

# Myth, Theme & Symbolism

Thursday, 27 April 2006

Last Updated Thursday, 27 April 2006

## Myth, Theme & Symbolism in Patrick White's Voss

By Len Webster

All writers have to find the way to knowledge that remains, for most people, buried within themselves. Nadine Gordimer  
\*1

As a major writer and Nobel prize-winner credited with creating a "narrative art which has introduced a new continent into literature", \*2 Patrick White matches the scope of his work with many of the traditional themes and symbols associated with myth and epic. He does so while leading the reader beyond a superficial impression of having been presented with something akin to realism, an impression that invariably results in paradox and unease by the time the end of a book is reached.

In Voss, the familiar Quester theme is utilized, the story of the central character and his journey into the Australian hinterland combining myth, legend and social history in a much fictionalised account that had its origins in such seemingly disparate elements as Ludwig Leichhardt's failed attempt to cross Australia from east to west in 1848 and the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany. Looming above all this are Biblical overtones expressed in language influenced by the King James Version and the Australian landscape itself, which gives rise to the re-expression of a mythology that goes further than Western Christianity and into an animistic past.

The key note to Voss as Quester is sounded by the hare-lipped servant Rose, who routinely announces in the opening line the arrival of "a man". By the end of the book, the reader has witnessed the creation of a legend, a somewhat paltry social creation compared with the vision that drove Voss to seek out the unknown in the desert; but he remains "a man" to those who came closest to him and the word reverberates throughout the text, often juxtaposed with "God". \*3

Within a few lines of the book's opening, we are introduced to three misfits, outsiders: the servant Rose, whose manner seems to "accuse the conscience" and whose pregnancy (as yet unrevealed) will shock the genteel Bonner family; orphaned Laura Trevelyan, consciously "expert mistress of triviality" but "happiest shut with her own thoughts&hellip;though few people ever guessed at these", who has recently decided that she can no longer believe in the God of her childhood; and Voss, "the man", a German outsider, uneasy in a society drawing room, who believes the people of the colony "huddle" and remain unaware of the "great subtlety" of their country. \*4 (Voss, pp.7-9)

An irony of this opening encounter is that it is the unexpected beginning of a romance: our "hero" has met his "heroine", and both will be spiritually invigorated by this physically unconsummated relationship that leads to a mystical bond linking the mind of the explorer and that of the woman who remains behind in the social "huddle" of the coastal region. Indeed, Rose's illegitimate child &ndash; named Mercy at the request of the mother &ndash; becomes the unmarried Laura's adopted daughter, saved by Laura's affection and by her own "respectful love for the forms of all simple objects, the secrets of which she was trying perpetually to understand". (p.439) With a mother who died shortly after giving birth and a name that carries the weight of obvious symbolism, Mercy is a character that both embodies and surpasses a basic Christian tenet. Her "respectful love for the forms of all simple objects" offers a possibility for a different future after the legend of Voss the explorer has been laid down on a base mix of truth and fiction solidified into the form of a bronze statue on which "the wrinkles of his solid bronze trousers could afford to ignore the passage of time". (p.440) The

relationship between "mother" and adopted daughter, however, is "more inevitable and lasting" than bronze or marble.

An epigrammatic technique is a memorable feature of the language employed by the author, not least in the pursuit of comic irony and paradox, though the reader must look at the context of each epigram in order to appreciate it fully. \*5

In addition, there is a range of poetic images reflecting events in the major movements of the narrative, not least those connected with natural disasters (fire and flood, for instance) and the landscape itself (desert, water, cave, etc.), and such images, or motifs, are found in both main strains of the narrative, the Voss strain centred on the journey into the interior and the Laura Trevelyan strain centred on the social world and its subsequent acceptance of the legend. The sighting of the comet, a central event in the clash between the white explorers and the aboriginals, is, for example, a talking point in the seaboard dwellers' lives. White describes the impact of the sight on the onlookers in this way:

Then the two old people stood rather humbly watching an historic event. In that blaze, they were dwindling to mere black points, and as the light poured and increased, and invaded the room, even Laura Trevelyan, beneath the dry shells of her eye-lids, was bathed at least temporarily in the cool flood of stars. (p.376)

This forms a prologue for the climax in the desert narrative line, leading up to the death of Voss, who has mocked the aboriginal story of "the Great Snake, the grandfather of all men," coming down from the north in anger. (p.378) The "cool flood of stars" metaphor includes reference to the flood, a perennial symbol of purification that has already been dramatically present on a realistic level in the Voss journey narrative.

