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The Red Page

Patrick White Refuses His Soup.

Mrs. Standish asked everyone if they would have some soup, in a tone of voice that expected the offer to be refused. It was the consequence of many years spent ignoring the second-best, the matrimonial second-best, of course. Spiritually, she liked to believe, she managed to keep to the heights. A precious country, it was also cheaply reached.

Will you have some soup, Elyot?
There is the keynote of Patrick White's new novel *The Living and the Dead* (Routledge; Angus and Robertson); it is about the kind of people who are expected to refuse their soup and the kind of people who expect people to refuse their soup. It is not a novel, consequently, that one could describe as bounding with animal spirits, dripping with soup and wine, burning with joy and passion; the soup is cold.

White is an Australian living abroad. His first novel, *Happy Valley*, set in Australia and distinguished like the new one for keenness of perception and a clinical accuracy of characterisation, left the Red Page reviewer wondering whether White's preoccupation with method (in particular, then, his devotion to Austrialian landscape, would devalue his material. Would the color and vigor of the Australian scene, forcibly projecting itself into his work, bring light and warmth and strength into his second novel; or would his intellectualism freeze his material into something one stage more remote from the Australian actuality?

The Living and the Dead (unless a third novel should show signs of a thaw) answers the question. White has gone further into the wilderness than the reviewer had imagined; he has frozen himself right off the Australian landscape. *The Living and the Dead* is set in London and deals with English intellectuals.

There are still patches of Joyce in his prose; but Joyce is not the chief influence at work. Rather, White has settled into the chilly clinical style prevailing among the younger English experimenters, an acrid precision which, as Stephen Spender has shown in his short stories, is admirably suited to the expression of spiritual indigestion. The curious effect of this meticulousness, in White's case as well as in Spender's, is that the narrative becomes woody and obscure; refinement is piled upon refinement of description until any statement becomes a maze of qualification.

The drunk had ventured out from the corner, following the line of imaginary light. He moved a little and looked at Elyot, conscious perhaps, in the way of the drunk or mad, that some transient thought was rising on him. But there was no contact. He meandered into the street, not so much mad as the clown upon his lightstage, a flapping of empty sleeve and hollow leg. And then, just at this moment, the moment before, Elyot realised it would happen, he must have from this fixed spot, at once, quickly, associate himself with the anonymous figure, that it was for this purpose they had lingered close to each other on the pavement. Because he could see that the bus, ballooning down by lamplight, very red and ominous. The whole side of the street came careening over into his close vicinity. I must do this, his mind shouted, towed out into the screaming of the bus. The lights spun. The whole neighbourhood moved. Except his feet. He was anchored where he stood. He was the audience to a piece of distant pantomime.

They put the mackintosh on the pavement. The legs protruded stupidly, the turned-up soles, round them a sudden flowering of pale, uneasy faces.
There are three ways of describing an incident such as this, the running-over of a drunk by a bus; Hemingway's, the deliberate lowbrow, the bare statement, "The bus hit the drunk"; White's, the clinical highbrow, meant to be absolutely accurate, but really so refined and rarefied, spun into such elaborate detail, that the picture is destroyed and it is, in fact, not at all clear that a man has been run over by a bus; and the third method, such as the straightforward novelist, not trying for fancy effects, would use—to describe the scene, the men and the accident as one would if trying to convey a

picture of it in conversation with a friend. Of the two fancy methods, White's is clearly the worse, for Hemingway at least lets the reader know what has happened.

Transferred from incident to character, the clinical meticulousness has the same surface accuracy and the same fundamental vagueness. By careful attention and by sufficient benevolent leaps of the imagination, it's quite possible to see the English family of his book and to follow their careers in love, business and politics; yet they remain cases in a doctor's notebook. The novel is crammed with images of their emptiness:—

Sometimes he decided, in moments of uncomfortable honesty, that he began and ended with these positive lives, their presence or flight, that he had no actual life of his own.
Bumping up the stairs in darkness, she was not particularly there, or anywhere, possibly not her miserable.
Leaving behind all sense of geographical ties at Aachen, Elyot Standish found himself floating, placeless, timeless, there was no end to his present or past fluidity. Then the years flattened out into a general monotony of time, broken by a few twinges of pain, the transitory and intensely personal hills of school.

