Articles: General

Patrick White: The Narcissistic Quest for Self

GEORGE WATT

Nobel Laureate and social misfit, Patrick White repeatedly claimed that he invested aspects of his own often unattractive and complex nature in the lives and characters of his fictional subjects. The obvious temptation is therefore to ask the question, "Exactly what in him finds its way onto the page in his fiction?" An answer to this question takes a reader to that area of literary endeavor shunned in recent years: biographical criticism. This paper is unashamedly speculative as it presents the hypothesis that White's personal psychological problems were the consequence of a narcissistic personality disorder, and that disorder strongly influenced the content of his fiction. Voss*, for example, while ostensibly about exploration of a continent, is used by White to explore and ritualistically resolve his own pathological inner world. This paper also argues that speculation, though not quite critically respectable, carries a set of interests and values of its own.*

> Patrick White "always saw himself as a shattered personality—not one man but a cast of characters…."
>
> David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*

When Narcissus stares at his reflection in the pond he does not recognize himself. Beauty notwithstanding, his self is a mystery to him. While traditional Freudian psychology examined the autoerotic implications of the myth, contemporary self-psychologists increasingly view his attention to the reflection not as expressive of self-love but as an example of the search for self. Narcissus in this view has an identity crisis. He longs for completion. Patrick White's work is replete with such situations that reveal a character in a moment of narcissistic speculation. Here are three such moments. Harry Robarts in *Voss* is asked, "What are you then?" His reply: "I dunno what I am."[1] In the play, "A Cheery Soul", Mr. and Mrs. Custance discuss an identity purely based on occupation:

> Mrs. Custance: …you haven't got a bank teller's hands.
> Mr. Custance: Didn't ought to have been in a bank.
> Mrs. Custance: …. What would you be, Ted, if you weren't with the bank?
> Mr. Custance: I've forgotten.[2]

And finally White on himself from *Flaws in the Glass*: "I am the stranger of all time…."

The missing self, faceless, sometimes mildly amusing, often consistently and voraciously demanding, occupies every work of fiction White creates, including himself. This paper, which is

only going to scratch the surface of an approach to White, demands a much more comprehensive treatment, and argues that without a narcissistic investment we would not have White's fiction at all. First, the theories of narcissism employed in this analysis will be introduced; second, the paper will attempt to describe the symptoms, though not the aetiology, of White's own painful and rampant narcissism; and third, the novel *Voss* will be used all too briefly to demonstrate how aspects of White's own narcissism are mirrored in the text itself. I am, of course, indulging in a kind of psycho-biographical criticism which many contemporary critics understandably hold as suspect, positing the notion that even a speculative approach to a complex writer's life and work carries a certain kind of interest and validity. To balance that admission, however, there is no other writer I know of who admits, time and time again, that that characters in his novels are reflections of aspects of his own personality. Here he writes to Ben Huebsch about his current project, worrying that his self-investment is a little too obvious: "I feel I many have given myself away a good deal, although passages I have been able to check for myself, seem to have come through either by instinct or good luck, so perhaps I shall survive. After all, I did survive the deserts of *Voss*."[3] There are times when he seems to forget that his character's experience is not his. By the time he wrote his last major work, *Memoirs of Many in One*, as the title suggests, he is openly admitting that the many characters who appear in this singularly odd work are "myself in various roles and sexes".[4]

Theories of Narcissism

As narcissism has increasingly interested psychoanalytic circles, its penumbra of meanings has multiplied to the point of some confusion. A current and readable overview of narcissism (particularly as it relates to damage to both intra-personal psychic equilibrium and inter-personal relationships) can be found in Sam Vaknin's *Malignant Self Love* or in Nina W. Brown's *The Destructive Narcissistic Pattern*.[5] The definitive clinical definition of the narcissistic personality disorder (one that will be closely used to describe White below) can be found in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* fourth edition *(DSMIV)*.[6] Still very useful are Smith (1988), Ronningstam (1988) and Akhtar & Thomson (1982) who provide comparisons of different systems of diagnosis and provide brief overviews of narcissism from Freud to *DSMIII* in 1980.[7]

This paper specifically relies on the work of Heinz Kohut and Otto Kernberg who are still regarded as the most influential theoreticians in the field.[8] Their at times similar and at times dissimilar work largely foreshadows the description of the narcissistic personality disorder described for the first time in *DSMIII* and later carried into *DSMIV*. In this way their work is still germane in any analysis of pathological narcissism.

