

Australian Modernist Theatre and Patrick White's *the Ham Funeral* (1961 [1947])

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Abstract

For a considerable period of time, literary Modernism has been mainly associated with the study of the novel and poetry rather than drama perhaps due to New Criticism's emphasis on the text and disregard of performance. This profound anti-theatrical thrust of Modernism has to be, most certainly, re-examined and reassessed, particularly within the context of Australian literature and, more specifically, Australian theatre. That Australian modernist theatre has been inconspicuous on the world stage seems to be an obvious and undisputable statement of facts. Yet, with Patrick White, English-born but Australian-bred 1976 Nobel Prize winner for literature, Australian low-brow uneasy mix of British vaudevilles, farces and Shakespeare, mingled with the local stories of bushranging and convictism, got to a new start. Patrick White's literary output is immense and impressive, particularly in regards to his widely acclaimed and renowned novels; yet, as it seems, his contribution to Australian – least the world – drama is virtually unknown, especially in Europe. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to disclose those modernist elements in Patrick White's play, *The Ham Funeral*, that would argue for the playwright to be counted as one of the world avant-garde modernist dramatists alongside Beckett and Ionesco.

Keywords: Modernism, Australian drama, Patrick White, *The Ham Funeral*, anti-consumerism

INTRODUCTION

European and Australian Modernism(s)

What is generally understood by the term Modernism is the movement in the arts, its set of cultural tendencies and associated cultural activities, originally arising from wide-scale and far-reaching changes to Western societies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In particular, the development of modern industrialisms and the rapid growth of cities, followed then by the horror of the Great War and also, later, of the II World War, were among the factors that shaped Modernism. Modernism also rejects the lingering certainty of Enlightenment thinking, and many modernists, like Romantics before them, rejected religious belief and God's privileged position in the world.

Typically, the term Modernism encompasses the activities and output of those who felt the traditional forms of arts, architecture, literature and society were becoming out-dated in the new economic, social and political conditions of an emerging fully industrialised world. Ezra Pound's 1934 injunction to "Make it new!" was paradigmatic of the movement's approach towards what it saw as the now obsolete culture of the past. Politically wise, Modernism rejected the idea of nationalisms and ideologies, particularly bourgeois materialism and believed in free exchange of views and attitudes.

A salient characteristic of Modernism is self-consciousness. This self-consciousness often led to experiments with form and an approach that draws attention to the processes and materials used in creating a painting, poem, building, novel, etc. In art, Modernism explicitly rejects the ideology of realism and makes use of the works of the past through the application of reprise, incorporation, rewriting, recapitulation, revision and parody in new forms.

Australian Modernism, however, was different, at least in its initial stage. As the Australian government official website (australia.gov.au) explains,

Modernism first came to Australia in the mid-1910s through migrants, expatriates, exhibitions and publications. The movement spanned five turbulent decades, including global wars, economic depression, technological advance and massive social change. Inspired by early European avant-gardes, the modernist movement affected many forms of arts

and commerce. While modernism was expressed differently in each of these forms, the common thread was a rejection of traditional representations of the world. The focus was on form over content and style over subject matter (Web).

Maintaining a reserved distance to government's official statements, it may, however, be argued that one of the most dominant difference between Australian Modernism and its European counterpart was the time span. While in Europe the Great War and its aftermath may be considered to be Modernism's peak, in Australia the war's atrocities, the lost Gallipoli campaign in particular, seem to have stimulated and propelled the Modernist movement in literature, with the most visible effects shortly after the II World War. Taking their cue from international modernist movements, including the Bauhaus, abstract expressionism and French symbolism, Australian modernists experimented and collaborated across artistic disciplines. Better-known modernist groupings include the contemporary art societies in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide; the Arts and Crafts Society; Angry Penguin poets; the Angry Penguin painters, including Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan, Max Harris, John Perceval, Albert Tucker and Joy Hester; and the Hill End painters. All of these artists, especially Boyd and Nolan, greatly inspired Patrick White in his artistic path.

