An Environmental Venture into the Land of *Voss*

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Abstract
Voss (1957) by Patrick White (1912-1990) takes the reader on a venture to unexplored parts of the Australian space. This study aims to follow the traces of White's early environmental and social awareness. It endeavours to bring the extra-literary to the surface in order to identify the consequences of colonial expansion on the Aboriginal people and the land. An aesthetic and historiographic exploration into the land of *Voss* will reveal White's proposal for a never-ending adventure.
Key-words: environmentalism, exploration, *Voss*, Patrick White.

1. The Albatross

"Certainly I wish I had never written *Voss*, which is going to be everybody's albatross. You would have died of him, somewhere in an Australian desert" wrote Patrick White to his director friend Joseph Losey on the failure to bring his 1957 novel to the big screen (1994: 545). In one word, the Nobel Prize winner sums up the mythification of *Voss* while alluding to how his eponymous hero blindly leads an expedition in the 1840s into terrible trials at the end of the world 'somewhere in an Australian desert.' In his Self-Portrait *Flaws in the Glass*, White attempted to demystify his most famous novel: "half of those professing to admire *Voss* did so because they saw no connection between themselves and the Nineteenth Century society portrayed in the novel [...] surrounded by the plastic garbage littering their backyards; they shy away from the deep end of the unconscious" (1981: 104).

One year after the publication of *Voss*, in his famous non-fiction essay "The Prodigal Son", the author explicitly presents the same critical stance that subtly lies at the heart of his novel.

In post-war Australia, White set out in quest of a race "possessed of understanding" (White 1989: 17; 1962: 31). Armed with European cultural mindsets, the characters' endeavour to map Australia evolves into a creative transcendence of space. The Australian landscape becomes, as W.J.T. Mitchell puts it: "a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other" (2002: 5). Indeed, through "endless exploration" (White 1989: 16) of "infinite distances" (White 1962: 203), the protagonists rely on the Aboriginal people's knowledge of the land for communication and survival. The author was burdened by the misconceptions and the inability of many readers to see the visible and acknowledge the invisible consequences of the British claiming of the continent, the very quest he assigns his cast of characters.

2. Grounded and Rooted

The world of *Voss* has been viewed over the years from the national to the universal and from symbolism to postcolonial approaches. One feature that seems to unite the important critical works is the identification of a repressed Western consciousness. Indeed, White calls into question certain characters' innate belief "that all the goodness which emanated from the earth was for their especial benefit, that it was even the fruit of their suffering" (p. 353). The challenge for the reader is not to imagine but to see, in the 19th Century setting, the roots of British imperialism and the emergence of globalisation and "to recognise[...] that a Western consciousness, [...] has degraded the land and decimated its first people" (White 2014: 147).

White's first public political action is usually considered to be when he stepped up onto the back of a truck in 1972 to save his own backyard, Centennial Park in Sydney. Yet, the foundation of White's political stance is, as Brigid Rooney notes in *Literary Activists*, laid out as early as "The Prodigal Son". In her publication Rooney comments on Tim Bonyhady's statement: "White [...] gave almost no expression to his environmentalism in his novels and plays" (2009: 33). While she argues that "'[e]nvironmentalism' [...] is not necessarily the optimal category for identifying connections between White's literary vision and his political activism" (p. 33), she does astutely remark that White's 'environment' includes

"the regulative social order planted upon the land, its normative lifestyles, hierarchies and distinctions, and the plight of the outsider exiled within" (p. 41). My article borrows from Rooney's reading of White's environment and will show how his 'environmentalism' is indeed rooted in *Voss*, well before and beyond his own backyard campaign.

In recent years critics have brought White's fiction back down-to-earth and focused on the corporal experience, an experience established quite simply from the outset by Rose Portion who "stood breathing" (White 1962: 9). Svend Erik Larsen argues that the very thing which unites the characters, their corporeality, epitomises the nature-culture divide. Jessica White further demonstrates how the landscape has left its mark on the protagonists' flesh, seeping through until it has penetrated and has become part of their inner being. The theme of corporality in *Voss* is precisely the question Laura asks herself when she first meets Voss: "although he is not here, to be sure, for my benefit. What is? She was compelled to add" (p. 27). Laura's striking thought spirals up into a radical questioning of anthropocentrism in tune with the ecological awareness she progressively achieves as the plot unrolls.