Kernberg's narcissist is more controlled by self-hate than love, more driven by shame than guilt (it is the emphasis on shame over guilt which moves these self-psychologists away from Freud's central precepts). His subject, who is frequently highly successful, presents

> …excessive self-absorption, intense ambition, grandiose fantasies, over dependence on acclaim, and an unremitting need to search for brilliance, power and beauty. [Kernberg] …stresses the pathological nature of their inner world, regardless of their superficially adaptive behavior. This pathology is manifest in an inability to love; a lack of empathy; chronic feelings of boredom, emptiness, and uncertainty about identity, and exploitation of others….[9]

To this description Kohut would add the use of others as self-objects to mirror potency and a tendency to display extraordinary rage as a reaction to narcissistic wounds. The "central features"

of this narcissistic rage are "the need for revenge—the undoing of hurt by whatever means—and compulsion in this pursuit, with utter disregard of reasonable limitations."[10] While this is a description of pathological narcissism, it is important to state that functional narcissism assists individuals to structure and uphold a workable, flexible, ever-developing sense of self. Both Kernberg and Kohut remind us that narcissistic strivings coexist in every human being "with mature object love, both confounding and enriching its development."[11] The normal narcissist's life is a workable balancing act: the dysfunctional narcissist must employ a variety of psychic and behavioral apparatus to keep himself from disintegration.

Before describing signs of White's own functional and dysfunctional narcissism, I would like to mention a common approach to narcissism not included in this paper. It has been in vogue for the last 25 years to paint our times as the age of narcissism (the frequently used journalistic term the "me" generation comes to mind as an oft quoted example of narcissism described as a social rather than individual psychological issue.) This trend has been popular since sociohistorian Christopher Lasch published *The Culture of Narcissism*.[12] A given culture can, he argues, exacerbate individual trends in pathological narcissism. His work is largely negative, not allowing for the universality of narcissistic experiences in all people in all ages, and many, like Roberta Satow, are uncomfortable about his attempting to explain a "social phenomenon in psychological terms…". She goes on to argue that the "term [narcissism] has been defined and interpreted so broadly in its popular use that it is difficult to find a cultural or psychological phenomenon that cannot be described by some version of it."[13] Lloyd deMause further argues that Lasch "uses the term 'narcissism' as a pejorative to criticize those whose life style he disagrees with."[14]

One further word of caution. While sociohistorians like Lasch almost imply that dysfunctional narcissism is more rampant in our age than in other ages (how that quantification can be accurately established is difficult to imagine), members of the psychological fraternity have cited, in ever-increasing numbers, narcissism as the "archetypal pathology of our age."[15] There is a danger in accepting this at face value, either from Lasch or from members of the mental health professions. The latter may be seeing more patients who present symptoms from *DSMIV* in ever increasing numbers, but that does not necessarily mean dysfunctional narcissism is on the rise. It might just mean that before 1980 we did not bother much to look for it. Pathologies that belong to particular eras, generations, cultures or nations are inventions of those who go out to look for them. In other words, they tell us more about the people looking for them, than that which has been found.

Patrick as Narcissus

Anyone who has read David Marr's biography of White, or indeed his own autobiography *Flaws in the Glass*, could not fail to recognize in White's behaviors many of the criteria below describing the dysfunctional narcissist, which is taken from *DSMIV*. In particular nos. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 would be particularly relevant in his case:

> Diagnostic criteria for 301.81 Narcissistic Personality Disorder
> A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:
>
> (1) has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements)
> (2) is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love

(3) believes that he or she is "special" and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions)
(4) requires excessive admiration
(5) has a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations
(6) is interpersonally exploitative, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends
(7) lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others
(8) is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her
(9) shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.

How much of this applies to White directly will be made clear below. Any psychiatrist would know he had a problematic patient who presented himself through the following:

> I wrote to my mother almost every week of her life yet I can't stand her, nor did I mourn her death. I have no respect for my father; the first few love affairs I had were with older men as father substitutes. I have had a wonderful partner for forty years—my stabilizing "central mandala", my moral self—but I give him Hell, especially when I am writing. I never keep friends: only the Moores have lasted a lifetime. Not surprising. I don't like people very much, especially myself. How would I describe myself? I am a lapsed Anglican egotist agnostic pantheist occultist existentialist would-be though failed Christian Australian…. (*Flaws in the Glass, 102*)

What would any psychiatrist do with a patient like that, even allowing for his legendary penchant for hyperbole and self-denigration, especially when he is one of the greatest writers of the 20th century? Interestingly enough, White continually shunned any kind of analysis, fearing such might cure him and in doing so destroy his creative spirit. He might well be right.

