 'momentary vision of greenish-yellow light' (p. 60). As if to reinforce this moment of illumination about Ellen's knowledge, Austin muses:

One forgets, Ellen, how much you know. And her reply, How much? how little is surely nearer the mark! (p. 60)

Of course, this reply is a paraphrase of the admonition 'know thyself' of the ancient philosophers.

The early stages of Ellen's journey of self-discovery, on board the *Bristol Maid*, are marked by her mind being clouded by fog (p. 145), and her behaviour, stealing food to remain alive (p. 196), being described in an absence of light.¹⁴¹ Her time with the aboriginals is spent in a 'colourless light' (p. 223); it is a time recognised by the convict rescuer Jack Chance, as

that heavy light you been floggin' against all of summer. (p. 275)

But at the end of her odyssey, she remains a mystery to the colonists and must remain so in order to safeguard her secrets, (pp. 308 and 317). As Ellen

¹⁴¹ The text reads:

She hid the pannikin under her shawl, and had resumed her slinking, through a light which

leaves the colony by ship with the staid merchant, Mr. Jevons, the light is 'diminishing' (p. 361), until she remains at the end of the novel 'contained within the ... ellipse of light' (p. 366).

Most moments of inner illumination experienced by White's characters are of a religious or quasi-religious nature, with a presumed but unidentified deity responsible for their occurrence. Thus White's main and perhaps more genuine and traditionally plotted novels have been described as fitting into a defined and determined sequence,¹⁴² with the first, *Happy Valley* and the last of these, *A Fringe of Leaves*, containing self-dependent characters, and the 'middle' novels dealing with those who are endowed outside themselves. Hadgraft saw this as a circular structure, with revelation as a major theme, reaching it's 'extreme point' in *Riders in the Chariot*. Whilst this critic was unsure of White's purpose in pursuing this theme of revelation, others for example David Tacey,¹⁴³ have seen it as the essential motivation for the personal quest motif, central to White's fiction. *A Fringe of Leaves* may also be compared to *The Twyborn Affair* in that it is more 'autobiographic' in many ways than the other novels.

However, by contrast with the novels of White's middle period, the most important sections of *A Fringe of Leaves* occupy a short period of time chronologically, and any grand metaphysical searching by the central characters is conspicuously absent. Additionally, the moments of enlightening revelation are noticeably few, of brief duration and decidedly secular in origin

accused whatever it illuminated. (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 196)

¹⁴²See particularly 'The Theme of Revelation in Patrick White's novels', Cecil Hadgraft, *Southerly*, 37, 1977, pp. 34-46.

¹⁴³D. J. Tacey, 'The Quest Motif in Patrick White', *Review of National Literature*, XI, 1982, pp.

and intent. This novel, then, represents a major shift in attitude and theme in Patrick White's writing.

In previous texts, *Voss*, *The Tree of Man* and particularly *Riders in the Chariot*, and importantly in *Fringe of Leaves*, the moments of illumination are much more experienced by the reader, not the characters, and yet they expand on the deeper aspects of character which White wishes to evolve. This is not a deliberately arcane device but rather does it represent a subtle change to the treatment of the quest motif, for, rather than the characters searching, in this novel such activity is replaced with a (societal) questioning by the author, through the characters, of the *a priori* knowledge and truth present in all people. This is particularly so of the main character, Ellen, who sees, feels and then acts, but seldom questions. Encouraged by her husband, Austin, to take up his brother Garnet's offer to loan her a horse to ride, Ellen senses the possibilities this mobility may bring:

... she was faced with her own vulnerable image, swimming at her out of mirrors in this ill-lit house, making her wonder whether those around her recognized what was happening to her. (p. 98)

When one day Garnet leaves on a round of inspection, Ellen soon follows, advising her maid, 'the day is so fine I must take advantage' (p. 98). The duality of her meaning is obvious to the reader, she is free on the horse to follow Garnet and she is free to explore through Garnet whom she has chosen, her sensuality. Her experiences with her dream, of coupling with Garnet, and then the subsequent literal event (pp. 82-84 and pp. 100-104) are

lyric and contain constant references to light. As Ellen approaches the clearing knowing she will meet Garnet Roxburgh she is aware of her intentions, but

must have closed her eyes, when a sudden spattering of light beyond the lids made her open them. (p. 100)

Paradoxically, these same eyelids that allow or deny the entry of literal light are closed as Ellen in a state of languor after seducing Garnet ponders on what she has done:

... for when she freed her mouth from the mouth clamped to it, and lay contemplating the gently stirring fern-fronds above her, they sprinkled her surfeited skin with a fine moisture, and she closed her eyes again for an instant, to bask beneath the lashes in an experience of sensuality she must have awaited all her life, however inadmissible the circumstances in which she had encouraged it. (p. 103)

These references convey illumination to the reader, rather than to Ellen, who by her behaviour explores rather her own sensuality and carnality.

The novel, therefore, differs from those preceding. Themes of suffering and understanding are continued and developed but the mode of the characters' attaining of knowledge and truth differs. Ellen is to learn by experience and the observation of others, rather than by having wisdom and a deeper understanding superimposed. Ellen is a traveller through life, rather than a searcher who has ever deeper experiences: her response to people met and her life's events is instinctive and emotionally reactive. Her childhood and adolescent experiences when caring for her father have taught her considerable self-control, and she adheres to the class and social strictures of the time until released by an unexpected marriage which sets her free. This is not to deny her an early and romantic imagination; her dreams of Tintagel and

search for it underscore its potential presence, but she does not live in it: it is her native and peasant doggedness that sees her survive capture by the Australian natives, and her pragmatism that determines her marriage to the available Mr. Jevons.

Her first husband, Austin, is also a shy observer, content to remain a dreamer if he accepts his birthright of rank. When the *Bristol Maid* runs aground he returns to the saloon cabin to rescue his copy of Virgil. As he walks on deck the mizzen mast breaks, and it and the canvas sails it carries are swept into the sea. Such an event can be anticipated in a storm, but White writes:

Then something amazing occurred, the more improbable because, as always, Austin Roxburgh's vision was not that of a participant. (p. 158)

That is, Austin Roxburgh has witnessed the event but he is unable to comprehend its meaning or interpret its significance. What also makes this text passage so revealing is that it was the very sight of 'this prodigality of canvas' that had 'carried his hesitant spirit in the direction of poetry' (p. 129), only a few days before as he had walked on the deck. Whilst he was in this mood, we had learnt of his creative spirit and 'perceptive apparatus' crippling clogged with 'waste knowledge and moral inhibitions' (p. 129). At this time Roxburgh - and his reader - is able to realise by illumination that such moments cannot be permanently encapsulated.¹⁴⁴ For someone with Austin Roxburgh's bookish, inherited and class-confined imagination, this is a significant revelation, but

¹⁴⁴ Similarly when he sees his wife's portrait commissioned after experiencing the revelation of her appearance as she descended the stairs (p. 130). He comes to realise the portrait is 'not the

such moments are few and seemingly unhelpful in developing in him a capacity to live a more spiritual, meaningful and comprehensive life. So those confined characters such as Roxburgh, White condemns to a life of mimesis, one lived in books, publicly conforming to society's rules and its more imaginative reaches and acted out through others. It is not surprising that for a wife Roxburgh chooses his opposite, the physically strong and protective Ellen Gluyas, who also happens to be deeply sensual.

Following Austin Roxburgh's visual and subsequent 'poetic' experience, we learn in flashback of his childhood, during which time his emotions and the emotional component of his personality were so suppressed: these are to become subservient to a lifestyle concerned with realism and pragmatism, since it is only by the cultivation of these virtues that a gentleman can discharge his duty to his family and class. The effort, however, for Austin is seen as a very considerable one, particularly as he draws an inevitable comparison with his brother Garnet who is overtly sensual and described as a Prometheus figure, (reminiscent in his sensual energy of the vital characters typical of the writing of D. H. Lawrence, for example Gerald Crich in *Women in Love*). Austin's modest efforts are described in images of fire and light, emphasising their revelatory nature.

