

POSITION OF WOMEN IN AUSTRALIAN COLONIAL HISTORY: PATRICK WHITE'S *VOSS*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to clarify that *Voss* is partly an endeavor to rediscover the position of woman in Australian colonial history, which has been predominantly told and written from a masculine point of view. One may point out that the narrative of the expedition phase excludes female existence except for dream communion between Voss and Laura. However, it will be shown gradually that Laura's role throughout the text is not at all secondary, but primary. In fact, she is the one who sets the goal of Voss's journey; survives a mental crisis, which is the equivalent of Voss's physical affliction; and conveys her discovery to the Sydney society. Furthermore, her metaphysical theory manipulates the reader's understanding of Voss's expedition.

Key words: allegorical, Australian colonial history.

INTRODUCTION

Patrick White's *Voss*, his fifth novel is set in the middle of the 19th century where the German explorer Johann Ulrich Voss endeavours to cross the Australian continent with a party of men with diverse backgrounds and professions. At the end of the exploration, he is decapitated by an indigenous boy in the middle of his project, but the story goes on to narrate the aftermath of his death. It is true that *Voss* is a historical novel in appearance, inspired by the journals and contemporary accounts of actual explorers of the nineteenth century. Moreover, an allegorical reading of the text has been dominant among critics, regarding Voss's journey as an exploration of the psyche of modern man. Yasue Arimitsu argues that White sums up his "ontological pursuit as an Australian as well as European living in the twentieth century" (Yasuae 62), which comprises the primary theme of his early oeuvre. The writer throws the modern ego established in the Western world into his creation of the mythical Australian interior, and suggests its inefficacy and the possibility of transformation in the face of a whole new geographic and climatic entity. Indeed, it is easy to find Faustian aspiration for knowledge and its failure in the megalomaniac protagonist, as James McAuley correctly places *Voss* in the affiliation of "German Romanticism" (McAuley 41). Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the protagonists of German origin, for White projected Adolf Hitler upon the failed conqueror as widely known today through his essay (White, "The Prodigal Son" 23). Behind the epic grandeur narrated in his symbolic style, the writer carefully depicts alternative modes of human existence and relations. Besides its socio-historical significance, the text embodies the dialogical process of self-discovery performed in the mind, which best describes Voss's relation with his female counterpart, Laura Trevelyan, a niece of a sponsor of the expedition. Early critics often devoted themselves to the study of Christian symbolism, which abounds in the text, and their analyses contributed to elucidating its complex metaphysical development. Patrick White is indeed a religious writer; however, it is erroneous to regard him as a Christian mystic; Geoffrey Dutton flatly refuses such a claim, "White has simply used Christian symbols to help him in his exploration of the nature of man [...]" (Dutton 25-26). In reading *Voss*, we find that the clairvoyant communion between Voss and Laura over a great physical distance has been a subject of discussion; by temporarily putting aside mystic arguments, we

will discover what the writer embedded in the text, that is, female instinct and insight to counter the masculine urge to conquer, which drove “civilized” Western nations to colonialism.

The present paper tries to clarify that *Voss* is partly an endeavor to rediscover the position of woman in Australian colonial history, which has been predominantly told and written from a masculine point of view. One may point out that the narrative of the expedition phase excludes female existence except for dream communion between Voss and Laura. However, it will be shown gradually that Laura's role throughout the text is not at all secondary, but primary. In fact, she is the one who sets the goal of Voss's journey; survives a mental crisis, which is the equivalent of Voss's physical affliction; and conveys her discovery to the Sydney society. Furthermore, her metaphysical theory manipulates the reader's understanding of Voss's expedition. At the end of this paper, it will be discussed as to why the focus of the narrative is centred upon Voss and what the final effect is.

The novel begins with Laura Trevelyan receiving an uninformed visit from a stranger, who turns out to be Voss, on a Sunday morning in the house of Mr. Bonner, a successful Sydney merchant and a primary sponsor of Voss's expedition. Skeptic Laura is staying home alone with a servant while other family members attend morning church services. Their conversation gradually reveals Laura's ambiguous position in the family: born in England, she was left to the custody of her uncle Bonner in Australia as an infant upon her parent's death. As a result, she cannot convince herself of her British lineage or her position in the colonial society of Sydney. Unlike the conceited Bonners, who never doubt their authentic existence in the settler colony endorsed by their material success, her marginality has a potential to reassess the validity of European occupation of the country.

If Voss represents the modern Western ego, Laura's position in her foster family acutely reminds the reader of the adoptive position of colonial Australia in its relation with Britain. The servant Rose Portion, an ex-convict, announces Voss's arrival to Laura, referring to him as “a kind of foreign man” (*Voss* 3). Thus, at his first appearance in the text, his foreignness is impressed upon the reader. Because of his shabby appearance, German accent and determination to be unwedded to social conventions, Voss is explicitly regarded as a stranger by Sydney residents who are mostly of British descent. It is immediately clear from this opening that Laura and Voss share otherness in common. In the course of their conversation, in an attempt to disguise her vague fear of the Australian continent about which she has little understanding, Laura wears the mask of a submissive woman and tries to flatter Voss's masculine pride: “A pity that you huddle,” said the German. “Your country is of great subtlety.” With rough persistence he accused her of the superficiality which she herself suspected. At times she could hear her own voice. She was also afraid of the country which, for lack of any other, she supposed was hers. But this fear, like certain dreams, was something to which she would never have admitted. “Oh, I know I am ignorant,” Laura Trevelyan laughed. “Women are, and men invariably make it clear to them” (*Voss* 11). At this stage, she is wearing the persona of a conventional woman, suppressing her inquisitive nature in accordance with social codes, which is a means to get along with materialistic Bonner, who by and large represents the colonial society. Furthermore, she disguises unspoken fears for the uncharted centre of the continent, which is shared among white Australians. Not allowing such superficiality, the fiercely self-reliant Voss penetrates Laura's respectability and helps to release her suppressed self.