The most obvious source of narcissistic wounding throughout his life is his mother, someone he describes as a "predator descending again and again to tear out an essential part of me" (*Flaws* 48). "I never thought I'd have a *freak* for a son!" she laments when he won't go to watch cricket with his father (*Flaws* 43). Patrick White seems to embody John Updike's claim that few things are harder than forgiving your mother for being your mother. Even after her death, writes Marr, three "more of his novels were to reflect the affections, antagonisms, dependence, betrayals and guilt that ebbed and flowed between mother and son for fifty years."[16] White's mother, in his perhaps skewed view—we don't have her side of the story—is the witch who stands between the hero-self and the ideal world. Incidentally, Mrs. White was apocryphally dismissed in Sydney society as the "White man's burden." According to White's view of his mother she is like Mrs. Bonner in *Voss*, someone who tries to arrange her family and friends as if they were a kind of statuary. Ruth White tried to carve the world she wants out of the world she has, but that should be no crime to an author who tries to do the same thing through his fiction. As described by her son, Ruth is Kernberg's archetypical mother-narcissist. He "holds that the narcissistic individual as a child was left emotionally hungry by a chronically cold, unempathic mother. Feeling unloved and 'bad', the child projected his rage on to his parents, who were then perceived as even more sadistic and depriving."[17] This is the "predator" who not only rips the boy to shreds in White's view, but who leaves him as a person with a vacuum rather than a person with a self—she has stolen something "essential".

White's resultant narcissistic crisis manifests itself in a number of ways. On the conscious level he accepts his identity problem as a post-colonial one. When he was a boy and young man in England (he attended Cheltenham school and university there) he felt rough, antipodean and alienated; when in Australia he felt like a half-transplanted Englishman and felt embarrassed by the effete edges he had adopted while trying hard but unsuccessfully to be a young man-about-

town in pre-war London. Many years later he still linked being unsure about his individual core to Australia's recent and tedious obsession with trying to find an identity of its own. "In recent years," he quips crustily, "we have been served up a lot of clap trap about the need for *national* identity…. And most of us who were transplanted here generations ago… are still too uncertain in ourselves. Australia will never acquire a national identity until enough *individual* Australians acquire identities of their own."[18] This is both a perception of a national problem and a projection of his sensed inadequacies of self.

Whilst White sometimes talks and writes about feeling guilty—about the treatment of his partner Manoly Lascaris, by all accounts the most patient man on earth, or about his inability to forgive his mother—it is the narcissistic affect of shame which pursues him all his life and which is given much attention in his fiction. He uses the word time and time again to express his reactions as a child and adolescent. In adulthood he treats it euphemistically, calling it disappointment, fury or the like, whether in response to poor reviews, poor sales, or not being awarded the Nobel Prize after being short-listed, though no such official list exists in reality. Though shame can be viewed as one response to guilt when we are forced to publicly acknowledge our actions and/or attributes, it is more likely that guilt is the result of action whereas shame is the consequence of a perceived inadequate state of being.[19] Shame certainly feels less voluntary than guilt, arising, according to Kohut, "when the ego is unable to provide a proper discharge for the exhibitionist demands of the narcissistic self."[20] Someone like White who is driven by the need for success is acutely vulnerable when responding to so-called failures.

Two novels White sees as influencing him most (while he often mentions something he is reading in his letters he rarely admits to being profoundly shaped by any) were the now largely forgotten George Moore works, *Evelyn Innes* (1898) and its sequel *Sister Theresa* (1901). He writes of the experience to Peggy Garland:

> Finally, I re-read two books that have meant more to me than anything in the last ten years, George Moore's *Evelyn Innes* and *Sister Theresa*. Do you know these two? They are out of print. I am tempted to send them to you, as I think you would like them as much as I do, but on second thought, I don't feel I could part with them.[21]

Ten years later we know that these novels were still on his mind: he writes to Edna O'Brien that he is leading a crusade with publishers in an effort to get them into print again.[22] David Marr thinks that what attracted White to them was Evelyn's quest for vocation and purity. While that is no doubt accurate in a way (since White was interested in those very issues in his own fiction) it does not include the notion that Moore is more interested in why the diva had to seek purity. To what extent is she seeking purity for its own ideal sake, or running away from shame? This question is at the heart of two novels, which are agonizing studies of shame and the punitive ego ideal that demands perfection—two issues central to the pains of the narcissist. The novels analyze the experiences and personality of a great diva whose narcissistic shame eventually forces her from the world's stage to life in a convent. It is also interesting that Moore's most famous work, and one still read today—*Esther Waters* (1894)—was the first attempt in England to write a novel about a fallen woman who refuses to succumb to the shame expected of her type by the rectitude of the Victorian mind. It is more than a little interesting that White is attracted to fiction that explores the issue of shame.