Austin's homoerotic feelings for his brother is converted into an aesthetic appreciation and White here provides the reader with a clue to the qualities this character will seek in a wife.

ultimate in revelation', and that the deep emotion he experienced when viewing her cannot be caught by conventional methods.

A little later in the same voyage chapter, and whilst on deck, Roxburgh attempts conversation with one of the ship's officers, Mr. Courtney, but, because of the latter's inability to reach any depth, the conversation remains on a superficial level. Yet White had previously written about Roxburgh before his marriage, stating that:

...Austin Roxburgh, whatever appearances suggested, was not all bookish: in him there stirred with vague though persistent uneasiness an impulse which might have been creative. (p. 54)

If this referred to personal relations, the author does not permit its expression.

White writes:

He [Roxburgh] was both expectant and apprehensive of Mr. Courtney's arrival. He longed to join the mate in the kind of esoteric conversation the latter would know how to conduct amongst his fellow initiates, a free-masonry to which Mr. Roxburgh could never be admitted it seemed because he had not learnt the sign. In an even more dependent mood he would see himself locked in his solitary confinement cell,... (p.130)

Roxburgh's lack of social skills or imagination had placed him outside any society other than that of his mother's at Cheltenham,¹⁴⁵ which is also why White could write that Austin Roxburgh's 'vision was not that of a participant' when he views the mast falling, (p. 158). Consequently, the impression he makes upon the crew is minimal and when, in a rather foolhardy manner he returns to his cabin to rescue his copy of Virgil as the boat founders but 'nobody noticed Mr. Roxburgh', (p. 159).

¹⁴⁵ Note the irony of the name, for Patrick White, according to his biographer, David Marr, hated Cheltenham College, his English school. See Marr, *Patrick White A Life, op. cit.*, pp. 69-76.

These events all take place in chapter four of the book, a section critical in the book's structure. It is in this chapter that the beginning of Ellen's physical trials begin, and they continue in the 'new' world. Prior to this, the narrative has dealt with the seemingly orderly and structured 'old' world, with its dominating class structure and formal and stuffy conventions. We move literally and metaphorically away from the civilisation of Europe as exemplified by Austin Roxburgh and by his symbiotic reading of Virgil. The importance of Austin reading this epic Roman text is to reinforce our sense of the depth and extent of this old world history. In Australia with its short and brutal history, Austin's brother Garnet is his antithesis, being dishonest in his dealings, brutish in manner and, probably, his own wife's murderer. The two brothers, then, are seen as allegorical figures, pre-figuring their respective normal landscapes, in both of which Ellen must endeavour to survive.

The shipwreck, therefore, so centrally placed, becomes the hinge in the book with the decline of the importance of Austin to the narrative and with the new central position of his wife Ellen. As if to mark this new focus, the motif of the mast falling and being cast aside must evoke for many readers Yeats' famous lines:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.¹⁴⁶

And this is exactly what happens, with the shipwreck and later desertion by part of the crew. Once outside the authority of the *Stirling Castle*, the class inhibitions of the company are abandoned and each one fends for himself or

¹⁴⁶ Quoted by David Harvey in his *The Condition of Postmodernity: An enquiry into the Origins of*

herself. For Ellen, this is the true beginning of her more active journey of self discovery, and the gradual realisation now comes that she has within her the resources to survive; yet, during this period, she constantly has to remind herself (and the reader), that she must 'endure'.¹⁴⁷

Prior to the shipwreck, and after his meeting with Mr. Courtney, Austin Roxburgh is to undergo a further episode of self questioning and doubt when he encounters the ship's mate, Pilcher. Their conversation takes place after they have both witnessed the illuminating effect of the light upon the visible land:

An invisible sun struck at the land with swords of light, but only for a few moments. (p. 134)

This now highly visible land then becomes a metaphor for their own efforts at self-exploration, as Roxburgh and Pilcher each present for us their own version of the truth. The conversation has, too, both elements of comedy and irony, since that of Roxburgh is metaphysical, and Pilcher's pragmatic and realist:

'What curious and beautiful tricks the light will play!' Mr. Roxburgh at once regretted his remark, but needlessly; Pilcher appeared to consider it unworthy of his attention.
'Ever been any way in?' Austin Roxburgh thought to inquire.
'In where?'
'Into the interior'.
'Nao!'

The mate was of another element. He continued staring at the water, his contemptuous expression dissolving in what entranced him.

'Not if I was paid,' Mr. Pilcher said. 'Nothing there.'

Cultural Change, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, p. 11.

¹⁴⁷ This is an interesting variant on the *Aeneid's* statements of a similar individual moral obligation.

.....'Only dirty blacks,' he added, 'and a few poor beggars in stripes who've bolted from one hell to another. The criminals they found out about! That's th'injustice of it. How many of us was never found out?'

.... 'That is certainly an argument,' Mr. Roxburgh said.

'That is the truth!' the mate blurted passionately, and looked in the direction of the land. 'If I was sent out here in irons, for what I done-or what someone else had done – I'd find a way to join the bolters. I'd learn the country by heart, like any of your books, Mr. Roxburgh and find more perhaps.' (pp. 134-135)

Whilst it is obvious Roxburgh's initial inquiry in this passage relates to exploration of the mind, it is Pilcher who has assessed accurately the injustice of transportation and of the convict system, and who, therefore, can espouse morally the virtue of escape from such a system. Additionally his deflating comments about Austin's books and learning reveal a strong egalitarian and practical sense.

Pilcher, when out at sea, feels complete freedom to make such comments, regarding Roxburgh as his equal in this exchange and, slightly later, he compares his own behaviour with that of the slippery conger eel; escaping with ease if his freedom was to be threatened. But Roxburgh is unable to accept this new egalitarianism or this honesty, for, as White says: 'The conger was still twisting and glinting at a depth where he feared to follow'. (p. 135) With a summons from his wife, the exchange is broken off and Austin rescued from further probing. Yet although illuminated, Austin realises Pilcher has the truer insight, he is unable to acknowledge this to his wife when she later questions him about their conversation. (p. 137) His confusion is described in terms of 'embroidering' and, later, as 'the silken cords of their own devising' (p. 137), a reflection upon his and their circumscribed existence and their inability

to 'break' free from the established conventions.

At this point in the chapter there is a shift in the language of the text, so that multiple Biblical references appear. These turns will reinforce the notion that Ellen's later sojourn with the natives has a spiritual and religious dimension. These references commence with Ellen questioning her own sincerity in prayer (p. 137); and then, a little later, at a meal with Captain Purdew and Mr. Courtney words such as 'mysteries' and phrases such as a 'vision of soft eggs' and 'feverish apples' (p. 139) are used. Importantly, '[i]t occurred to each of the Roxburghs that the second mate had not yet broken bread with them' (p. 138). This is a prescient New Testament-echoing sentence, referring to Mr. Pilcher who is later to abandon them at sea, but who later still also achieves redemption through love in Christ at the end of the novel, so that the sacramental phrase 'broken bread' is entirely appropriate. This tone shift and emphasis on selfless sacrifice is important, since both Ellen and Austin realise that, ultimately, they have only one another and the love they share:

Now the world had shrunk to its core, or to the small circle of light in the middle of the ocean, in which two souls were momentarily united, their joint fears fusing them into a force against evil. (p. 141)

Both have come to this state by different means: Austin through his conversations with Mr. Courtney and Mr. Pilcher, and then later at dinner, when looking at his wife he realises 'with annoyance, his ineffectual love', (p. 139). Ellen, who now knows that her adulterous liaison with Garnet Roxburgh has resulted in pregnancy, has come to understand she is responsible and therefore must endure the consequences: 'I will, I *must* endure it because this

is now my only purpose' (p. 140), and, meaningfully, her pain and suffering are described in Biblical terms. This is revealed as she 'kissed his hands' (p. 140) in a symbolic act of supplication for her guilt. The idea of pain and suffering closes the chapter as Ellen feeds her invalid husband Austin on warm milk with a 'skin', something he had disliked from childhood. But his anginal pain is so severe, that he is happy to submit to Ellen's ministrations and in doing so regresses to a child-like state of dependence.

