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- 1 Bridget Grogan's monograph *Reading Corporeality in Patrick White's Fiction* articulates a welcome challenge to a number of the assumptions of White studies. Her compelling primary thesis is that White doesn't endorse a dualistic paradigm between spiritual transcendence and corporeal abjection, but rather stages it as an immanent critique of rationalist modernity. This argument draws on the concept of what Grogan calls the "somatic spirituality" which critically diverges from the Platonic and Pauline view of the flesh as the prison of the soul. This is salutary in a number of ways; critics have long recognized the importance of physical abjection in White's novels, but often in unhelpful and contradictory ways.
- 2 Australian literary scholarship has a detailed history of misreading White in both complimentary and censorious directions. G.A. Wilkes, the first professor of Australian Literature at the University of Sydney, thought that White's emphasis on corporeal experience often got in the way of his metaphysical themes, singling out the apparent but highly debatable "telepathy" between Voss and Laura in his 1957 novel *Voss*. Wilkes' successor Leonie Kramer, who White famously detested, had similar difficulties with *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) which in the terms of her evaluative Leavisite paradigm she considered a poorly executed allegory especially in terms of its treatment of materialism. Among White's revisionist critics too, the tension between metaphysical

impulses and bodily realities has been singled out. Simon During's controversial study *Patrick White* (1996) encapsulates the pseudo-theoretical reading of White as an Eliot-style aristocratic high-modernist with elitist philosophies and politics. Like Kramer, During argued that White complicates his grand metaphysical inquiries with sanguine physicality.

- 3 These readings are, Grogan astutely argues, overwhelmingly informed by Western paradigms which perceive the body as separate to the mind/soul, and therefore incompatible with revelation. Grogan's sense of the somatic sacred is informed by Kristeva's theory of abjection as a means of alienating or "othering" aspects of corporeality and thereby defending the narcissistic fiction of the autonomous self. Throughout her study this application is demonstrated to be a very generative way of understanding White's many characters who, like Voss and Waldo Brown, seem to wage a constant psychological war against their own physical realities. Following this logic, Grogan persuasively argues that White's undeniable preoccupation with characters who desire to transcend their circumstances through intellect or art does not constitute any kind of simplistic identification or endorsement, but an observant and at times prescient engagement with the errors of rationalism. Here, Grogan's adroit use of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the fascist impulses of enlightenment, and of Derrida's theory of the metaphysics of presence, dismisses the trite canard that the decline in White's reputation was in any way directly linked to the advent of critical theory in the anglophone world. On the contrary, Grogan persuasively argues that White's treatment of the fascist or elitist principles of western modernity is closer to deconstruction than it is to celebration.
- 4 In this respect Grogan's monograph joins an encouraging development in White scholarship, in which the complex irony and perspectivism of White's novels is coming to be recognized with appropriate nuance. For instance, where Brigid Rooney describes White's earlier "metaphysical" trilogy – comprising *The Tree of Man* (1955), *Voss* (1957) and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) – as "mythic, biblically charged national fictions" (2009, 42), Andrew McCann argues that White's prose style should be seen as an attempt to "empty out, to travesty and to rephrase as ruin the very signifiers of its own theological orientation" (2015, 119). Grogan's concept of somatic rather than platonic spirituality strikes one as a useful solution out of this impasse. According to the terms of a transcendent metaphysical spirituality, many of White's novels – and *The Tree of Man* in particular – must be interpreted as at least partially redemptive allegories for the European conquest of the Australian continent. According to the parameters of an earthed spirituality in which bodily abjection is revered as the origin of pity, White's novels needn't be hampered by the politics and philosophies which they interrogate.
- 5 This problem of interpretation has the potential for wider implications for White scholarship and its place within the study of Australian and postcolonial literatures. Australian literary studies developed as a professional discipline in the context of numerous cultural anxieties concerning Antipodean belatedness and distance. As I have written elsewhere, many of the proto-scholars like Vance and Nettie Palmer often wrote to confect or augur the distinctly Australian literary character that the lingering influence of Romanticism taught them to value so highly. Because of this context, White's celebration as the prophesied advent of the great Australian novelist was in many respects so over-determined that until relatively recently it seemed impossible to read him as anything else. The after-image of this tendency has in turn left White a

legacy not unlike the explorer's statue at the conclusion of *Voss*, what McCann calls "an icon in the service of a fairly uninspiring cultural nationalism" (2015, 127). Grogan departs from this disciplinary lineage, not least in her rigorous reading of White's second published novel *The Living and the Dead* (1941), a text largely ignored by Australian critics. This is one of the numerous ways in which Grogan's monograph exemplifies the value of reading White beyond and against this limiting cultural prism.

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