3. And Stood Breathing

The novel opens at the Bonners' bourgeois house in 1845 at Potts Point, Sydney where Rose the "emancipist servant" (p. 250), "stood breathing" (p. 9). She announces the arrival of "a man" (p. 9) to Laura Trevelyan, her mistress, the orphaned niece from England. In his essay "And Stood Breathing", which takes its title from the second paragraph of *Voss*, Charles Lock amusingly explains how White's use of a conjunction to start the sentence of a three word paragraph should draw the reader's attention to the fact that "the variety of possibilities turns out to be endless" (2012: 87). The roles of the two women and their inquisitional echoing exchange on the identity and nature of the man at the door sets the scene for continued exploration.

Almost endless possibilities are embedded into the very structure of the novel. The idea that "*Voss* is modelled" on numerous "submerged novel forms" (1984: 170), with the purpose of presenting multiple viewpoints, was put forward by Norbert

Platz. Building on this hypothesis, Larsen, introduces *Voss* into the realm of 'ecocriticism' arguing that the abundance of diverse genres enables passages between diverging cultural models and clashing environments.

In his aesthetic pursuit to root *Voss* in natural sustenance White, in my opinion, was largely inspired by Ludwig Leichhardt (1813-1848) who led a fatal expedition into the heart of the continent. Indeed, over the years, as Angus Nicholls exemplifies in his archival exploration, folds in the redoubled myths of *Voss* and Leichhardt have unfolded and will continue to unfold. In the 21st Century Leichhardt's ever changing reputation has been salvaged; he is now projected as an early ecologist. As a matter of fact, White drew creative force from Leichhardt's multidisciplinary approach and extremely innovative insight on Australian flora and fauna.

White's historical muse provides the conversational starting point between Laura and "Mr Voss", the "strange, foreign" man at the door (White 1962: 10). In his letters the explorer likened Sydney to his home "Mark Brandenburg" in Prussia (Leichhardt 1944: 17; White 1962: 13). In a one-word sentence "Sandy" (White 1962: 13) the writer, borrowing the observation from Leichhardt, sums up the essence of the iconic Australian coastal and interior landscapes. Yet, Sydney's sandy soil had been progressively potted and re-potted to cultivate and foster European gardening and horticulture. As Laura points out to the "German gentleman" (p. 9), her own backyard has been transplanted with such a "collection of shrubs" (p. 17) it triumphs the Botanic Garden.

4. The Re-Cultivation

The consequences of this cultivation are revealed to Frank Le Mesurier – from the crew of riff raff assembled by Voss and his sponsors – the day the "great expedition" (p. 22) is to set sail from Circular Wharf. From the decks of the *Osprey* the poet sees in the "white space that opened out before the wharf" (p. 107) "two aboriginal women", seated in the "most distinguished silence" preparing "fish they had caught" (p. 107). This first and only appearance of the Aboriginal people in town, discloses that "[t]he past is illusion or miasma" (p. 107). The putrefying and toxic reality is that by 1845 the Aboriginal people had been cast out from

the more fertile lands situated on the periphery of the continent. A similar phenomenon transpires as the party crosses overland where the squatters and emancipists "were engaged in clearing and populating their adopted land" (p. 33).

The impacts of the 1840s drought on the edge of the continent, the economic depression, the gradual folding of the penitentiary colony as well as the hunger for land were so great that as soon as explorers set off, as the Royal Geographical Society put it on their medals: *Ob terras reclusas* [To lands unknown, or for lands yet to be discovered], the settlers were following in their "wagon tracks" sometimes even racing ahead (Thomas 2015: 76). The "common need for sustenance" (White 1962: 203) is ignored by the squatters as the land is turned into a patchwork quilt for the thirsty, imported merino sheep, the only visible local economic production. In his literary and historical study on the role of sheep farming in the colonial environment Leigh Dale stresses the spatial consequences and the everlasting legacy of the "merino flock" (p. 69).