White successfully re-creates the sense of fear in the minds of a people close to the natural world, a people disturbed by the arrival of the fire in the sky, but he also adds new dimensions to his story: the suicide of Frank Le Mesurier before Voss identifies with the cries of the horses and mules that are being slaughtered by the aborigines:

None of this was seen by Voss, but at one stage the spear seemed to enter his own hide, and he screamed through his thin throat with his little, leathery strip of remaining tongue. For all suffering he screamed. (p.392)

Curiously, perhaps perversely, White describes "the glistening, greenish caverns of their bellies", repeating an image used elsewhere in the novel, of green being associated with death rather than just with life, though the reference to "caverns" is also suggestive of the idea that the body is itself a landscape and it is possible to extend this notion to include the Australian continent as representing both body and mind, with some individuals (not necessarily merely writers and artists) prepared to search for the "knowledge that remains, for most people, buried within themselves". \*6

There is the image of the spear in Christ's side (years later, in the novel's chronology, incorporated into the myth or legend surrounding the death of Voss) plus scope for a conventional image as the aborigine Jackie, in a Judas-role (or is it the role of an unwitting executioner at the time of John the Baptist?), seeks to "break the terrible magic that bound him remorselessly, endlessly, to the white men" and proceeds to hack off Voss's head.

When Jackie had got the head off, he ran outside followed by the witnesses, and flung the thing at the feet of the elders, who had been clever enough to see to it that they should not do the deed themselves.

The boy stood for a moment beneath the morning star. The whole air was trembling on his skin. As for the head-thing, it knocked against a few stones, and lay like any melon. How much was left of the man it no longer represented? His dreams fled into the air, his blood ran out upon the dry earth, which drank it up immediately. Whether dreams breed, or the earth responds to a pint of blood, the instant of death does not tell. (p.394)

This is an implicit reference to ritual sacrifice, with blood running onto the dry earth that "drank it up", but Jackie's confused bloodlust has a rational explanation in the passion of "his increasing, but confused manhood" in which he attempts to reject the white man's world by rejecting his surrogate father &ndash; unaware that, in doing so, he will be an alien among both black and white, racked with guilt and "weighed down with the wisdom of age", himself "a legend amongst the tribes". (p.420-421).

The Quester theme, manifested in the story of a driven man, is not without its comic aspects, which is in keeping not just with 20th Century literature but with earlier prose literature, too. The central hero, Voss, forms a marked contrast to the traditional hero of myth and folklore but is quite at home alongside such embodiments as James Joyce's Leopold Bloom, a seedy, renegade Jew shuffling around the streets of Dublin in a 20th C. re-telling of the story of Ulysses. The character of Voss also contains an element of Don Quixote. For windmills, substitute the Australian desert and the encounter with aborigines who understand nothing of the western settlements on the seaboard.

An expedition involves a group of people and Voss gathers, and has gathered for him, a variety of personalities whose very names might be seen as carrying aspects of their role. Palfreyman is the best example of this, with the slightly archaic name for a type of horse having a suggestion of medieval knights, perhaps even Crusaders.\*7 Palfreyman, a 19th Century man committed to both science and religion, is a character about which we receive a lot of background knowledge yet it is Palfreyman who provides a cautionary note concerning wishes for perfection:

"Paradise may well prove to be a mirage." (p.260)

Voss admits to scepticism,

"although I confess to be fascinated by delusions, and by those who allow themselves to be convinced." (ibid.)

Significant images, sometimes carrying the weight of symbolism, occur in the different layers of the book. We have already mentioned the deformed Rose Portion, whose mistake leads to the birth of Mercy. Palfreyman's deformed sister, subject to rages, used to smash glass ornaments (fragile things of beauty) and then try to fit the pieces back together in acts of penitence. As a child, Palfreyman has been thrown through a window by her, only for her, in her shame and fear,

to comfort him. She also tears up flowers (delicate symbols of transience, beauty and the natural world) and feels she is "doomed to remain unique". (p.263) The adult Palfreyman has come to realise he will never be able to take some of her suffering on himself, which – as a Christian – he would want to do. Voss decides that Palfreyman has retreated farther and farther from his "failures".

On one level, Voss the explorer is an emblematic figure for man – in the conversation just noted, perhaps man in search of an elusive saviour; on another level, he seems to be an almost blasphemous embodiment of egotism, attempting to prove that man can become God. Nevertheless, in the legend that emerges, Voss is referred to by Judd as a Christian who would "wash the sores of men." (pp.443) At the time of the expedition, Judd is a family man who has learnt from his convict-past. He has an almost mystical attachment to "instruments" and has made his own telescope to look at the stars. Judd, until the splitting of the expedition party into two halves, is a strong man and probably better equipped than Voss for such a major undertaking.