The idea of shame and the punitive ego-ideal that demands perfection of the narcissist casts light on White's inability to take criticism. To pass even mild negative judgment on White's work was to make an enemy for life: art critic and historian Robert Hughes (dismissed by White as "that

ingrown type of Irish R.C.-cum intellectual playboy"), poet A.D. Hope, academic Dame Leonie Kramer, comic and social commentator Clive James, the drama critic Kippax—indeed anyone he saw as not viewing life and art as he does, if he was feeling narcissistically vulnerable at the time. Of course he was disparaging of himself and his talents, often in more fundamental ways that the critics he resented, but woe to anyone who concurred with him at the wrong time. Only when we understand the relationship between his fear of criticism and his sense of shame do his bitchy love of revenge and his infantile splitting of others into all good or all bad make any sense at all. How could any sensible man regard Clive James' presence in London as primarily to organize and lead a plot against White and his reputation? Even one part of Patrick White wouldn't believe it.

The narcissist often demonstrates extremes of over-idealization and devaluation of self and others. One moment White sees himself as omnipotent, and then the next describes himself as weak, perverse, incompetent. "For many years I had no need for a faith… believing as I did in my own brash godhead" (*Flaws 68*). He tells fellow man of letters and soon-to-be-banished good friend, Geoffrey Dutton, that when his writing was going well he "confessed… to feeling Godlike."[23] Compare that with this: "I am a failure as a human being."[24] Nin Dutton found him a "hard man to comfort" when he is wallowing in his moments of self-denigration:

> I remember one night when he was hammering away at himself at the table. I was sitting next to him and didn't know what to do to comfort him…. Pain and hunger still dogged him, and even now he suffered bouts of relentless self-dissatisfaction. He spoke of suffering from self-disgust so powerful at times that it made him 'ashamed to go amongst people who have completely different and exalted ideas of what I am'.
>
> Deep into the brandy one night at Martin Road he raged to Peter Beatson that he would give anything to be cured of his affliction and lead a normal life. Beatson hesitated to ask precisely what he meant….[25]

White over-idealized and then devalued himself in turns, giving the impression that this was involuntary. He was cruel to himself and as such treated those around him in the same way. The list of friends and acquaintances who found themselves over-idealized then devalued and expelled without ceremony is legendary. As he admits above, only the Moores and Lascaris survived for most of his adult lifetime (though I would not say survived unscathed). His inter-personal exploitation, sense of entitlement and exhibitionism might even surprise Narcissus himself. A gentle and civilized friend of ten years from the Castle Hill days, Klari Daniel, to name only one of many like her, was expelled after refusing to try the cauliflower salad White had made. Marr describes her experience:

> 'You never try anything,' White snapped. The row that followed seemed routine, but Daniel was appalled to find that this little quarrel marked a final breach. It almost destroyed her, but she was a resilient woman and bore the humiliation with dignity. 'I don't hold it against him,' she told Maria Prerauer. 'I was there at the right time. I did it gladly. He squeezes you out like a lemon and when it is dry he turns to someone else.[26]

A further examination of White the artist reveals other aspects of his narcissistic character, for it is through narcissistic enterprise that he managed to maintain some sort of psychic equilibrium by transforming himself and everything in his world into his personal fiction. "My flawed self," he admits, "has only ever felt intensely alive in the fictions I create."[27] As an artist he sees himself as the literary equivalent of a suffering saint—almost a masochistic one—describing his art as undergoing a "series of caesareans without anesthetics"[28]; his art is a "disease for which there is no cure"[29]; he does not write creatively, he "grinds away at grey, bronchial prose" (*Flaws* 150). All of this adds up to something that, if not actually pleasurable, aggrandizes the sufferer. The greater the suffering, the greater the act, the greater the art. This suffering, grandiose saint-artist is further aggrandized the more his surrounding society is denigrated. White frequently referred to Australia

as a cultural desert, his "land of high farce and sheep shit".

Kohut's view of the creative process throws light on White's intense rages during periods of composition. As the artist writes

> there is a regression, a withdrawal of cathexis from the self and its ideals. The unattached narcissistic cathexis is subsequently put into the service of creative activity. The temporary enfeeblement, exposure and sense of isolation… 'repeat those overwhelmingly anxious moments of early life when the child felt alone, abandoned, unsupported.'[30]

This vulnerable self is exposed during the artistic process, but at the same time it is also repaired by it: "The broken self," explains Kohut, "is mended via the creation of the cohesive artistic product."[31] This is true of White, however the adhesive used in each case eventually self-destructs and he needs to move on to the next defense.