The conversational piece at and on every picnic table and almost every meal is a "stupor of meat" (p. 221) or more specifically "a stupor of mutton" (p. 44). *Voss* is a world where sheep are seen as a "commodity rather than an animal" (p. 276) and where ever-present animal suffering and carnivorism underlines a somewhat bestial form of behaviour. The further the explorers push the boundaries towards the endless Australian "Horizonal Sublime" (Ashcroft 2010: 95), through scorching heat and flooding rain, the clearer it becomes that Voss is leading his flock to slaughter at the bottom of the driest sea.

5. The Same Old Song, the Same Old Story

Driven by the idea of leaving their mark on the land, or "dream[s] of gold, or of some inland sea floating with tropical birds" (p. 106), their only lifeline to "precious water" (p. 159) are their Aboriginal guides. Dugald and then Jackie are assigned the difficult job of translators, and one should add, interpreters of the land to the party. The narrator makes their place clear when they first enter the scene "[o]nly a slight, but particular sound" can be heard "upon the earth [which] at once established their ownership" (p. 182). Their ownership is established by their knowledge of the environment. In

the 21st Century it is difficult to ignore Dugald's *poïesis*, his song runs like a gargling spring:

'Water is good,
Water is good....'

The truth of this filtered fitfully through the blazing land. (p. 233)

The space provided in the text underlines the essential truth of Dugald's rhythmic song. On his return to deliver Voss's "presumptuous notebooks" (p. 228) his poetic chant echoes all the further as it touches the driest inhabited continent on earth.

The reunion with his own people liberates him from his written burden. Before heading North, Dugald transcribes the "black writing" for them as the "thoughts of which the whites wished to be rid". "[W]ith the solemnity of one who has interpreted a mystery", the old man tears the papers up and throws the fragments into the air. As he watches "the pieces of paper flutter[...] round him and settle[...] on the grass, like a mob of cockatoos", he is saddened before "walking through the good grass, and the present" (pp. 234-235). Situated well in the present, Dugald has deciphered from the fragments the arrival of the cockatoo, a small farmer or someone engaged in illegal activity in colloquial Australian (OED). The cockatoo farmer will join the squatters. This translates into more plundering of the natural resources by fencing the space off, re-cultivating it and sealing the deal with legal documents turning the *terra nullius* myth into Australia.

6. Deciphering the Times and Decoding the Space

Following Dugald's prudent departure on the cusp of the wet season, Jackie is left to read and interpret the land for the explorers. The crew of "flotsam" (p. 309) find shelter from the torrents of rain in a cave adorned with Aboriginal frescos. The enclosed space becomes the medium of temporal imagination. In his native tongue, in English, even with a bit of German and plenty of gestures Jackie reads and retells the tales of earlier dwellers and the myth of the 'Great Snake': the "Father my father, all blackfeller" (p. 292). The ancient sign on the wall is the record of a natural phenomenon integrated into local culture. The snake will later become a cosmic

reality, the "Great Snake" (p. 415) Comet. Thus, passages of deep remnants of space movements across the oldest canvas, the sky, are inscribed on the geological formation. Age-old art on the walls of the "eternal cave" (p. 307) connects the characters to deep time and "through the spectacles of geology, *terra firma* becomes *terra mobilis*" (Macfarlane 2008: 43).

After the deluge, the explorers step out from the dwelling, where they have healed their boils and sores and regained their strength. On the edge of the "mouth of the cave" (White 1962: 312) Turner, who came along for the ride, proceeds to kill a "fearless bird" (p. 353) just because he can. From there, the party painstakingly moves on propelled by an "insatiable desire for perpetual motion through the unpleasanter portions of Australia" (p. 444), somewhere on a desert bed. Their quest for 'perpetual motion' points to a utilitarian linear path that leads to empty, straightforward achievement. Palfreyman, the scientist of the group, quietly queries the idea that he "could be responsible for much that [he] does not realise" (p. 354); over the years the ornithologist had "killed many" (p. 354) a specimen. His reflection on the potential impacts of progress and science resonates with the historical and environmental consequences of exploration carried out for the sake of nomenclature and new resources.