Other members of the expedition include the young Frank Le Mesurier, a poet whose egotism can be regarded as resembling that of Voss:

"The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming." (p.271)

Later, he says Voss has taught him "to expect damnation" (p.360) When Le Mesurier can no longer believe in his art, he cuts his own throat, an act described as "his last attempt at poetry". (p.381)

Turner, a labourer, and Ralph Angus, a young landowner, are both selfish; Harry Robarts, faithful and simple, purposeful "only when serving" (p.94), is nevertheless able to "see" a soul escape from Jackie's hands "and lose itself in the whirling circles of the blue sky". (p.243) Mr Judd believes Harry has been "seeing things", which may be true, but it is a vision that returns to Harry at the later burial when he

saw into the meaning of words, and watched the white bird depart out of the hole in Mr Palfreyman's side as they lowered the body into the ground. (p.344)

There are two distinct glimpses of an earthly paradise in Voss's journey. One centres on the monk-like Sanderson and his family at Rhine Towers – the "Towers" being a name of a local rock formation and the "Rhine" echoing Voss's German origins. Sanderson is well read and practical; a second character, Judd, a strong ex-convict, indicating an important aspect of Australia's colonial history, also has a family in an Eden-like idyll. Both live in harmony with their environment but are conscious of something beyond paradise: Sanderson has a good library; Judd has made a telescope to look at the stars; both accept the unknown and explore it in their own way. Voss is wary of these, instinctively recoiling from strong characters that offer alternatives to the single-minded exploration of an unknown geographical interior. An unlikely parallel to Voss, Frank Le Mesurier, thinks that "the serpent has slid even into this paradise". (p.129) Voss, or at least his "will to power", could be that serpent.

Judd's motivation for going on the journey seems to be one of altruism:

"I have had some experience of the country to the north-west&hellip;I consider it my duty to offer my services to the Colony on the strength of that experience." (p.136)

The ex-convict, described as a Lazarus "risen from the tomb", Judd is tough, but displays

a union of strength and delicacy, like some gnarled trees that have been tortured and twisted by time and weather into exaggerated shapes, but of which the leaves still quiver at each change, and constantly shed shy, subtle scents&hellip; (p.133)

Judd survives the journey, having made the decision to return soon after Palfreyman's death, but he cannot survive the serpents in his paradise. His wife dies; a snake kills his eldest boy; another falls sick. More than twenty years on, the details are beyond him and his memory has failed. Judd lives beyond grief:

He was impressed, rather, by the great simplicity with which everything had happened. (p.443)

But, in apparent confusion, he believes Voss has left a mark on the country:

"if you live and suffer long enough in a place, you do not leave it altogether. Your spirit is still there." (p.443)

The seasons and natural weather patterns feature in the book on both a realistic and transcendent level. During the journey, there is (not surprisingly) the "dry bed of a river". (p.247) Rain follows, then lightning and "rocks of thunder". The party has to shelter, at first beneath a rocky ledge (p.253), then in a womb-like cave where the aboriginal drawings depict creation and the life of the world. (pp.272-280) In the cave Voss communes with Laura, whose "smooth, instinctive soul caressed his stubborn, struggling spirit", and secretly wants "to contribute to the rock drawings, in warm ochre, the L of happiness". (p.275)

Outside, in the flood, Voss forces the use of a raft on Judd, with the result that the raft overturns and things are lost.\*8 Huddling in the shelter of the cave later, the men recognise the simplicity and truthfulness of the symbols in the drawings, "to the extent that each man interpreted them according to his own needs and level". (p.279)

With the coming of spring, the men emerge from their cave-womb:

They no longer blamed their sins for their predicament. Although physically weak, and disgusting to smell, their importance was returning by human leaps and bounds. Their weak eyes were contending with stronger sun. Already the higher ground showed green promise of a good season&hellip; (p.331)

It does not take long for the new promise to be marred by a needless action as Turner ("his almost foetal eyes&hellip;twinkling") delights in shooting a bird. (p.332)

The spring takes hold. Men sing like birds as their presence in a world of "green and promise" is celebrated. (p.333) Moving on, the men find an aborigine "singing, stamping and gesticulating with a spear" while others look on. (p.334) Voss rides across to "communicate intuitively with these black subjects, and finally rule them with a sympathy that was above words", but they run away:

When the rejected sovereign returned, still smiling generously, and said: "It is curious that primitive man cannot sense the sympathy emanating from relaxed muscles and a loving heart," his followers did not laugh. (p.335)

It is not long before the party has to leave the "fat country" and enter the "devilish country", a natural waste land that forces upon everyone the most fundamental of changes:

In the lyrical grasslands through which they had lately ridden, they had sung away what was left of their youth. Now, in their silence, they had even left off counting their sores. They had almost renounced their old, wicker bodies. They were very tired at sunset. Only the spirit was flickering in the skull. Whether it would leap up in a blaze of revelation, remained to be seen. (pp.336-337)

Soon afterwards, a weak horse falls into a gully and has to be shot. At dusk, the men sit "nursing in their mouths a little tepid water, that tasted of canvas, or a sad, departed civilization". (p.338) In "the mingling of dusk and moonlight", Harry Roberts thinks he is looking into the eyes of animals, only to realise that they are the eyes of an aborigine &ndash; equally shocked at the appearance of a white man. The next day, they see the aboriginal group that Voss, spurning Judd's instinct to fire a gun over their heads, asks Mr Palfreyman to approach. Martyrdom results.