It is, therefore, reassuring that, at least in the 21st century, an official government body admits that Modernism, particularly Modernist art including drama, was received with open hostility in Australia indulgent in parochial realism of Ned Kelly stories:

However, the unfamiliar language of modern art often met with strong and passionate resistance from Australia's general public and art establishment. Australia's reception to modernism is a complex story of spasmodic cultural transformation led by avant-garde experiments and the creative exchange between modern artists, designers and architects. From reshaping the environment (in particular city living) to affecting body image, social life and ideals about design, its impact has been profound. (Web)

Had it not been for the decision of The Art Council in Melbourne to ban Patrick White's play of 1947, *The Ham Funeral*, it would have made its way to British and European stages in the 1950s to herald the advance of Australian Modernism into the world theatres. It is, predominantly, the relationship between an individual and one's destiny, i.e. death, and, globally, the deaths on massive scale, that pushed Western thinking to extremes to make the intellectuals re-assess the position of the human in the inhuman world, alongside the false ideological thinking of the supposed superiority of one race over the other and middle class over the working class, also true within the Australian context:

To some extent, the spectral figure of white death is a by-product of the worst excesses of a twentieth-century modernity haunted by barbarisms practised in the name of a 'superior' civilization, and by genocides predestined to secure the lasting supremacy of a 'master race'. To say that much post-war literature in the West—and not just the West—emerged out of Hitler's shadow might be too obvious to mention, but it certainly reminds us that many of these writers were actively engaged in an international struggle against modernity's contradictions, a struggle that narrowly nationalistic approaches to literature, Australia's included, have been reluctant to address. Whatever the case, *the two World Wars had more effect on the development of a modern Australian literature than any of the national events of the twentieth century* although, as in other Western countries, it remains moot whether modernism itself was a response to or a reaction against the experienced immensities of global transformation and social/cultural change [emphasis added, RW]. (Huggan 2007: 84)

Australian cultural discourse after II World War, articulated and given prominence by the so-called leftist (or anti-royalist) writers like Patrick White and Susannah Katherine Pritchard, took a clearly anti-realist and anti-nationalist bend and steered towards modernist art. Being aware, however, of Australian idiosyncrasy, White strongly believed that nationalism, as practised in Australia at his time, was a backward force that should be repudiated with all might. Though English by birth but anti-royalist by choice, White looked at British cultural imperialism with suspicion.

THE HAM FUNERAL (1947)

Patrick White's major play, *The Ham Funeral*, was originally written in 1947 but had to wait in the dark for thirteen years before being brought to the public attention by Adelaide Theatre Guild on 15 November 1961. This expressionist drama, highly European in consciousness, was the first of its kind to reach the Australian mainstage: it and the three other plays, *The Season at Sarsaparilla*, *A Cheery Soul* and *Night on Bald Mountain*, which quickly followed paved the way towards a new kind of theatrical imagination which soon began to draw with a new freedom of all forms of poetry, music and the visual arts into the creation of a new kind of indigenous drama.

A generation later a theatre rich in skills and resources has grown to maturity in which the plays of Patrick White have taken their place in the repertoire of the major companies. Patrick White's main interest in his art has always been to uncover a variety of mental states – the deeper states of the mind.

The play starts with a Prologue spoken by the YOUNG MAN who *"is dressed informally, in a fashion which could be about 1919. He is rather pale. His attitude throughout the play is a mixture of the intent and the absent, aggressiveness and diffidence"*:

YOUNG MAN (*yawning, addressing the audience*) I have just woken, it seems. It is about . . . well, the time doesn't matter. The same applies to my origins. It could be that I was born in Birmingham . . . or Brooklyn . . . or Murvillumbah. What is important is that, thanks to a succession of meat pies (the gristle-and-gravy, cardboard kind) and many cups of pink tea, I am *alive!* . . .