All of White's novels reveal the self dismembered. He tears himself apart to remake himself. He unashamedly admits his personal involvement and investment in the fictitious lives he invents. "I can only endure the isolation and monotony of writing fiction by losing myself in a number of characters. I suppose this would not work if the writer's own character is not sufficiently fragmented."[32] In *The Solid Mandala* Waldo Brown is White's coldest self personified, whereas Arthur is the gentle self he longs to be; planning *Voss* he dreams of being both the hero and his anima, Laura Trevelyan; in *The Eye of the Storm* he takes the form of brother and sister who return to Australia not only to watch their mother die, but to encourage her to do so; in *The Vivisector* he is artist, hunchback, prostitute; and by the time we reach his final major work, *Memoirs of Many in One*, the deranged but articulate Alex Grey can proclaim "Words are what matter. Even when they don't communicate. That's why I must continue writing. Somebody may understand in time. All that I experienced…in any of my lives, past and future—as Benedict, Magda, Dolly Formosa. Somebody…could understand tomorrow…."[33]

Narcissistic illusion is the reverse side of the coin of White's creativity. They cannot be separated. His regressive, infantile narcissism and subsequent illusions in later life are the core of his self and the deepest source of his creativity. Nietzsche's Apollonian man builds sandcastles without due regard for the incoming tide which will destroy them. His Dionysian man acknowledges the power of the tides and builds no sandcastles at all. The first is bruised and beaten by reality; the second is somehow depleted by it. White is the third type, Nietzsche's tragic man who is

> …aware of the tide and the transitory nature of his productions, yet building his sandcastles nevertheless. The inevitable limitations of reality do not dim the passions with which he builds his castles; in fact, the inexorable realities add poignancy and a sweetness to his passions…. [He generates] the deepest meaning from the dialectical interplay of illusion and reality.[34]

Now it is time to take a brief look at one of White's sandcastles of self to show how it mirrors and eventually transforms his complex narcissism. As he often claimed, "Everything comes out of the mess you're in…".

Narcissism in *Voss*

Voss is a novel about lost souls, and about one lost soul in particular, not an unusual state in post-colonial fiction, or in the work of White in general. In the novel we meet a renamed and partly refashioned Ludwig Leichhardt, the eccentric social misfit who became explorer through

sheer force of will and who failed to return from the 1848 attempt at an east/northwest crossing of the continent. The megalomaniacal Voss is a singularly unattractive man, a disdainful wiry knotted lump of sexual repression who tries to "dispense with flesh". In a novel where geographical features are also objectifications of psychological states, he is lost in a continent and in a limbo between "aspiration and human nature" (191). After three pained and awkward meetings with Laura Trevelyan they develop an enlightening relationship by dream and correspondence. They are apart for most of the novel. It is just as well that they love theoretically and from a distance, for in the marriage bed neither would be what technicians would call user-friendly. That they are both alter egos of White himself also makes erotic coupling at odds with the role they are playing both in the novel and in his narcissistic configuration.

Early in the novel White reveals Laura adopting the classic stare of Narcissus in front of the mirror, and he does so time and time again. Laura, who appears self-sufficient and haughty, (also classic narcissistic affects) is also not beyond seeing partly into her own predicament. She is described as a heroine after the Charlotte Bronte type who is intelligent, determined, but like the Victorian heroine of *Villette* has great trouble keeping [mentally] well:

> If she was a prig, she was not so far gone that she did not sometimes recognize it, and smart behind the eyes accordingly. But to know is not to cure. She was beset by all kinds of dark helplessnesses, that might become obsessions. If I am lost, then who can be saved? she was egoist enough to ask. She wanted very badly to make amends for the sins of others. So that, in the face of desperate needs, and having rejected prayer as a rationally defensible solution, she could not surrender her self-opinion, at least, not altogether. Searching the mirror, biting her fine lips, she said, I have strength, certainly, of a kind, if it is not arrogance. Or she added, is it not perhaps—will? (74-5)

If a mirror is not handy she can "believe… in wood, with reflections in it… and in water" (9). It is unsurprising that the other White alter ego, Voss, also undergoes moments of "humiliating helplessness" as the reverse side of his grandiose illusions of his own divinity. And he too is described through interaction with the mirror metaphor. He sits with the simple Harry Robarts as he would with "still water, allowing his thoughts to widen on it" (32); meeting Le Mesurier for the first time they search for purpose in the "vast glass of ocean" (33). The Narcissus pond takes on global possibilities in White.

As White did himself, both Laura and Voss vacillate between ideas of perfection and self-denigration. One moment Voss fears never being able to save himself from "his inherent helplessness" (32) and the next he fantasizes on his ability to "discard the inessential and attempt the infinite" (35). One minute Laura convinces herself that she is the most complete of beings, only to be crushed by the "knowledge of her superficiality and ugliness" (111). In both Laura and Voss the "self is inherently and constantly at risk of collapse."[35]

The narcissist is usually either sexually cold or the seeming opposite, promiscuous. Both states of frigidity and over-abundance confirm that the narcissist is constitutionally unable to participate in mature, reciprocal object relations. Narcissus is unable to see the real Echo, so the myth eventually leaves her as a disembodied spirit. Both Voss and Laura present the narcissist's fear of sexuality. There are several reasons for this. In his bloated egocentricity the narcissist can only sense desertion after intimacy. In the narcissist's guilt-shame cycle the id impulse is inhibited. Sexual contact threatens intrusion and exploitation and a further loss of self. Mature object relations require that something of the self be given away. The psychosocial maxim of the narcissist, on the other hand, is to give nothing away and to control others and hold them at arm's length. Voss is someone who despises what he most desires (213): "To surrender itself into other hands is one of the temptations of the mortal flesh, the German knew, and shivered for an instant"

(208). One of the few comic scenes in the novel describes the hero crushed in an overcrowded carriage full of women.