The expedition has left its mark in many different places, on everyone who was directly involved and quite a few who were not. Near the end of the book, Colonel Hebden relates a story about a tribe of aboriginals, "driven eastward by drought", enacting a massacre of horses. We also learn of the later life of Jackie. Real actions have given rise to story, to legend.

The complexity of Voss, as with much of Patrick White's work, is firmly based in recognizable myth. However, a central

theme is also the creation of legend or myth, and that involves the writer in supporting recognizable mythic strains with recurrent motifs, not all of which necessarily equate to symbols. What results is a basic structure containing a rich texture that is not so much a conventional novel as a mandala, a focus for reflection and meditation that will lead to a shift in the reader's perception.\*9 The novel demands much more than a single reading, in much the same way as the stories of myth and legend demand much more than a single telling.

#### References:

\*1 Nadine Gordimer, in "Mysterious Incest," (a review of Patrick White's *Flaws in the Glass: A Self Portrait*), *The New York Review of Books*, 15 April 1982, pp.14-15.

\*2 From the Swedish Academy's 1973 Nobel Prize for Literature citation. See <http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1973/press.html>

\*3 The delirious Laura's remarks in Chapter 13 are especially worth noting: "'Dear Christ, now at last I understand your suffering&hellip;How important it is to understand the three stages. Of God into man. Man. And man returning into God&hellip;When man is truly humbled, when he has learnt that he is not God, then he is nearest to becoming so. In the end, he may ascend.'" (pp.386-387) And Voss learns the lesson of his own egotism: "He himself, he realized, had always been most abominably frightened, even at the height of his divine power, a frail god upon a rickety throne, afraid of opening letters, of making decisions, afraid of the instinctive knowledge in the eyes of the mules, of the innocent eyes of good men, of the elastic nature of the passions, even of the devotion he had received from some men, and one woman, and dogs&hellip;" (p.390) Voss's memorial is predicted in a reference to the crowd at Circular Wharf shortly before his departure on the first part of his journey: "What kind of man is he? wondered the public, who would never know. If he was already more of a statue than a man, they really did not care, for he would satisfy their longing to perch something on a column, in a square or gardens, as a memorial to their own achievement. They did, moreover, prefer to cast him in bronze than to investigate his soul, because all dark things made them uneasy, and even on a morning of historic adventure, in bright, primary colours, the shadow was sewn to the ends of his trousers, where the heels of his boots had frayed them." (p.109)

\*4 Voss (1957). Page references given in the text are from the Vintage Classics edition, Random House, London, 1994.

\*5 Examples (with the perspective from which the author includes the epigram) are: "to be misunderstood can be desirable" (Voss), p.14; "'To make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself.'" (Voss), p.34; "Inspiration descends only in flashes, to clothe circumstances; it is not stored up in a barrel, like salt herrings, to be doled out." (Voss), p.38; "While approving of any attempt to save the souls of other men, he did appreciate the comfort of his own." (Mr Bonner), p.155; "'The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming.'" (Le Mesurier, who goes on to cut his own throat), p.271; "'Man is God decapitated.'" (the Laura Trevelyan of Voss's imagination), p.364; "'&hellip;nothing can be halted once it is started.'" (Laura Trevelyan), p.375; "'&hellip;it is not possible to communicate lucidly with men after the communion of souls.'" (the author, commenting on Jackie's inexpressible feelings), p.420.

\*6 Nadine Gordimer, op. cit.

\*7 Palfrey 1 a riding horse, as distinguished from a "war horse"; 2 a saddle horse, particularly suitable for a woman. Voss has respect for horses, but "hatred" for mules.

\*8 Pp. 276-277. This has the effect of showing Judd's superiority as a leader, though I do not claim any symbolism for the raft itself. However, there is a comic metaphorical reference towards the end of the novel that contrasts the social world of Miss Trevelyan's "court" with the world Voss wished to embrace: "Conversation was the wooden raft by which their party hoped eventually to reach the promised shore." (p.446)

\*9 The mandala image, a symbol of totality, is also explored in White's later novel, *The Solid Mandala* (1966).

Copyright © Len Webster. 2006