Chapter four, then, is pivotal to the novel's structure, marking the central point in the narrative where the old world gives way to the new upon the death of Austin Roxburgh. Chapter one, however, introduces the core key signifier of the book - who is the prisoner, and who is the guard? That is, the author explores the reaction of each character to their situation of confinement, which is physical, in the case of the convicts, psychological in Austin Roxburgh's case, and due to convention and class with Ellen Gluyas. Whilst some are content to remain within their situation, others, as exemplified by Ellen, are driven by intuition to break free and explore a larger milieu.

Such restriction applies to the three minor Sydney-based characters at the beginning of the book, Mr. and Mrs Merivale with their friend Miss Scrimshaw. They are physically confined in their closed carriage and mentally confined by their own snobbery and pretension. Mr. Merivale, for example, is stereotyped as being of:

that stamp of English gentleman, not so gentle as not to be firm, not too positive, yet not altogether negative, who will transplant reliably from his native soil to the most unpromising pockets of the globe. (p. 8)

Thus, although he accepts his Australian physical exile, this never takes place in his imagination, and for him acceptance is through duty as determined by his preferred English-style social class. His imagination is limited to and by the Sydney surroundings, as White makes clear later in the chapter:

Mr. Merivale began to grunt and unfold his long legs. Since the raising of the window, the enclosed carriage was more than ever its own world; to leave it amounted to an emigration. (p. 16)

The carriage represents a closed and complete world for Mr. Merivale and his ilk, to whom any deep questioning would be a complete anathema. But for these people this is a virtue, since:

His strength lay in his capacity for enduring boredom, his wife suspected, quite overlooking the possibility of a relationship with the landscape... (p. 8)

The carriage window functions as a physical and metaphorical barrier to any expansion for the minds of the occupants, so it is not surprising to read that Mrs Merivale has the window closed because of the risk of contaminating 'dust' (p. 15). This also serves to emphatically exclude any light or mental illumination. However, two people intrude on and disturb this smugness: one is Mrs Roxburgh, the other, the Irish emancipist, Delaney. Mrs Roxburgh disturbs the settlement women since they are unable to 'imprison' her by any smug knowledge of her lowly family background or of her rebellious thoughts because she remains silent. Additionally, she is sexually attractive to men, something the other women find threatening, so that she is dismissed as 'mysterious' (p. 15), and determined by them to be lacking in 'spiritual' qualities (p. 14).

Delaney makes a brief appearance but is extremely important for White's purpose, since as an emancipist, he represents the successful felon and someone free in Australia. Despite the unjust and cruel system of the old world, in the new world it is possible to achieve personal freedom and identity and then subsequent financial and social success. This is only possible in an egalitarian society. Merivale is trapped by the stultifying conventions and duties he had brought from England and which he has never discarded, whilst his counterpart, Delaney, is 'engaged in the carrying trade and whatever other gainful ploys nobody was altogether certain' (p. 16). And it is not just through the possession of material objects that equality is demonstrated: Delaney responds in an ambiguous and almost insolent manner when it is suggested that Miss Scrimshaw may be returning to England, obviously the last place he would wish to go.¹⁴⁸ Delaney has achieved dynamic forms of personal freedom that - White suggests - would only be possible in the new world, and therefore in the novel he is an example of someone who now moves freely between the two literal and metaphysical states of gaoler and the gaoled.

The other person to challenge accepted mores - both in England and in Australia - is Ellen Gluyas, who is a relatively simple Cornish girl, deeply attached to nature and of an engagingly romantic disposition. Following the death of her mother, her father becomes increasingly dependent upon her to maintain the household and physically work the farm. She remains on the

¹⁴⁸ The passage reads:

Miss Scrimshaw for the Old Country? Good luck to her then!" He laughed softly, and let them interpret it how they pleased.

Mrs. Merivale simmered, not because her friend's sensibility might have been offended by the interest of a rough, common man, but because a convention had been flouted. (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 19)

farm through a sense of duty (a form of moral imperative) to her parents, despite the increasing frustration caused by the isolation and apparent lack of a future and the suggestion by the author of physical abuse.¹⁴⁹ She is sustained by her romantic imagination¹⁵⁰ and then by the arrival of the physically weak Austin Roxburgh, whom she has to treat as she would a motherless poddy calf.¹⁵¹ The proposal of marriage from Roxburgh allows an opportunity for Ellen to escape and although as she confides in her diary: 'Good, kind, tedjus men make me feel guilty' (p. 62), she remains grateful, and so:

To please and protect became Ellen Roxburgh's constant aim; to be accepted by her husband's friends and thus earn his approbation; to show the Roxburghs her gratitude in undemonstrative and undemeaning ways,... (p. 67)

But although Ellen adopts this attitude and appears to have exchanged one brutal 'prison' for a life of civility with comfort in another, it is not long before she finds that a moral compromise has to be undertaken in order to keep her resolve:

¹⁴⁹ The text here reads:

While she was still a little girl, he used to stroke her cheeks as though to learn the secrets of her skin. She would feel the horn-thing on his crushed thumb scraping her.

On one occasion, unable to bear it any longer, she cried out, 'Cusn't tha see I dun't want to be touched?' and threw him off. (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 56)

¹⁵⁰ The passage reads:

It was Ellen Gluyas's hope that she might eventually be sent a god. Out of Ireland, according to legend. Promised in marriage to a king she took her escort as a lover, and the two died of love. Pa confirmed that they had sailed into Tintagel. She had never been as far as Tintagel, but hoped one day to see it. (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 45)

¹⁵¹ It is noteworthy that Will, Ellen's admirer, and therefore Roxburgh's rival has come to help kill the calf; metaphorically Roxburgh. The scene referred to is on page 48, and reads:

'They're killing the calf!'

'Yes,' she admitted. (Will had come over to help Pa perform the operation.) 'You dun't have to watch, Mr. Roxburgh.'

Without thinking, she touched his hand, unladylike, to lead him back into the enclosed existence others had ordained and made for him, in which death, she had only latterly discovered, was a 'literary conceit'. (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 48)

She had been encouraged early to tell the truth, but found that truth did not always match what she was taught by precept or in church: it was both simpler and more complicated.

Her parents in the past, and now her husband and mother-in-law, expected more of her than they themselves were prepared or knew how to demonstrate. It had pained and puzzled her as a child, until as a girl she too began accepting that there are conventions in truth as in anything else. As a young wife and 'lady' she saw this as an expedient she must convert into permanence, and former critics were soon applauding her for observing the customs they were accustomed to obey. (p. 66)

Ellen even in this early stage of the novel has moved from one confining domestic situation to another by her marriage: importantly Ellen quite understands the circumstances, as she again confides to her diary:

...I would like to see my husband as perfect. I will not have him hurt. I am better able to endure wounds, and wld (sic) take them upon myself instead. Women on the whole are stronger because more knowing than men, for all the knowledge men lay claim to. We also learn to numb ourselves against suffering, whether of the body or the mind... (p.67)

Ellen demonstrates a pragmatic approach to her new life and is thankful for her changed circumstances after marriage to Austin; the quotation is, therefore, not ironic in any way, as a casual reading may imply. But, like the convicts and gaolers, Ellen is confined within a marriage contract, one she will be unable to alter. Similarly, whilst it is obvious that the convicts are confined to prevent their escape, the gaolers are so also, by the nature of the organisation they serve. In the case of the penal colonies in Australia the responsibility of warder was invested by the government in the military whose traditions, uniforms and regulations all serve to curtail personal freedom, and any form of spontaneous expression. This is comically illustrated during the commandant's interrogation of Ellen: 'The Commandant was sweating; it

trickled down over the neck of his tunic which he was too correct to unhook', (p. 328).