The warning neck of a sweat stretched across a distant path. Julia walked dully. Leaving her mind empty, she hoped something would fill it soon.

Eden raised her head, not to look at Connie, but beyond windows, into some distant country where there were answers. Irritated by his own hands, he watched them continue to play with the salt. The little mouth of the rose, only so far, that fell, dry pure, and limbed. Connie sighed. "We are the Hollow Men," in fact.

The chief nigger in White's woodpile, however, is neither Joyce nor Eliot, but the Aldous Huxley of *Point Counter Point*. White on a wife who has discovered that her husband is unfaithful:

Have a good day, dear, she sighed. She might have been almost asleep. So-so, he said. Worked while I had the light. Anything I can get you? he asked. Was there anything I could get, when she knew, when her hand, and touching her arm with his hand, as then her face, if he could put his hand through and touch the real state of her feelings, she longed for that, Willy withdrawing a burnt hand. Aloise, she was furious. She put on the reading lamp when he had gone and lay there rigid in her impotent anger.

So it became a game of knowing and watching. She made him feel how remote and superior and all-informed she was.

Aldous, on a similar situation:—
"You won't be late?" There was anxiety in Majorie Carling's voice, there was something like entreaty.

"No, I won't be late," said Walter un- happily, guiltily certain that he would be. It was only two years since they had begun to live together. Only two years; and now, already, he had ceased to love her, he had begun to love someone else. The sin was losing its only excuse, the social discomfort, late wife palliation. And she was with child. "I'll pass twelve," he implored, though she knew that her impatience would only annoy him, only make him love her the less.

The tone is identical. And that is the page of Huxley which Wyndham Lewis once devastatingly reprinted to show how weak, how peevish, nervous and vapid the intellectual novel can become. Patrick White has a pretty considerable talent, but he will do no good with the novel until he can take a bowl of soup without a sigh, a shudder and a clinical analysis.

Sitwell for Sitwell's Sake.

To whom in the wide world is it of any consequence that the officer who was on sentry duty at the Winter Palace of Czar Alexander II at St. Petersburg on a night of 1868 remained at his post for 24 hours; or that, as compensation for this long watch, he was officially permitted to have an armchair, to undo the chain of his helmet, and to take off one glove?

It is of no interest to the sentry any longer; he is dead. The present inhabitants of the city now called Leningrad have other things to think about. Even if the sentry had been permitted to yawn three times and scratch his left ear with the toe of his right boot, it wouldn't affect the price of fish in Sydney. Yet that trivial curiosity of history, and a hundred like it, moved Sacheverell Sitwell to write a book—*Valse des Fleurs: a Day in St. Petersburg* and a Ball at the Winter Palace in 1868 (Faber)—and, because of the intrinsic interest of its oddities to collectors of literary or actual bric-a-brac and because of the unvarying fineness of Sitwell's prose, the book is readable. *Valse des Fleurs* is what its sub-title says it is, and very little more. There is an attempt, but so slight as to be negligible, to portray in the manner of Carlyle the miseries and slowly awakening angers of the poor in contrast to the splendors of the nobility and the Court; there are occasional political observations, remote and precious perhaps, but nonetheless acute:—

But the circumstances are more extraordinary than in any other city in the world because of the unmeasured wealth that had accumulated to the Crown. It was as though the Sleeping Beauty had slept undisturbed into our times. And again:—
These are the Russians, who are the Antipodes to all other nations, born, it would seem, into a different perspective or proportion, often overtaken by disaster owing to ignorance and vainness, but wrongly so, for they never having been happy. They are the mute animal upon whom experiments are made, of one kind and another of inoculation.

But the book wasn't written to analyse the Russian soul, nor to stress the inevitability of the Revolution.