The abundance of objects –either possessions or commodities– from an unused "ivory paper-knife" (p. 25) to the "battered beaver" (p.30), more precisely the "best beaver" (p. 108) high hats, signify the large scale hunting and plundering of natural life and the expansion of the empire. Through gradual awareness Laura's belongings, such as the "muff of sealskin" she carried "as a protection against more abstract dangers" (p. 64) slowly become useless. In *Voss* the journey of the protagonists becomes smoother when they attempt to break through the cultural barriers that determine and shape their political, social and physical environment:

> Now the party had begun to move forward over the plain of quartz, in which, it was seen, a path must have been cleared in former times by blacks pushing the stones aside. The going was quite tolerable upon this pale, dusty track. Some of the natives went ahead, but most walked along behind. Now there was little distinction between skins, between men and horses even. Space had blurred the details. (p. 390)

7. From the End of the World to the End of *Voss*

At the end of the novel, Rose no longer monotonously 'stood breathing'; she died after giving birth to Mercy and offering her daughter to Laura. Up until her death Rose unconditionally offered her whole being to Laura, the latter then realises that she has learnt from her friend the "slave of virtue" (p. 10) "to crave earthly love" (p. 251). Rose, as her perpetually flowering first name indicates, shows Laura in "Death" that life is "becoming an endless, blowing at last, indivisible, indistinguishable, over the brown earth" (p. 251). White has connected Rose's "perpetual struggle, in becoming" (p. 298) with the dissolution of boundaries in a similar way to Heraclitus who:

> denied the universe rest and immobility as this is the nature of corpses. But he conferred motion to all things: an eternal motion to eternal things a motion towards decay to decaying things. (my translation) (Heraclitus 1988: 137)

On her deathbed Rose is seen by Laura as an animal, in this case a "poor" dead animal with "living hair" (White 1962: 250). On the day of her burial the mourners are greeted at the entrance of the cemetery by a repository of death, "an urn, besides, in which someone had left a dozen apples to rot" (p. 250). I believe that via Rose's death, White is pointing at the body experience as being part of spatial growth and decay.

When writing a letter to Voss describing the death and burial of Rose, Laura becomes a "bower-bird" (p. 254). In symbiosis with White, who described himself as "a bit of a bower-bird" (1973: 139), she uses the essential elements around her to build her epistolary seduction. At the cemetery and in the letter describing the burial, the style evokes a World War II aerial battle: "the clouds were loading lead to aim at men", the procession of mourners threatened to be blown away and there was such a "swirling and whirling that the earth itself pulled loose" (White 1962: 251). The death of the 'slave of virtue' points at the shared mortality of all forms of life, human and non-human. Rose's virtue was her knowledge of continuous cycles the "wind, earth, the ocean beyond" (p. 255) the mortality of plant and animal life which Laura picks up on and uses, not to seduce her reader, but to insert into the structure of her bower.

Alas, Voss never receives Laura's letter, and cannot "see [the] seed" (p. 201) that she was trying to plant in his imagination. Instead, "the white men continued westward through what could have been their own perpetual sleep" (p. 224). They do not turn around when they cross the path of Aboriginal people going in the opposite direction, towards the immemorial Bunya Bunya gathering to "gouge themselves on the nourishing Bunya kernels for approximately 3 months" (Leichhardt: 2015), they could only imagine the "fruit of the mystic bunya bunya [which] contracted in their mouths" (White 1962: 224).

It is only when Voss is entrapped in a "twig cage" (p. 401) built around him by the Aboriginal people that he wakes up from his dream of mapping, conquering and possessing the land to finally understand that "[a]ny hope of salvation was, ironically, an earthly one" (p. 268). On the liminal nights of the 'Great Snake' Comet, Laura can finally ride by his side, stopping to eat the "lilies" (p. 418) that she had planted for his return journey. Voss, in turn, feeds her with these "white wafers" and "words of love" (p. 418) feasting on the native plants, observing their gelatinous properties and thus acknowledging that "[t]his link between the flesh and the sullen substance of nature was in itself an assertion of life" (p. 448). But, one cannot stop here, it is too romantic.