It is during this interview that Ellen comes to an intuition, to realise that her experiences are incomprehensible to those in so called 'civilisation', particularly to such as the Commandant, in whom any expression of imagination was vigorously suppressed.¹⁵² And so:

...when she had blown her nose, and re-arranged her veil, she went outside, to return to the settlement in which it seemed at times she might remain permanently imprisoned. (p. 353)

The shifting sense of freedom and imprisonment are best seen in the complex relationship which White has developed between Ellen and her convict rescuer, Jack Chance. It is Chance who rescues Ellen from virtual slavery with the natives and she comes to love and respect him, but, by allowing the relationship to become sexual, Ellen has, by the association, sunk to the same status, as the convicts. In a beautiful and lyric passage¹⁵³ with references to birds and light, Ellen and Jack are symbolically 'cleansed' in the lake water of their earthly 'sins'.¹⁵⁴ In the writings of Patrick White, water and water imagery are important for the sense of peace and purity they convey.

¹⁵²The Commandant more than likely did not understand, but was writing. Mrs. Roxburgh suspected that what she understood had little to do with words, in spite of tuition from Mr. Roxburgh and his mother. So it would be throughout her life.' (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 328)

¹⁵³The passage is quoted in full:

Illusions of beauty and suspended time increased as the day declined. Birds balanced on trapezes slung between trees grew accustomed to the presence of intruders and descended seemingly by ropes of light. Still in mid-air, some of them were catapulted skywards by anxiety, others landed, flitting and flickering, themselves like brown leaves as they foraged over mould and in the crevices of shed bark. (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 284)

¹⁵⁴This cleansing by water fulfils a previous prophecy Ellen had experienced as a child when for an inexplicable reason she visits St. Hya's Well and immerses herself fully clothed:

She was soon crying for some predicament which nobody, least of all Ellen Gluyas could have explained: no specific sin, only presentiment of an evil she would have to face sooner or later. Presently, after getting up courage, she let herself down into the pool, clothes and

At this point a noticeable shift in dependency has occurred in that Jack is now described as being dependent on her. While she is initially dependant upon him for survival in the bush, he later is to depend upon her speaking well of him if he is to obtain a pardon, since he is an escaped convict. At this early stage Jack is described as her abductor (p. 259), but almost immediately Ellen is considering him to be her servant, (p. 263). Later they become lovers and in response to Jack's question as to whether Ellen could ever love him, she begins to feel this may be possible, since this offer is 'unconditional' (p. 271), unlike those offered by Garnet or Austin Roxburgh. At moments of rest Jack is described as her deliverer and guide (p. 273), but, during a dream in which Ellen becomes the manifestation of all Jack's lovers and the means of his ultimate freedom, the balance of dependency and therefore 'ownership' shifts, so that -

she thought it well to remind, 'I am the one on whom you depend,' before taking possession of him. (p. 280)

As if to reinforce his dependency and to demonstrate her own newfound abilities, Ellen climbs a tree in the manner of an Aboriginal woman seeking birds' nests and honey. Jack climbs after her, imperilling their lives on the thin branches, until, importantly, they stand together, as prelapsarian equals, now all 'in a blaze of light and cataract of green...' (p. 286). Because of the physical danger, Ellen asks Jack not to proceed further, not as a request but as an 'order' and he is 'forbidden' to proceed. Significantly, and just when they have achieved physical and moral equality at the tree tops, buildings are seen and

all, hanging by a bough. (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 98)

Ellen feels that what was previously described as her 'martyrdom' (p. 217) - and liberation, too - is over. Jack, however, is more sanguine, sensing a return to the Moreton Bay penal colony and therefore imprisonment and all its attendant evils. He experiences a negative epiphany and remarks:

And beyond in the distance, you can see the river. There was never such a vicious snake as the Brisbane River. (p. 287)

The snake reference is Biblical, referring to the corruption of the paradise they have experienced and shared. Neither wish to return to the place that has confined them: Ellen psychologically and Jack literally. On their final evening together, Jack again becomes her 'servant' as he prepares their food. Ellen learns something of Jack's life before his criminal conviction and the circumstances surrounding the murder of his lover Mab. Despite her abhorrence she is unable to resist his demands for sexual intercourse and is quite unable to cope with his further insistence that she accept his essential innocence by the act. Jack is now described as her 'monstrous child' (p. 201).

Through all of this episode with Jack Chance, Ellen is disturbed by the recurring challenge of their shifting relationship. Initially one of gratitude for her rescue, then a belief for a period in the possibility of love, and finally as they separate Ellen's feelings are described as 'my affection for you' (p. 296). These changing states parallel their combined physical and psychological circumstances as they escape the natives, spend time in a paradise-like idyll and finally experience the reality of return to civilisation. Of the two, it is Jack who is truly free, being responsible only to himself; Ellen, reminded constantly by her wedding ring that she is linked to a society to which some day she must return, knows that she must provide an explanation to its members.

Immediately before this happens Ellen loses her ring, and, through the loss, her sense of social superiority over Jack, so his claim of their being equals causes her to treat him with angry derision and regard him as a 'convicted murderer' (p. 297). Ellen is affronted and upset, but self-illuminated, when she realises that Jack is speaking the truth when he regards the human relationship they have experienced far more highly than a jewel:

And ringless didn't prevent you an' me becomin' what we are
to each other. (p. 297)

As well as the soldier guards in *A Fringe of Leaves*, men who are inhibited by conformity and ritual, the other parallel group of warders are the ministers of religion. Patrick White is well known for his rather insipid and dismissive portraits of the clergy and this is no exception to that procession. Following Ellen's return to the settlement she undergoes two interviews, the first by the Commandant, the second by the chaplain, Mr. Cottle. Both interrogations of the woman are conducted along similar lines, with the pontificating male standing in the middle of the carpet and Ellen sitting. These interviews, especially that by the Commandant, are reminiscent of the interrogation of Laura Trevelyan, by Colonel Hebden in *Voss* (pp. 411-414). Textual comment is made about the nature of the light in the room before the interview starts: 'bars of sunlight' (p. 325) are noted reinforcing the renewal penal nature of the episode, whilst a 'coppery light' (p. 326), suggests that the interview will be dull and unedifying. Both interviews are used by White to parody the two relevant systems of control of people, either physically, or in the case of organised religion through their unquestioning enforcing of stock belief. For Ellen who has experienced the utmost in mental and physical tribulation, their

questions are superficial and either easily answered or else the answers so profound as to be incomprehensible to her interrogator.

Earlier in the book when Austin and Ellen had attended church in Van Diemen's Land, organised religion was shown to be a special place for display by the wealthy. (p. 94) The church is 'cold and forbidding' (p. 94), an attitude reinforced by the positioning of the convicts at the rear; this joyless structure contrasts with the later crude chapel built by the seaman Pilcher. He had earlier abandoned his fellows after their being shipwrecked, but he is saved and, apparently in gratitude to Providence constructs a chapel in the grounds of the penal colony. The description of the chapel emphasises the association with light and the presence of birds, whilst the lettering, 'God is Love', repudiates the earlier war-like slogan 'Holy Holy Holy Lord God Of Hosts' (pp. 95 and 353). Ellen instinctively understands Pilcher's endeavour, whereas she had been encroached upon by Garnet at the earlier church service because of his bulk and sexual intentions, even there and so lost any chance then of enlightenment in church.¹⁵⁵ The Pitcher 'shrine' is so different:

At last she must have cried herself out: she could not have seen more clearly, down to the cracks in the wooden bench, the bird droppings on the rudimentary altar. She did not attempt to interpret a peace of mind which had descended on her (she would not have been able to attribute it to prayer or reason) but let the silence enclose her like a beatitude. (p. 353)

And so, later Ellen had 'sensed at once that something out of the ordinary had happened to dispel apathy and relieve tension' (p. 353). This epiphany

¹⁵⁵The text reads: '...Garnet Roxburgh tended to overflow against her. As he leaned forward in prayer, she could hear the cloth stretched to cracking across his shoulders, and when he eased

which Ellen has now experienced has to do with the realisation that an 'ordinary' man, indeed one who committed the terrible offence of abandoning his fellows, has sought and found forgiveness and demonstrated it in the most humble and simple of ways. And yet, though it is outside the conventional structure the builder's intention is more powerful and so the religious message more acute. Part of the description of Ellen's visit to the chapel includes 'bright sunlight' and 'birds' flying (p. 352). These references reinforce the fact that for White, the author, the more selfless are refreshed by gazing at trees, seeing birds, and contemplating nature. For Ellen is helped to peace by this revelation of God's creation in the bright light, and it forms part of the spectrum of ways in which one may attain insight into God's purpose for all men and women. The special significance of this illumination is emphasised in the next sentence -