The YOUNG MAN then speaks of the play in which he is to take part but his "dilemma in the play is how to take part in the conflict of eels, and survive at the same time." He also introduces its setting – the house, saying:

Let me remind you of a great, damp, crumbling house in which people are living. Remember? Perhaps you have only dreamt it. Some of the doors of the house have never been seen open. The people whose protection they are intended to ensure can be heard bumping about behind them. Sometimes these characters fry little meals for their temporary comfort. Sometimes it sounds as though they are breaking glass. . . . There are the voices, too. Not only the voices of the walls. There are the voices of the gas-fires, full of advice that we haven't the courage to take. And the mirrors in the deal dressing-tables . . . well, you can never believe *them*. They are living lies, down to the last vein in their eyeballs. So, we turn our backs. But look again. The landlady, you're going to see, spends an awful lot of her time looking again. And I . . . but I know already. I know too much. That is the poet's tragedy. To know too much and never enough. (*Defensive*) You are right in suspecting I can't give you a message. The message always gets torn up. It lies at the bottom of the basket, under the hair, and everything else. Don't suggest we piece it together. I've found the answer is always different. So . . . the most I can do is give you the play, and plays, of course, are only plays. Even the great play of life. Some of you will argue that *that* is real enough . . . (*very quiet and diffident*) . . . but can we be . . . sure? (Returning to the surface, dry) Thank you. We'd better begin now.

EXIT *behind the CURTAIN*

The way in which the play starts recalls more familiar British Theatre of Absurd or Angry Young Men movement and shows in Scene One a middle-age couple in what may be termed their domestic chores:

LANDLADY (*laying down the knife, pushing things away from her*) I'm just about sick of peelin' bloody pertaters! Don't yer understand, Will? (*Disgusted*) You wouldn't.

(LANDLORD *looks at her expressionlessly for a moment, then continues to stare and smoke.*)

I'm sick of it! I'm sick. . . .

LANDLORD Why?

LANDLADY Why? Lord, I dunno *why!* (*Yawns and stretches*) Aoooh, nao! (*The relaxes on her chair, momentarily helpless*) I dunno much. Else I wouldn't be sitting 'ere. Thursday I went to the theayter. It was lovely. A bunch of toffs in satin . . . gassin' about love and nothink. An' when I come out, the rain 'ad stopped, an' the blossom sticky on the chesnut trees. You could smell it, that strong and funny. It nearly bust my 'ead open. . . . (*Angrily, pushing the potato peelings farther away from her*) Then I come 'ome!

(LANDLORD *noisily clears his throat.*)

Yes, that's wot I felt! Twenty years listenin' to the damp, an' the furniture, an' your 'usband's breathin'!

The language the female character is using in the opening scene, as well as others, makes the audience understand the couple's social class and their position in it, and the Aussie accent – basically the imitation of the Cockney of London – is intended to convince the viewers and the readers of the authenticity of the presented scene from the common life of an

average working class urban Australian family, tied of life, fed up with themselves, dissatisfied with the things they do every single day, with their repetitiveness and predictability.

Then, in an infrequent outburst of emotions which most likely stems from the recollection of the theatre spectacle she has viewed, LANDLADY recalls the day the couple met for the first time and, putting her hand on his shoulder, eventually confessed to her husband:

I loved you, Will. Afterwards, I even got up to like yer, and wanted you about. We were two bodies in the bed. I could return to you out of my dreams . . . push against your hot side. You didn't wake ever. But you was solid.

(LANDLORD *grunts and stares*)

(*Withdrawing her hand, angrily*) You were that, all right!