White also reveals Laura's sexual fears in many forms: "Persistent touch was terrifying to her" (122). She particularly loathes one part of the Bonner's garden, a quiet corner that is a popular rendezvous for courting couples. Here in this "mysterious ganglion of dark roots" (71) "the night is full of voices and unexplained lights" (54). Rose Portion, her down-to-earth servant, is a constant discomfiting sexual self-referent for her:

> Rose remained, her breasts moving in her brown dress. Laura Trevelyan had continued to feel repelled. It was the source of great unhappiness, because frequently she was also touched…. It is the bodies of these servants, she told herself, in some hopelessness and disgust, while wondering how her aunt would have received her thoughts, if spoken. Similar obsessions could not have haunted other people. (53)

Kernberg's and Kohut's narcissist commonly assumes that his or her problem is unique, probably because real empathy for others is all but impossible to sense. Narcissus, when told that a youth has fallen in love with him and cannot live without him, haughtily sends him a sword with which to end his misery.

All so-called love affairs are narcissistic in a sense, but mature, basically stable couples are able to balance loss of self with confirmation from the other. Voss and Laura don't have a love affair: they really use each other as transitional self-objects. In other words the "real" embodied Laura and the corporeal Voss are beside the point. "Can two such faulty beings, " Laura asks, "endure to face each other, almost as in a looking glass?" (185). Antisocial as they are, both escape from the guests at the farewell dinner party before the expedition leaves for its own kind of ultimate oblivion. The couple meets in the garden accidentally, thrown together by their shared social discomfort which, at times, approaches misanthropy:

> "You are so vast and ugly," Laura was repeating the words; "I can imagine some desert with rocks, rocks of prejudice, and, yes, even hatred. You are so isolated. That is why you are fascinated by the prospect of desert places, in which you will find your own situation taken for granted, or more than that, exalted…. Everything is for yourself. Human emotions when you have them, are quite flattering to you. If those emotions strike sparks from others, that is also flattering. But most flattering, I think when you experience it, is the hatred, or even the mere irritation of weaker characters."
>
> "Do you hate me, perhaps?" asked Voss, in darkness.
>
> "I am fascinated by you…. *You* are *my desert*." (87-88)

The shared perception of each other's uniqueness, the dimly formulated but palpable sense of suffering in the mirror image, the safety of being together and apart, are the springboards from which their narcissistic bond is built. Their "friendship" becomes the psychological vehicle through which the dyad will over-inflate its special nature, and which will fortify the pair against the incursions of reality in a hostile world.

They could never be together and use each other for positive narcissistic ends. The advantages of their being apart are many. The body will not get in the way of the fiction of being together. Both use the mirrored other to explore self without loss of personal psychic borders, without giving anything away. They exploit the rich transference potential of the experience, but at the same time manage to avoid the defensive withdrawal, which is often the reactive instinct of the narcissist who risks losing the bounds of his artificially structured self. The pair avoids going through that destructive moment in many narcissistic friendships where aggression is used to reestablish the grandiose self. The danger of a reactive flight back into this kind of self is displayed early in their history when Laura admits that the "incident with the German in the garden had been

describably ugly, untidy, painful" (122). Their meeting and immediate parting is the start and continuation of individuation for both.

This paper speculates that White uses these fictional characters to transform his own narcissism ritualistically through art. How does he do it?

We know nothing of Voss's childhood and little of his development except that in late adolescence we are given this portrait, which on its own is almost a catalogue of narcissistic pathologies and defenses. As a university student

> he had a reputation for bristling correctness, as befitted the great surgeon it was intended he should become, until suddenly revolted by the palpitating bodies of men. Then it was learned that he would become a great botanist instead. He did study inordinately, and was fascinated in particular by a species of lily which swallows flies. With such instinctive neatness and cleanliness to dispose of those detestable pests. Amongst the few friends he had, his obsession became a joke….

As for his debt to his parents he reveals the coldest face of the adolescent narcissist:

> …he knew he must treat with his boot upon the trusting face of the old man his father. He was forced to many measures of brutality in defence of himself. (13)

Ordinary human beings mirror his own essential weakness and humanity, something which prevents him "soaring towards the apotheosis for which he was reserved" (178). Note above that it is not being a surgeon or being a botanist which is the object of his obsessive study. It is being "great". His parents, whose humble humanity mirror anything but greatness, must be sacrificed on the alter of his ego. They are unfaithful and unreliable mirror objects, impediments to his imagined potential greatness.