There was little to obstruct, whether flight, thought or vision. (p. 352)

That Ellen understands Pilcher's outsider status and the freedom from convention which he has achieved in building his simple structure is evident from the description of her behaviour after leaving the chapel:

Then, when she had blown her nose, and re-arranged her veil, she went outside, to return to the settlement in which it seemed at times she might remain permanently imprisoned. (p. 353)

Ellen's various forms of imprisonment are as much to do with her gender as with her nature or personality, and for her they interact and remain a

himself back in his seat, she felt his thigh pressed inescapably into her skirt', (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 95).

constant source of speculation. White's characterisation of the male is often to be seen as weak and rather dominated. Except for the convict Jack Chance, the other males are constrained by either convention, society or duty, particularly in the case of the Commandant, the chaplain and the captain of the *Bristol Maid*. In the first chapter Mr. Merivale's lack of understanding is attributed to 'his sex and nature' (p. 8). The idea that gender is involved in the process of attaining a deeper understanding is further commented on by Ellen (and by the author), when she writes in her diary: 'Women on the whole are stronger because more knowing than the men, for all the knowledge men lay claim to' (p. 67). With this dawning insight, Ellen is able to comprehend, even when relatively young, that 'truth did not always match what she was taught by precept or in church' (p. 66). Ellen is also able to recognise that within her own character her reactions will always be situation and survival based, 'instinctive', as she explains to her husband: 'It was too late when I started to learn. I shall only ever know what my instinct tells me' (p. 31).

Her nature is kindly to others and she has discharged her filial duties responsibly and with love, but she is romantically inclined, her early and strangely persisting religious belief a confused mixture of Arthurian legend and Cornish regional myth. But there also remains something else in her character, a quality of passivity, detectable by others and noted by the narrator:

But in her own case, a kind of sensual apathy intervened as often as not between the intention and the act. Or, in the beginning life to be lived. (p. 31)

It is this potential and latent quality that the other female occupants of the

carriage, Miss Scrimshaw and Mrs Merivale, recognise and fear when they describe Ellen as 'something of a mystery' and lacking in 'spirituality', (pp. 14-15). It is the same somewhat passive sensation that causes Ellen to be both attracted to and repelled by the 'coarse and sensual' Garnet Roxburgh (p. 74). Their meeting causes her to begin metaphysical speculations about the nature of good and evil and the proportion of both in each person, and so she writes in her private diary:

How much of the miscreant, I wonder, is in Garnet R.? Or in *myself* for that matter? I know that I have lied when necessary and am at times what the truly virtuous call 'hypocritical'. If I am not all good (only my dearest husband is that) I am not excessively bad. How far is it to the point where one oversteps the bounds? (pp. 79-80)

That Garnet Roxburgh is more than willing to help his sister-in-law to find the answer to these behavioural questions, is evident early in their acquaintance and in a moment of knowledge for Ellen, when White writes of their first meeting: 'The light glinted on his teeth; his arms were open to receive his sister-in-law', (p. 77).

Ellen becomes then a victim of her own elemental yet complex character, seeking a sensual and sexual exploration of her personality and vicariously confiding to her diary:

Good, kind, tedjus men make me feel guilty. Perhaps it is Pa's blood in my veins. I am given to fits of drunkenness without having indulged. (p. 62)¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Miss Scrimshaw has similar knowledge which she has divulged to Mrs. Merivale in the carriage regarding a woman's 'secret depths', see above. This oblique revelation is overwhelming for Mrs. Merivale, who is described as 'terrified' at the prospect of either possessing such propensity or searching for it in case it was found.

The passages leading up to and including the sexual intercourse with Garnet Roxburgh are perhaps the most lyric in the novel. White describes how Ellen's sexual interest in Garnet is curiously stimulated by finding the pink bow from Mrs. Aspinall's dress in his writing box (p. 92). At the same time there occurs a flashback to her childhood, describing how Ellen has undergone a preventative total water immersion to protect her from evil. Despite this and her apparent essential Christian faith, Ellen realises on looking into the mirror that her instinct is to simultaneously pursue Garnet and to explore her own nature, regardless of the consequences and to this end had already gone on foot, to find a suitable place for their lovemaking. (pp. 82-83)

On this journey the narrative is rich in symbolic imagery of her choice: the road forks, forcing her to make a decision, she passes through a tunnel with its sexual imagery and finally comes upon an area described in terms of a virginal bride awaiting to be despoiled. Briefly, (in a mental mirror), she examines her conscience, before dreaming of the arrival of her lover in a ship. Importantly, Ellen's decision that day to take that particular fork in the road is associated with a sudden brilliant light that is described as, 'whiter, keener, at such moments when it succeeded in slashing its way through the foliage', (p. 82), suggesting perhaps that the author concurs with his character's decision to follow this chance of some self 'enlightenment'. Additionally Ellen's sleep is in an area where 'the spangled net of sunlight had been raised from the clearing' (p. 83). Within this space Ellen feels as close to her fundamental self as she ever has:

Removing the superfluous bonnet and loosening her matted hair, she felt only remotely related to Ellen Roxburgh, or even Ellen Gluyas; she was probably closer to the being her glass

could not reveal, nor her powers of perception grasp, but whom she suspected must exist none the less. (p. 82)

Following this experience the inevitable sexual union occurs a few days later, after what is described as a 'conspiracy' (p. 99) to meet is contrived by Ellen, in the same glade previously explored. Imagery is again an important part of the description with both bird and water, images of spirituality used by Patrick White of Ellen. Although Garnet blames her for his seduction, he fails to understand her scheme,¹⁵⁷ assuming it is based on lust and suggests further meetings. But he is in fact her victim (p. 103) in an artifice in which the physical act is the least important. Her explanation of seeking 'freedom' is beyond his comprehension and she has only a brief moment in which:

...she closed her eyes again for an instant, to bask beneath the lashes in an experience of sensuality she must have awaited all her life, however inadmissible the circumstances in which she had encouraged it. (p. 103)

Garnet Roxburgh, like Jack Chance, later becomes a possession of Ellen's, through whom she is able to probe further her own sensual nature. Neither of them appreciates or understands her motive, and Garnet is keen to continue the liason,¹⁵⁸ but Ellen realises the relationship is based purely on lust and she resents the shared intimacy of the doctor's wife, Mrs. Aspinall (p. 118), who from her discussion has clearly also had adulterous relations with Garnet, (pp. 118-119). But Ellen is trapped by her gender, since she becomes pregnant, but, plot conveniently, on a single day she couples with both Garnet

¹⁵⁷ Garnet is specifically described as 'the one who was less her seducer than the instrument she had chosen for measuring depths she was tempted to explore', (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 104).

¹⁵⁸ Rather ironically for someone so coarse, (or is it as some form of control?), he adopts a 'tutorial' stance suggesting '[I] would love to educate you further in what you have shown yourself adept

and Austin Roxburgh (p. 109), so the parentage is ambiguous and anyway she is later to miscarry whilst adrift at sea.

Whilst acknowledging that the sudden experience with Garnet was based on physical lust (p. 104), Ellen continues to ponder her actions particularly as:

She tried to console herself with the explanation that if she had been drawn to a certain person, it was because some demoniac (sic) force had overcome her natural repulsion. (p. 118)

But this is unsatisfactory, since White has already described how Ellen conspired to arrange the meeting with Garnet, (p. 99). Additionally although she wonders (as does her landlady Mrs. Impey) about a woman's ability to make decisions (pp. 114, 118), Ellen clearly makes the decision to meet Garnet after dreaming in almost an annunciation of such a meeting. Then, as if to emphasise the point about entrapment and potential danger, the light is described as a 'spangled web' (p. 83). That Ellen is in reality quite capable of making major decisions is suspected by Miss Scrimshaw at their first meeting: 'Perhaps', she hesitated, 'it was *Mrs Roxburgh* who made the decision' (p. 11).