It was written because Sitwell could work in a footnote recalling "the Semiramis of the North," Catherine the Great:

The brothers Orlov, Vissnisky, Vassilichsky, Potemkin, Zavadovsky, Zoritch, Rimsky-Korsakov, Lanskoi, Yermolov, Mamonov, Plato and Valerian Zubov received in money alone from the hands of Catherine, some ninety million roubles, which was the equivalent of fifteen million pounds to our mind. In addition, at times it could not be calculated. In addition, they received other gifts, houses, and huge estates with tens of thousands of serfs attached.

And that, as presented by Sitwell, is not so much a political or social statement as a piece of barbaric decoration; on a par with the item about the sentinel, or his preposterous aside about the number of soldiers wearing steel breastplates at the end of the nineteenth century, or his lavish descriptions of Petersburg architecture, his rhapsodies about Russian music and the ballet, his pictures of the almost-bulging "Court Arabes"—black Christian Abyssinians whose function at the Court, essentially, was to symbolise Russia's imperial ambitions.

"Huge blocks of ice the size of a small iceberg," says Sitwell, describing the ball, "have been hollowed out to hold tubs with bottles of champagne." His book is rather like one of those bottles of champagne: good wine, but infinitesimally small in the gigantic mass of Russia. As with most of his other books, its chief value is not as a history but as a specimen of a poet's prose style.

An Australian Admiral.

The Yield of the Years (Hutchinson), by Admiral Sir Guy Gaunt, is the autobiography of an outstanding Australian, a member of a remarkable family.

The father, W. H. Gaunt, was a Victorian Judge and a goldfields commissioner in the "roaring days" of Ballarat. The eldest son, Cecil, commanded the 9th Dragoon Guards. Ernest became an Admiral, Guy too. Give a distinguished cavalry officer, and Mary (Mrs. Lindsey Miller) a traveller in wild parts of the world and an authoress of more than ordinary merit.

The young Gaunts were brought up near Ballarat. Guy was a Melbourne Grammar School boy and was destined for the law, but, flatly refusing to be anything else but a seaman, was shipped off to England when he was 14 to join the training ship Worcester—where, by the way, Admiral E. R. G. R. Evans also learnt the rudiments of his profession. He went to sea as an apprentice in a windjammer two years later, equipped with first-class extra certificates and an appointment as a midshipman in the R.N.R. After many adventures about the seven seas in a variety of craft he had his second mate's ticket at 19, and a few years later passed for master. He met his brother Ernest, then a lieutenant R.N., in London:—

"How much longer are you going to continue this rotten existence of yours?" Ernest began.

"In sure I don't know."
"Where are you sleeping now?"
"Down in the Old Kent-road, in what they describe as 'Good London Beds,' a shilling a night, over the entrance door."

His brother induced him to join the Navy, and got him an appointment as acting sub-lieutenant in H.M.S. Rupert, whence he was seconded to the Victorian Navy when he was 21. He served four years with that, as he describes it, futile organisation, and then went back to England. From this time he never looked back. First on the China station and then the Australian in H.M.S. Porpoise, with Commander Sturdee, subsequently victor of the Falkland Islands battle, for a skipper. The war in Samoa of 1899 was largely run by Sturdee and Gaunt.

The book is crammed with good stories, always told with a laugh, but the really fascinating part of it for most people must be the adventures of Captain G. R. A. Gaunt, R.N., as Naval Attaché and Chief of the British Intelligence Service in the United States, 1914-18. He goes into detail about the strenuous work that came his way in countering, exposing and checking the plots of the German Embassy and its agents up to the time the U.S. came into the war, sometimes just escaping being murdered for his trouble. President Wilson was not his style of man, but Colonel House was, and so was Franklin Roosevelt, whilst for ex-President Roosevelt he expresses

unbounded admiration. It is a splendidly told bit of history as viewed from behind the scenes.

The writer of this review has known Guy Gaunt for 40 years or so, from the time when he was navigator in H.M.S. Porpoise, just back from Samoa and the startling doings of Gaunt's Brigade (the battalion of native warriors he organised and led), has met him at intervals as commander, captain and admiral, and can certify that *The Yield of the Years* rings true: the authentic reflection of a spirited, adventurous and humorous personality.

J. H. M. A.

Various Verse

An Australian to a New Zealander.