Voss's admission of Laura as anima somehow takes him back to this period of his development, perhaps in the same way that an analyst might. They "…were drifting together. They were sharing the same hell, in their common flesh, which he had attempted so often to repudiate" (364). The sacramental witchetty grub given by an elderly aboriginal shortly before his execution becomes the "struggling wafer of his boyhood" (388). In a dream, Laura "came to him, and at once he was flooded with light and memory. As she lay beside him, his boyhood slipped from him in a rustling of water and a rough towel" (383).

As part of their movement towards a positive transformation, Voss becomes more feminine and Laura more masculine. Shwartz-Salent submits that the balance of intra-psychic masculine-feminine functioning in members of both sexes is linked to creativity, the gentle inculcation of spiritual values, and the capacity of realistic and sustained reflection. When there is balance, in this view, there is security in the narcissistic realm. When there is not, the unconscious realms of the psyche are replaced by a "grandiose power drive. Under its control certainty must reign and chance be suspended."[36] It is the illusion of certainty, Voss's mask of majesty, which hides the fragmented sense of self that he denounces shortly before his death:

> He himself, he realized, had always been abominably frightened, even at the height of his own 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 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. (390)

Voss thus takes on the punishment for White's own narcissistic sense of entitlement, of inflexibility, of heartlessness, and above all, of grandiosity. As he dies he becomes more acceptably human and takes White's sins with him.

Laura is also important as she can experience a transformation of her narcissism from the dysfunctional to the functional and still live. Laura's grandiose self is encapsulated in monumental marble imagery: she is "some inexorable marble thing"; she "lay in long folds of uneasy marble" (120); such was the texture of her marble that few people" could guess her thoughts or enter her personality (7). Voss too is described in a similar way by White when the "creases in his black trousers appeared to have been sculptured for eternity" (171). With this man of stone, Laura continues her life-long quest for perfect symbiosis with a parent figure. We have little more information about her orphaned childhood than we do Voss's early years. During her first uncomfortable meeting with Voss she is somehow dragged into the past:

> …she herself was threatening to disintegrate into the voices from the past. The rather thin, grey voice of the mother, to which she had never succeeded in attaching a body. (12)

In Kohut's words, Laura is, in the absence of potent parental mirroring, "the child defensively denying the narcissistic disequilibrium and then developing an even more megalomaniac self-image" to regain her narcissism. Furthermore her archaic grandiosity remains "untamed [because] the mother's confirming responses are deficient."[37] The Trevelyan mother, no more than a thin grey whisper, captures the essence of inadequate parenting. Laura is seen searching for the compensatory symbiosis with a parent imago: on the voyage to Australia as a girl the Captain of the ship, and old family friend, would "lock her in his greatcoat, so that she was almost part of him…. It did appear momentarily that permanence can be achieved" (13). As Laura makes a myth out of Voss (and as White mythologizes both of them) a psychic model for permanence can be ritualistically achieved. White makes it clear that he intends his readers to see Voss and Laura as "locked inside" each other "permanently" (275) and that, from Laura's perspective, this union represents the transformation of their narcissistic pathology. There are early signs that her long-distance transference is working for Laura. Laura had, writes White, "in the past barely suffered her maid to touch her… [yet she] suddenly reached out and put her arms round the waist of the swelling woman" (164). Adopting the illegitimate daughter on Rose's death, she becomes more confident and witty, though never suffering fools gladly. By the conclusion of the novel

> Laura Trevelyan was perfectly at home in the environment to which she was no longer expected to belong. There were few now who recognized her. New arrivals at the colony… were unaware of her origins, and those who were safely established had too little thought for anything but their own success to point to an insignificant failure. This judgement of the world was received by Laura *without shame* [my italics]. Indeed she had discovered many compensations, for now that she was completely detached, she saw more deeply and truthfully, and often loved what she saw…. (410)

As the novel closes Laura is the headmistress of a successful girls' school. The reciprocal symbiosis of mother and daughter that marks the relationship of Laura and Mercy would be inadequately conveyed by the "bronze and marble" through which White described the previously narcissistically vulnerable woman. There is no doubt that the personal investment he makes in this transformation is comforting to him as a writer, albeit temporarily—Laura at the end of the novel is someone he would, we suspect, like to become. White works and reworks the ritualistic resolution of his narcissism through his alter ego's transformation. Laura's strength seems to be her new ability to live contentedly as an outsider/insider and is clearly a foil to the more tragic scapegoat Voss must become for White's own more destructive narcissism.