Whilst this episode with Garnet Roxburgh is for Ellen an exercise in carnality, her capture by natives and subsequent experiences are preceded by Ellen, 'sensing', in spiritual terms that recall both Voss and Himmelfarb, that this is 'the beginning of her martyrdom' (p. 217). Reinforcing this interpretation is the light-associated manner in which White describes the most controversial act in the book - that of cannibalism (pp. 242-244). Coming upon the natives in an area where 'shafts of light admitted between the pinnacles and arches of

at learning - on one occasion on at least', (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 122).

the trees...’ (p. 242), a description suggestive of both a Roman sacred grove and a Medieval cathedral, Ellen is ‘to share with these innocent savages an unexpectedly spiritual experience...’ (p. 243). Having eaten the flesh and, therefore, violated all orthodox Christian and social morality, the reader is advised that Ellen’s response is paradoxically one of an illuminating and spiritual nature, as she is ‘tempted to believe that she had partaken of a sacrament’ (p. 244). This response appears to operate on two levels in the novel: the physical necessity to survive hunger and protein shortage, and the fulfilment of a spiritual need consequent upon her suffering and ‘martyrdom’ (p. 245). It could be argued that, for a person such as Ellen with a vivid imagination, this spiritual response releases her from any direct responsibility and it represents another of her quests to her inner self, through a sampling of direct bodily experience.

However, a further explanation of this episode is to allow the author to explore the concept of universal evil and its existence in all men and women. This is not necessarily the evil of the Bible but, rather, the moral imperative of society which may or may not have its foundation in religious coda. For it is not only Ellen who has apparently tasted human flesh; for Austin Roxburgh had contemplated it when adrift at sea and starving,¹⁵⁹ and the rather ambiguous phrasing of Jack Chance’s reply when questioned¹⁶⁰ suggests that he may

¹⁵⁹ ‘It stimulated his actual hunger until now dormant, and he fell to thinking how the steward, had he not been such an unappetizing, might have contributed appreciably to an exhausted larder’, (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 206).

¹⁶⁰ The paragraph reads:

Again, while chewing at the tough, though fortunately glutinous, half-roasted meat, she began asking without thought for the consequences, ‘When you were with the blacks, did you ever taste --?’ but stopped before she had compromised herself.
‘Did I ever what?’

also have indulged at times of need. The suggestion is made even more strongly in the case of Pilcher, the seaman who had led the revolt against the ship's captain and who later abandons them all after the shipwreck. When he and Ellen later meet privately and discuss their ordeal, the exchange¹⁶¹ suggests that whilst both have committed cannibalism, neither is prepared to admit it, even though their circumstances were extreme. For this is what White is suggesting: that given the gravity and intensity of the situation all would be complicit leading to abrogation of society's mores. White, in his description¹⁶² of the eating of the human flesh and of the emu (pp. 244, 282) by Ellen, appears to also suggest that in the end, meat protein is meat protein regardless of the species, and it is the awareness of the religious and social circumstances surrounding the actual event that determine its social unacceptability. As a consequence of these strictures each must remain silent, causing Ellen to say to Pilcher at the end of their meeting:

‘So,’ she said, after she had turned, ‘I hope we can accept each other’s shortcomings, since none of us always dares to speak the truth.’ (p. 341)

This passage suggests that although she remains guilty about the act itself, the guilt is man-made and is determined by a society that has not been

‘Once,’ she mumbled, ‘they killed a dugong. It tasted of hog.’

‘Nothing unusual about dugong’, (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 283).

Since human flesh is said to most resemble hog in taste this choice of association is not coincidental.

¹⁶¹ Their discussion reads:

‘Did you try?’ Mrs. Roxburgh asked.

Mr. Pilcher became so agitated he rose from his chair and began patrolling the room. ‘I ask you,’ he said at last, ‘Mrs. Roxburgh - would you?’

‘I don’t know. It would depend, I expect.’ (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 340).

¹⁶² In both descriptions Ellen eats the flesh to the bone with apparent relish. The initial description of the emu is with human character, and later it is described as a ‘human bird’ (p. 282). The consumption of the roasted emu, (the human was also roasted) is associated with

challenged by the need for such an experience. But Ellen, who acted out of necessity through starvation, has been, redeemed by it, and is prepared, therefore, to discuss it openly. This inability to speak the truth is for White a form of dishonesty. Clearly White has made this matter of cannibalism a moment of justified and even self-revelatory experience for a number of the characters in this novel. In several instances the accepting of the need for this necessity is an act of decision, self-determination, and, at a deeper if unspecified level, of liberation from constriction.

There is one further aspect to this manifestation of human behaviour that further demonstrates the complexity of communication, experience and spirit- and self-evolution and its operation on multiple levels in society, and that is Ellen's insightful feeling that despite her love for the convict, the exchange of ideas on a plane higher than the physical is impossible for her. Ellen realises:

...with the passing of time she would not have known how to exculpate herself, or convey to the convict the sacramental aspect of what could only appear a repellent and inhuman act. He would not have understood, any more than he recognised the semblance of a feather boa she had hung frivolously around her neck. (p. 283)

Understanding, of course - like theology's 'fortunate fall' - requires knowledge as a prerequisite and neither of the lovers have the education as a consequence of their circumstances to impart or receive. Ellen, however, has by this stage in her life experienced a great deal and now feels confident about discussing and sharing these experiences.

The cannibalism, with its traditional connotation of bestiality and of moral

Ellen attempting to ask Jack Chance if he had eaten human flesh (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 283).

degradation, serves to exemplify the quotation about self-knowledge from the French essayist, Simone Weil at the beginning of the novel¹⁶³ and it also forms part of the martyrdom that Ellen seeks and commences when upon the murder of her husband she is taken prisoner by the natives (p. 217). Again, like evil itself, the martyrdom has religious resonances, but it proves to be a predominantly secular manifestation of Ellen's personality. For Weil, personal suffering and self-abasement are essential for a personal moral and religious creed.¹⁶⁴ Her view that individuals should align themselves with the oppressed and disadvantaged in order to blunt the effect of evil and injustice by authority is sincere and the path which Ellen instinctively takes. This recalls her words from earlier in the book as she says, 'I shall only ever know what my instinct tells me', (p. 31). Both Garnet and Austin Roxburgh tell Ellen that Van Diemen's Land is '*morally infected*' (pp. 73, 121), which is the excuse advanced by Austin, for the behaviour of his brother Garnet towards women and the convicts. The excuse appears to be a combination of pragmatism for survival in the frontier situation in the new colony, with an acceptance of instinct and passion as the dominant ethic determining behaviour. Given that most men and women and certainly the convicts will not return 'home', these exiles are metaphorically diseased and destined to be incarcerated on the island, convict or no.

Thus Ellen, by her behaviour in Tasmania with Garnet and later in the north with the escaped convict Jack Chance, becomes equally diseased, a

¹⁶³ 'If there is some true good in a man, it can only be unknown to himself', (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 6).

¹⁶⁴ See the entry in *The Penguin Companion To Literature*, vol. 2, ed., Anthony Thorlby, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1969, p. 823.

fact quickly sensed by Garnet, causing him to suggest they continue their adulterous liaison (pp. 121-122), but he is essentially evil, brutal by nature and particularly to his servants and convicts. His behaviour towards women is predatory, seeking sexual gratification and, as Mrs. Aspinall noted, 'having a craving for variety' (p. 116). By contrast, Ellen, operates on a different moral level, and although her association with Jack Chance is 'immoral' according to the tenets of the time, she believed she truly loved her rescuer (p. 284), and her behaviour was therefore excusable. Additionally and ambiguously, she deliberately seeks out a gang of convicts on her return to the colony at Moreton Bay, and bare-faced without her protective veil (p. 335), in a Christ-like pose, receives their judgement: a convict spits on her cheek, the act serving as her propitiation.