Although Mrs Bonner relates her impression that Voss is “already lost” even before his departure for central Australia, their dialogue reveals that Laura is also lost in a psychological topography, which is symbolized by her vague fear of the vast geographical stretch. It follows that not only Voss but also Laura is an explorer, struggling to establish her psychological and physical position in the adopted country. By assigning a psychological journey to the heroine, White gives voice to “her story” as opposed to the masculine “official history” of Australia.

Laura projects her inner self upon Voss, which is symbolized by the motif of a mirror. In the opening scene, she looks into a glass hung in the living room while waiting for the visitor. She is satisfied with her surface “flawless” image, which appears convincing in the world of reticence: “There was in consequence no necessity to duplicate her own image, unless in glass, as now, in the blurry mirror of the big, darkish room” (*Voss* 9). The immaculate image of the woman, seeming like a mirror itself, stresses its fictitiousness. Then, Voss offers himself as another mirror to reflect her inner self and fulfill her repressed desire to “share her experience” (*Voss* 9) as they are depicted, sitting face to face, as a mirror-image: “They were in almost identical positions, on similar chairs, on either side of the generous window” (*Voss* 11-12). Thinking of their symmetrical position, it is possible to say that Laura is engaged in a self-reflexive dialogue with her unconscious mind on the occasion of their first encounter, which is mostly narrated from Laura's point of view. Her letter to Voss reveals that she is aware of his role as her double, who shares a self-destructive pride of hers: “can two such faulty beings endure to face each other, almost as in a looking-glass?”

In the conscious world, he shows a strong aversion to human flesh, which first caught him as a medical student in Germany. We can observe two-fold implications in this dream. On the one hand, the “enfolding” landscape represents the process in which empirical knowledge engulfs his swollen ego, or the process of unmaking the self by direct negotiation with a whole new geographic entity. On the other, the dream illustrates his desire to dissolve into the feminine self because the fleshy hill has an undisguised feminine implication. By doing so, his unconscious attempts to complement his aggressive masculinity which is manifest in his aspiration to conquer the land. Yet another dream shows an explicitly copulatory image. In the early stage of his expedition, while he is still in touch with civilization by way of the outposts in the bush, Voss proposes to Laura in a letter and she gives her consent. In spite of his euphoria, he is tormented by ambivalent desires in the following dream: Then Voss began to float, and those words last received take some time to thaw, but the words of lilies were now floating in full summer water, whether it was the water or the leaves of water, and dark hairs of roots plastered on the mouth as water blew across. Now they were swimming so closely they were joined together at the waist, and were the same flesh of lilies, their mouths, together, were drowning in the same love-stream. I do not wish this yet, or *nie nie nie, niemals*. (*Voss* 187) Thus, he resists linkage with the lily woman. The basic motif of this dream is drowning. Once again, it symbolizes his fear to be engulfed by a feminine existence. Furthermore, their unity is curiously sexual and asexual at the same time. The lily usually symbolizes virginity and Immaculate Conception but here sensuality of the flower is emphasised and they even share “the same flesh of lilies.” It seems that Voss does not seek mere physical consummation with Laura but totality through androgynous union. In White's fiction, heterosexual love and marriage occupy secondary significance; instead, he develops the theme of imaginative, asexual/unisexual procreation by male characters and the inheritance of artistic spirit by a spiritual child in his later oeuvre, which disclose his desire to incorporate a womb, a source of creation, into a male body. Concerning sexuality represented in *Voss*, Simon During offers a renovating view, which sheds a whole new light on the meaning of Voss's expedition: There is a sense in which Voss's journey is an excuse for White to imagine a highly sexualized community without women, and the expedition's tragic end can be read as an expression of his internalization of homophobia as guilt.

Two years after the explorers were lost, Voss is publicly celebrated with his monument raised: “[Voss] was hung with garlands of rarest newspaper prose. They would write about him in the history books. The wrinkle of his solid, bronze trousers could afford to ignore the passage of time” (*Voss* 440). He is thus turned into a legendary as well as historical figure to satisfy the public need of a national hero and myth. Although aware of fictitiousness of the event, Laura is ready to accept it in

order to keep her personal experience intact. She contradicts Hebden, “Mr Voss is already history.” “But history is not acceptable until it is sifted for the truth. Sometimes this can never be reached.” She was hanging her head. She was horribly twisted. “No, never,” she agreed. “It is all lies. While there are men, there will always be lies. I do not know about myself, unless sometimes dream it” (*Voss* 413) It is obvious that White is skeptical of national myth/history fabricated by men. Hebden's obsession with historical “truth” to be reached by gathering facts and information is de-authorized by her way of exploring truth, that is, through dreaming. Laura accuses the fallacy of “history” and her speech in the party opens up a way for “her story” to be delivered.

It leads to the conclusion that Laura plays a leading role in her relation with Voss throughout the narrative in that she determines the goal of his psychological exploration and transmits its meaning to other members of society, but her superior status is disguised by White's manipulation of focus. By doing so, the writer reenacted the process in which women's stories are buried in men's history myth making. Australia as a Western nation appears to have been established upon a masculine paradigm, as its history is adorned by conquest, settlement and exploration into the uncharted territory. White took up the motif of expedition, a most characteristic phase of the masculine tradition, and disclosed a feminine instinct inherent in homo-social society. Furthermore, he suggests the role of women in charting the nation. Geographical 'conquest' of the continent may be outwardly carried out by men, but the creative instinct of women, acquiring knowledge which “overflows all maps,” may also contribute for Europeans to spiritually assimilate into their adopted country.

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