The essence of Voss the character and *Voss* the novel were made up of, according to the author in the Marr biography, "bits of Leichhardt…bits of Eyre, and I suppose some of the others,

but there is more of my own character than anybody else's."[38] Why did he not base the novel purely on Leichhardt? He was more interested in a psychological adventure than in historical verisimilitude, but in addition to that, he admits in a letter to Ben Huebsch, he viewed the real Leichhardt as "merely unusually unpleasant whereas Voss is mad as well."[39] It is clear that whatever his motivation for inventing a new explorer in Voss, he draws from the vast continent he inhabits, while at the same time exploring the frightening internal world of his own intimate kind of madness. Voss's execution renders him an heroic scapegoat for White's own narcissism. In *Flaws in the Glass* he tells of the moment he decided to kill off his unattractive hero: "Bronchitis, Menuhin playing Bartok's Violin Concerto, and a virulent review of *The Tree of Man* helped me to resolve the death of Voss. I had not felt up to it before. Suddenly I was injected with adrenalin enough to hack off the head" (*Flaws* 141). He wrote to the Moores: "It liberated me."[40]

1 Patrick White, *Voss* (London: Penguin Books, 1960) 37. Hereafter quotes from this text will be marked in the body of the paper with pagination from this edition.

2 Patrick White, "A Cheery Soul" in *Four Plays* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1965) 185.

3 David Marr, ed. *Patrick White Letters* (Sydney: Random House, 1994) 151.

4 David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (Sydney: Random House, 1991) 622.

5 Nina W. Brown, *The Destructive Narcissistic Pattern* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998); Sam Vaknin, *Malignant Self Love—Narcissism Revisited* (Prague: Narcissus Publications, 2003). Vaknin is particularly interesting since he is a self-proclaimed Narcissist with a history of dysfunctional behaviors related to it.

6 See American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition, (1994) entry no. 301.81.

7 Salman Akhtar and J. Anderson Thomson, "Overview: Narcissistic Personality Disorder," American *Journal of Psychiatry* 139:1 (1982): 12-20; Elsa Ronningstam, "Comparing Three Systems for Diagnosing Narcissistic Personality Disorder," *Psychiatry* 51:3 (1988): 300-311; David L. Smith "Narcissism Since Freud: Towards a unified theory," British *Journal of Psychotherapy* 4:3 (1988): 302-313.

8 See Otto F. Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1975); *Object Relations Theory and Clinical Psychoanalysis* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1980); and Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of Self: A Systematic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971); The *Restoration of Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1977).

9 Akhtar and Thomson 13.

10 Akhtar and Thomson 14.

11 Carl Goldberg, *In Defense of Narcissism: The Creative Self in Search of Meaning* (New York: Gardner Press, 1980) 12.

12 For popular sociohistoric approaches to narcissism see Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in and Age of Diminishing Expectations* (London: Abacus, 1980); Christopher Lasch *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (London: Picador, 1985; and Richard Sennett, The *Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

13 Roberta Satow, "Narcissism or Individualism," *Partisan Review* 48.2 (1981): 286.

14 Lloyd deMause, "Comments on Dr. Golden's Paper 'A View of Narcissism through Psychohistory'," *Issues in Ego Psychology* 8.1 (1985): 101.

15 Davis A. Williams and Stephen Patrick, "Therapy for the Age of Narcissism," *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 5.1 (1984): 95.

16 Marr 427.

17 Akhtar & Thomson 13.

18 Marr 633.

19 For a convincing description of the affect of shame and its relationship to narcissistic behaviors see Andrew P.

Morrison, "Shame, Ideal Self, and Narcissism," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 19.2 (1983): 295-318.

20 Morrison 304.

21 Marr, *Letters* 83.

22 Marr, *Letters* 178.

23 Marr 486.

24 Marr 353.

25 Marr 525.

26 Marr 455.

27 Marr 353.

28 Marr 481.

29 Marr 349.

30 Lynne Layton and Barbara Ann Schapiro, eds. *Narcissism and the Text* (New York: New York University Press, 1968) 23.

31 Layton and Schapiro 23.

32 Marr 151.

33 Quoted in Marr 623.

34 Stephen A. Mitchell, *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis: An Integration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) 195.

35 For an easily digested view of the fragility of the narcissist's defenses see Phil Mollon & Glenys Parry, "The Fragile Self: Narcissistic Disturbance and the Protective Function of Depression," *The British Journal of Medical Psychology* 59 (1984): 138.

36 Nathan Schwartz-Salant, *Narcissism and Character Transformation: The Psychology of Narcissistic Character Disorders* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1982) 40.

37 Akhtar & Thomson 14.

38 Marr 314.

39 Marr, *Letters* 107.

40 Marr 318.