Patrick White also suggests that elements of both destiny and predetermination as well as choice operate within Ellen's character, following on her chance contact with a vagabond when walking around the Point at Hobart Town. The meeting occurs the day after her talk with Mrs. Aspinall, the doctor's wife and another of Garnet Roxburgh's conquests (pp. 115-117). Ellen has contempt for Mrs. Aspinall's behaviour but as she writes up her diary realises how hypocritical this stance is, since she has also had sexual intercourse with Garnet. (p. 118) Ellen's excuse is that a 'demoniac force had overtaken her natural repulsion' (p. 118). In terms reminiscent of the Biblical account of the Adam and Eve story the vagabond suggests that nature binds men and women together (p. 120), but from birth, women act as temptresses, causing the downfall of man. Thus whilst Ellen believes her behaviour to be instinctive and her passion a powerful behaviour determinant, this may not be

so, and she is empowered from within.¹⁶⁵ Therefore the 'martyrdom' Ellen senses she is to experience when she is taken by the natives (p. 217) is of two forms: the experience of survival whilst subjugated by the Aborigines; but, and perhaps more importantly, the journey of self discovery whilst in a primal state, with the Adam and Eve story re-enacted with Jack Chance and the human flesh as the apple.

The suppression of the 'self' at society's behests is an important strand in the novel, one exhibited by many of the characters, and it is often essential for real love to find its moment for further expression. Such people as Mr. Merivale are akin to White's own father, silent but strong, achieving their very private epiphanies by and through silences and despite marital harassment.¹⁶⁶ In the first chapter Mr. Merivale is given the task, by the author, of speculating somewhat about the character and behaviour of main protagonist, Ellen Roxburgh, and this he does fairly and accurately, without malice or guile, in contrast to the responses of the two women who accompany him. He is depicted as fair, modest and reasonable, and his goodness of estimate is identified with the sunlight: 'Instead he smiled, out of politeness, into the sun, which was lowering itself by now into a cloudless winter sky'. (p. 20) Despite the fact that he has, as his wife observes, from the skin of his hands, become almost 'part of' the new land (p. 8), he has largely subordinated his personality

¹⁶⁵ It is interesting to compare the beliefs of the author's fictional characters and White's own writing. White set forth his credo, in which there is a similar mixture of destiny and instinct:

I am coming to believe, not in God, but a Divine Presence of which Jesus, the Jewish Prophets, the Buddah, Mahatma Gandhi and Co. are the more comprehensible manifestations. This presence controls us but only to a certain degree: life is what we, its components, make it...

Extract from Patrick White, 'Credo', *Overland*, 111, June 1988, p. 16.

¹⁶⁶ See White's autobiography, *Flaws in the Glass*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1983 (1981), for a

to a love for his wife, in order to maintain the image of domestic social respectability which she wishes to maintain, but which he realises is no longer appropriate in the new colony.¹⁶⁷

Within this framework the socially mandated sense of responsibility and duty become the main factors determining people's behaviour, especially those who belong or aspire to belong to the upper classes. For even Mr. Merivale who has far greater insight into human character than his wife, is still noted to be limited, and when events or memory prove too great a challenge he responds physically by 'tightening his mouth' (p. 11), rather than concentrating his thoughts. He also becomes silent, or as the author writes, 'withdrawn behind a curtain of the past', suggesting that he is imprisoned by a fear of the future and, when threatened, he takes refuge in going again over the past. However, he is one of the characters for whom listening becomes an important means of attaining knowledge or illumination: usually this is to natural sounds such as bird-calls or the wind. Similarly, in the following passage, Ellen, whilst a captive of the natives, is returned by memory to the Eden of her youth through experiencing the natural beauty of a clearing in the bush. The arresting passage is noteworthy for its allusion to birds, and for Ellen's remarkable sense of spiritual identification with the space and the bright light:

She was rewarded at last when the scrub through which she had been struggling was transformed into a mesh of startling if chilly beauty. Where she had been slapped and scratched at first, she was now stroked by the softest of fronds. Shafts of

description of his father, Victor (Dick) White, pp. 8-9.

¹⁶⁷ Mr. Merivale's easy and friendly association with the Irish emancipist, Delaney, much to the annoyance of his wife (*A Fringe of Leaves*, pp. 18-19), is direct evidence of this.

light admitted between the pinnacles and arches of the trees were directed at her path, if the hummocks and hollows had been in any way designed to assist human progress. But she felt accepted, rejuvenated. She was the 'Ellen' of her youth, a name they had attached to her visible person at the font, but which had never rightfully belonged to her, any more than the greater part of what she had experienced in life. Now this label of a name was flapping and skirring ahead of her among the trunks of great moss-bound trees, as its less substantial echo unfurled from out of the past, from amongst fuchsia and geum and candy-tuft, then across the muck-spattered yard, the moor with its fuzz of golden furze and russet bracken, to expire in some gull's throat by isolated syllables. (pp. 242-243)

In this passage we learn of Ellen coming to understand something of her identity and relationship to this new land and importantly, she feels 'accepted' by it. She is awed by the Australian bush and, such is her empathy with it that, her old 'self' is returned to and lost among the flora and fauna of the 'Old Country', which is described by White in somewhat prosaic terms. The section precedes the incident of cannibalism and therefore it has the effect of 'easing' the reader into an understanding of Ellen's actions; she has, unlike Ulrich Voss in the novel *Voss*, passed metaphysically from the confines of the old European world into the new, and in her self discovery to the deepest point possible for her. For whilst both characters literally and metaphorically search, Voss had constantly opposed the bush and refused to accept anything about it beyond a rational explanation. Ellen, however, with her instinctive behaviour is more flexible, and so survives in the bush when isolated in it and recalls her earliest years. Both protagonists possess the will to overcome problems,¹⁶⁸ but

¹⁶⁸ Ellen is worried about the return to civilisation following her rescue from the natives:

Now, as they escaped from one hell into what might prove a worse, however fulsome their reception at Moreton Bay, this man was leaning on her so heavily she hoped she was not a similar drag. She no longer believed in physical strength; it was the will that counted. (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 299)

she is able to suppress herself and demonstrate a capacity for love and affection, something Voss could never do.

So Ellen re-enters the society she had left in the shipwreck, without any new material possessions; she has lost both her only important physical possession, her wedding ring, and any previous moral inhibitions have also gone as a consequence of her experiences. Because of this loss she enters the penal colony, cleansed if not baptised - 'almost naked as a newborn child', (p. 297). Ironically, by accepting the offer of clothing from Mrs Oakes and the covering of her nakedness, White suggests Ellen loses the innocence and freedom from original and societal sin, associated with her time in the bush; the proffered clothing signifying her return to civilisation and a new exposure to potential sin. White suggests that it is her innocence, survival and self discovery in what is seen by the colonists as the threatening bush, peopled by savages, that redeems Ellen and gives her a fresh start, both in her future social life, as a widow, and, spiritually, as one who has suffered and learnt from this ordeal. The importance of the childhood state is emphasised at the end of the novel when Ellen is staying with the Lovell family and playing with the children:

Innocence prevailed in the light from the garden, and for the most part in her recollections; black was interchangeable with white. Surely in the company of children she might expect to be healed? (p. 342)

The Lovell's garden is associated with light and children, and therefore innocence and redemption and becomes for Ellen a regular place to visit:

As on practically every morning, she took her walk in the garden, the light twirling round her with appropriate frivolity. (p. 343)

This is not to be so for Jack Chance who declines to continue with her and decides to remain in the bush, since he senses that if he returns, he is escaping 'from one hell into what might prove to be a worse' (p. 299). For Jack, as an escaped murderer, further floggings are inevitable and he cannot return under any circumstances; Ellen, however has to return with the secret knowledge of her adultery, her liaison with an escaped convict and her cannibalism.¹⁶⁹ These thoughts and Jack's honesty cause her to be apprehensive as they approach civilisation and she is 'blinded by the sun' (p. 296), a reference perhaps also to her realisation that deception and self delusion will have to be maintained in order for her to function in the society. Ellen somehow believes her previous experience of baptism by water immersion absolves her of much responsibility. Or does it? She appears to believe not, since as they approach the settlement she recalls the previous description of the water immersion at St. Hya's well (pp. 97-98), as if to reassure herself. Importantly, she also ponders on the meaning of the event, so that she appears to have changed her mind about its significance and by pondering the present, the meaning is changed about: 'I dun't believe a person is ever really cured of what they was born with. Anyway, that is what I think today'. (pp. 298-299)