8. The Tale Telling of *Voss*

The only members whose lives are spared to tell the tale of the "great expedition" (p. 163) are the Aboriginal guides and Judd, the emancipist, but all three are either impeded from talking or their story falls on "unwilling ears" (p. 448). Judd's miraculous return twenty years after their departure to witness Voss's transformation into "bronze" and passage into "the history books" (p. 468) links the former convict to unrecorded history. Although his back is "laced with scars, of an ugly purple" (p. 159) and the stone houses in Sydney wear the marks of how "painfully [they] had been hewn" (p. 33) "the 'real' Australian history" (Hughes 1987: xi), that of a country colonised by forced labour, will have to wait until the mid-1970s to be fully recorded and visibly acknowledged.

As Dugald "had become so old he was young again" and Jackie too "weighed down with the wisdom of old age" (p. 448) it is

Judd who attempts to relay the talk of the Aborigines. He tells the Sydneysiders of the "mark on the country" left by Voss, the "queer bugger", by "cutting his initials in the trees" (p. 472). It warrants mention that, when in America, the heroine of White's novel, *The Aunt's Story*, "noticed initials carved in the scaly bark of a tree [...] from which the resin oozed" (1976: 264). These traces mark a certain acknowledgement by White that, as Lawrence Buell puts it: "art removes itself from nature. Physical texts derive from dead plants" (1995: 84). Thus, the written word, however creative, inevitably embodies an anthropocentric vision. On the one hand, the marks left on the trees bridge an environmental consciousness with a sense of belonging. On the other hand, the oral testimony delivered by Judd is a call from the author not to forget the violence of the written text and, as H.D. Thoreau reminds us, of "the memorable interval between the spoken and the written language" (1968: 89). The legacy of Laura and Voss mirrors Leichhardt's in many ways and byways. It continues to branch and sprawl like a rhizomic network of stories and tales. Beyond the traces, the scars, and the stamp of history, they "rode on above the dust, in which they were writing their own legend" (White 1962: 391).

9. Mere Tenants Observing a Rainbow

Voss ends where it began, but the property is no longer owned by the Bonners. It is "rented" (p. 458) and they become mere tenants of the land, passing through. In the backyard the "heavy imprint on the original sand" left by Rose's labour when planting the exotic garden is no longer visible. Yet, by reckoning with the visible, White exposes "invisible, chains" (p. 56). The "shackled" (p. 56) past is released revealing the tainted foundations of the country: "Can you not see it is bleeding at the roots?" (p. 289). Environmental damage is rooted deeply in the culture. Meanwhile, at the edge of the garden, a native "cabbage tree had flowered [...], providing an object for expeditions so little adventurous that nobody wished to share them. This was their virtue" (p. 457).

As its name indicates the cabbage tree provides local sustenance. It can also be used to build a "humpy" (p. 477), a temporary dwelling. A cabbage-tree cottage industry was developed to provide protection from the scorching sun, even Palfreyman wore a "cabbage-tree hat"

or "what had once been cabbage-tree hat" (p. 364). Incidentally, it was a prized object of the Leichhardt expeditions and appears to be the hat worn by an explorer believed to be Leichhardt in a rock art depiction (Ngandali 2014: 25).

Though White is aware of the noxious limitations of our anthropocentric vision, he entrusts the reader with the capacity to take a step back and investigate. White carried out endless research; his notebooks testify a minute attention to botanical and historical details: "bunya-bunya tree in Sydney in the Forties?" (White 1947-76: 2-46s3) "Cabbage-tree or cabbage tree palm?" (p. 8). In a similar light, readers are invited to explore the unexplored or in-explored, to continue to discover, to see the virtue of broader cultural crossings and perhaps to envisage the possible benefits for the environment. Well before he stepped into the public arena White demonstrates to his reader the importance of a creative perspective for the environment, after all, "[t]he blowfly on its bed of offal is but a variation of the rainbow" (p. 476).

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