Bewildered turns to hatred; and at last
The sight of your idle fingers, card and
holding
Slow vapor's drawing purpose, makes me cast
Quarrels between us, light into darkness, the
darkness where you're folding.
Us both within the chain of our doomed years.
And you say
"What does it matter? All this age is
doomed. Above
With a drifting dream of wings men dance to
death. And the day
Is fine again. Let us go out, my love,
And burn and praise and dig. On your cold
checks the fire
We build along the hedge will burn and die,
While thoughts of turning gold and metal wires
Bite deep and drone and you across the sky."
But in my mind across a harping brain
I see some words that took me the sun
One morning when I shook my hair's dark
rain
Over the flowers and shadowed them, one by
one.
"Dying in New Zealand, friend, remember!
Not living here in strength, not using this damp
land
As the seedbed of your youth; not fanning the
slow ember
Of life to come and things to understand.
Not! Dying here, among the days of grass,
Ave's of cloud, the fumes of wind and dew,
Dying here, beneath the nights that pass,
Condemning agonically, bone-pointing you
"into the grave, demanding that you be
Willing to lie in a pastor in this way."
And, upright in the dark, I silently
Leap into death, return, stand firm, and say,
"But in Australian earth, I'm dry and lean,
And I live long, though scared with widening
wounds."
You spring on me with mad growth, twisted,
green,
Unending, untamable. I laugh. I was not
born
To join in your mad orchestra of death,
Half-savage, all chaotic and unreal.
The clay figure, drew my first sharp breath
In a depth of heat and dust. Therefore I feel
The striking, swift, sane anger of long heat,
Of being and receiving it upon my tropic back.
I carry the sun like a rider, and underneath
my feet
Open a road whose wide lips curl and crack."
So to the stars I turn and shake my fist,
So to the moon, the sneering fairy globe,
I turn and shake my fist. Harshly I twist
A mat called prayer between us. A warm robe
To shield me from that cold, New Zealand light.
I think all this quiet faced, while silently
With hook and hoe and torch I make the bright
Fires burn among the bracken. From the sea
A fountain of rainbows, plumed and misty rise,
An autumn leaf grades harshly on the ground.
And we, you say, are doomed. Awedly from
The oily roar comes circling round and round.
It does not matter that tonight we'll sit
Tired about our fire and shut the door
And eat our bread. There will be bitterness
in it.
Someday we shall sit here . . . and eat no more
MOORLAND. EYE LANGLEY.

Love and Friendship.
What was it that you said? "Friendship, not
love.
Shall keep us close together!"—bodily friendship
You meant, and you and night and wine be-
trayed me
Tenderly into this. But now, being womanly,
Out of the summer of our girl bodies
You reap uneasy yearning, now all's over—
The sharp-edged, sweet fruit of wild regret.
The angry hunger raising in you still.

What shall I do? We counted our betrayals
And cancelled them with reason: said, "Thus
long
And after that no longer may we lie
Together and about our fierce encounter."
Yet in your distant voice desire is mixed now
With something more than friendship and
memory
I would not want that love should spring from
this.
From nights of sleep and pleasure ended lately,
Ended on oath, god-bless-you, and one kiss
To seal the bargain. I can love no more
And no more want it, turning always backward
Into the past, where love, being solitary,
is perfect. If you love me, do not say so
But hold your peace; for I can not love you
And so am not deserving of your love.
Nor its true object. Be content, content
To wait upon the future and its chances
Of our superb resumption—when, I know not,
But be assured I shall not fail you there.
Count the dark nights, and count the shining
days
And in their noble order and declension
May you find comfort, if your heart is troubled
By what we said our union would not mean.
Let your strong body outgrow memory
Of all it suffered in the summer nights
While I just for some wild hours we both con-
tained.
Let winter's cool embrace, and sleep, and
laughter
And food and labor purge you of me now
So finally that if we go again
Your first few cry of gossamer surprise
Will be your first indeed.

All this I beg
In your name and my own: friendship, not
love.
Has been our bond. Let it be so for ever,
N.S.W. KENNETH MACKENZIE.

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