At the end of this experience Ellen has answered the knowledge/identity question posed early on by the author through his character Mr. Merivale; in

¹⁶⁹ Ellen thinks about her experiences:

And what would others know? she wondered when the distance between them allowed her to indulge in more private thoughts. Even if the pardoned convict respected the laws of decency, would society think to see her reflected in his eyes, or worse still, the convict in

the first chapter she has reacted instinctively when both physical and sexual hunger have presented themselves.¹⁷⁰ And although the quotation suggests an earlier belief otherwise, at the end of the experience these reactions of hers she sees as having been inevitable, despite the society and religion of the day. As previously noted, these episodes are described by the author in terms of Ellen's self-examination and accompanied by various types of epiphanies, suggesting the author's approval. This is because White portrays Ellen as a person willing to undergo hardship and deprivation and live contentedly with the resultant effect. She has known and experienced love, both as a reciprocated extramarital passion with Garnet Roxburgh and Jack Chance, and as part of her duty to her husband Austin. It is Austin who rescues her from poverty and from implied physical abuse by her father, and although his motives are confused,¹⁷¹ he risks considerable social disapprobation by marrying out of his class, a fact realised and appreciated by Ellen, hence her dutiful responses.

But their natures and personalities through birth, class and education are very different. Yet he symbolised issues that Ellen only intuits. Austin identifies very strongly with the thought of the Roman poet, Virgil, who wrote long ago of the peace experienced by those who seek and live by rational means. Austin assumes that he has an understanding that Ellen lacks,¹⁷² and whilst he

hers?' (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 296)

¹⁷⁰ 'When Mr. Merivale, for the second time that afternoon, launched an unexpected remark. "I wonder", he said, "how Mrs. Roxburgh would react to suffering if faced with it?"', (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 21).

¹⁷¹ 'That he might marry Ellen Gluyas became after all a tenuous possibility on seeing her not only as his wife, but as his work of art.' (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 54)

¹⁷² Austin quotes, in the original Latin, from Virgil: 'Happy is he who has unveiled the cause of things, and who can ignore inexorable Fate and the roar of insatiable Hell'. Ellen cannot

remains within the narrow confines of his class and somewhat scholarly mental attitude, he remains 'happy' but deluded, for of course it is paradoxically Ellen who has, and is shown to have, the greater wisdom that is not merely worldly. It is in chapter four that Austin's rational beliefs had been challenged by comments made by the second mate, Mr Pilcher in response to the recent death of a sailor. Immediately before this discussion Austin had been reflecting about his childhood and his relationship to his brother and wife. The reader learns of his ambivalent feelings towards them, his sexuality and his strong sense of duty to the family and suppression of emotion (p. 132). When Austin and the mate looked towards the land, they noticed how the 'sun struck at the land with swords of light' and in particular 'what beautiful tricks the light will play' (p. 134). The land in the narrative thus became a metaphor for the opening mind, as Austin Roxburgh, echoing Voss, then enquires whether Pilcher has 'ever ventured into the interior' (p. 134). The subsequent discussion between the two is used by White to juxtapose the viewpoints of the pragmatic yet basically questing second mate and the wistful Roxburgh and to set the scene for Ellen's own growth in knowledge and in self-understanding.

That freedom and knowledge are admired and sought by all are themes in the mate's arguments, but also there is the universality of evil. These truths are suspected by Roxburgh, but their expression is now made in so emphatic and in such an egalitarian manner that Austin's equanimity is threatened and he

understand Latin and requests a translation, provoking the response from Austin: 'As you are in almost every respect admirable, one tends to forget that you don't always understand.' (*A Fringe of Leaves*, p. 30)

declines to debate the proposals, being pleased when the mate's duties call him away. But these thoughts returned when, after the shipwreck, they were abandoned and left to their own physical and mental resources and Austin realises that money and position finally count for nought. This deep understanding is described in terms of illumination:

a white light threatened to expose the more protected corners of human personality. Mr. Roxburgh was fully exposed. In advancing towards this land's end, he felt the trappings of wealth and station, the pride in ethical and intellectual aspiration, stripped from him with a ruthlessness reserved for those who accept their importance or for those who have remained unaware of their pretentiousness. (p. 185)

But as the author so succinctly describes, the significance of the revelation is lost to Austin and in a description redolent of Voss, Austin moves on:

So the explorer gritted his teeth, sucked on the boisterous air with caution, and visibly sweated. He might have been suffering from a toothache rather than the moment when self esteem is confronted with what may be pure being - or nothingness. (p. 185)

But between this experience and his rather heroic yet wasteful death, Austin had experienced deep pleasure and satisfaction in a meaningful act of Christian charity, treating Spurgeon's boils (p.193). This involves the use of 'drawing ointment' to remove the pus, an act metaphorically interpreted as removing evil and so of 'cleansing' the patient. So perhaps the earlier revelation has impinged upon Austin and the reader senses he has finally accepted his diminished status, with his death then seen less as a vainglorious act and rather the sacrifice Ellen had anticipated:

Listening to this upright old man, [Captain Purdew] made Mrs. Roxburgh melancholy. She suspected that those who are honourable must suffer and break more often than the others,

which did not absolve the honourable from continuing to offer themselves for suffering and breakage. (p. 184)

All of this sets the issues for the reader to then trace in Ellen the idea that White himself has commented on, which is how he sees the Australian woman as generally stronger than the male and this is reflected in his treatment of the two genders in so many of his novels.¹⁷³ Austin Roxburgh may have experienced some degree of insight into his character before his death and have manifested it in his care of Spurgeon, but it is the female characters who close *A Fringe of Leaves* with their wisdom. To a very minor character, Mrs. Lovell, the oppressed wife of the overbearing commandant, there belongs the opportunity to comment about the uniqueness of the female and, on behalf of them all, to stress their involvement in creation. Speaking to Ellen Roxburgh on the eve of her departure from the colony she advises:

You must not be so merciless, my dear, to yourself. Whatever is past, you have so much to look forward to. A woman can look to the future, don't you see? However unimportant we are, it is only in unimportant ways. They will always depend on us because we are the source of renewal. (p. 345)

The profundity of her comments are underpinned by the next authorial comment:

[her] faded looks were illuminated, her harassed manner dispelled by her moments of inspiration. (p. 345)

The final remarks as to the unpredictability and monstrous potential of human nature are granted to the spinster Miss Scrimshaw. Although her name may

¹⁷³ Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass*, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

suggest sensuality,¹⁷⁴ she appears throughout the novel as an ageing handmaiden and companion to the rich, accepting their opinions and attitudes without question. So it is with some surprise that we learn of her satisfaction with her apparently subordinate single state (p. 362), and her covert desire to flee the restraints of the colonial society:

‘To soar!’ Miss. Scrimshaw wheezed. ‘To reach the heights! To breathe! Perch on the crags and look down on everything that lies beneath one! Elevated, and at last free!’ (p. 363)

However, unlike Ellen, she has not yet achieved her spiritual goal, and this is because, as is suggested in the final paragraph, despite our dreams and desires, in the final analysis, it is ‘human nature’ and its expression through instinctive behaviour that determines our place in what may otherwise be seen as ‘an ordered universe’, (p. 366).

The lesson encapsulated in the lives of so many of this novel’s characters then, is that, even in engrossed activities containing but little time to ponder, the most mundane situations contain moments of pause when the various characters are able to progress to a greater understanding of what is right for them. Light, space, and the expression of self are the hallmarks of the epiphany envisaged by Miss Scrimshaw and more freely experienced by Ellen. That this is different from the much more expansive treatments in the earlier novels is not to deny the lesser forms of epiphany to be found in *A Fringe of Leaves*.

¹⁷⁴ ‘Scrimshaw’ is the adorning of shells, ivory, etc., (as by sailors) with a carved or painted design. This must prompt the (bawdy?) thought that Miss Scrimshaw may well have been much earlier a sailor’s woman.