When asked by YOUNG MAN, her lodger, whether she expects much of life, Mrs Lusty (nomen omen) simply answers: "Expect? I don't expect. I take wot turns up" (Act One, Sc. Two). The poet, however, does, but blames himself for his lack of cleverness, which makes him desperate:

It seems that everybody else understands which button to press, which lever to pull, which tablet to take, to achieve the maximum happiness or the required dream. At least, that's what their faces claim. Sometimes I stand in the street and watch them. Then my ignorance begins to choke me. The answer is either tremendously simple, or tremendously involved. But either way, it's something I still fail to grasp. (Act One, Sc. Three)

The YOUNG MAN shows the traits characteristic of majority of the European vanguard theatre heroes of the 1950s and 1960s: he prefers the solitude of his bedroom, lying on the bed and staring at the ceiling, to active social life. He writes poems, majority of which find their way in the basket, and rebels against the world: "I've had my answer! I hold my still, cold poem, stiller and colder than the landlady's dead child." When she repeats "all right" several times, he angrily comments, "Everything's 'all right'. The pity is it's never 'better'," to finish off, saying, "All my life the present moment has just failed to materialize. Completeness is something I sense, but never yet experienced. There is always the separating wall (Act One, Sc. Three).

Landlord, Will Lusty, rarely speaks save the moments of extreme agitation, when, for instance, he spat out a mouthful of bread with dripping and threw the slice back on the plate, hollering, "This stinks! It stinks!" to which his wife's reaction was that of contempt: "It's you, Will. Your bloody mouth's foul with silence" (Act One, Sc. Four). Silence is what she hates most: "All you get is words . . . good, bad, or doubtful. Or else it's silence. (*Shivers*) That's worse (Act One, Sc. Four).

As might be expected of him, Will died without a word, in silence: "E just died, without a word. Even without a fit. (*Holding her face*) Oh, God! Oh, dear! (Act One, Sc. Six) [...] I didn't say good bye to him," which prompted YOUNG MAN to utter White's famous formula, "The truth stops where words begin" (Act One, Sc. Six), and then, "Words are bridges that won't bridge. They break" (Act Two, Sc. Six).

The symbolism of the play, however, does not consist merely in the fact that we have the symbolic characters such as, for instance, YOUNG MAN who is a symbolic child of the couple and who later becomes the lover of the young girl living next to him who, in turn, is the anima, the Jungian feminine side of the male, that is, YOUNG MAN, but also in symbolic objects such as ham, huge and fat (YOUNG MAN describes the couple as fat and ugly). Symbolically, ham stands for LANDLORD: after the wedding night, LANDLADY wakes up in their bedroom to discover "the bleedin' 'am" next to her side instead of her newly married husband. Therefore, Will's funeral turns to be the ham funeral (or *The Ham Funeral*) at which the mourners eat thick slices of fatty ham, which may, doubtless, recall a cannibalistic ritual, not a Christian wake.

Also, the house is treated symbolically in the play and stands for life: ascending and descending stairs, rooms in which you sleep, eat, make love, die. YOUNG MAN declares: "This house is life. I watch my house fill with light, and darken. These are my days and nights. The house spreads solid over my head" (Act Two, Sc. Six).

As Katherine Brisbane argues in her Introduction to *Patrick White Collected Plays Volume I*:

White's contribution to the stage at this point [i.e. in the 1960s] was twofold. First, as a literary figure of international reputation, he came from a world very different from the popular working-class culture represented by [Australian] authors [...] and his perspective upon that culture was accordingly very different. Second, his European multi-lingual education had

exposed him to a greater variety of style than the simplicities of domestic drama and musical comedy afforded in Australia; and the expressionist forms he drew upon in his novels, particularly of that period, extended naturally into his plays. It is as if the very innocence of the limitations of the Australian theatre at that time had freed him to draw effortlessly upon his poetic imagination. (ii)

White's interest and aim, both in the novel and the theatre, was to reflect the Australian landscape of imagination and not social reality:

White has been commonly called a symbolic or expressionist playwright, in that his writing is a reaction against naturalism and seeks to represent spiritual before social reality. But while the tone of the European expressionists and their precursors was, on the whole, pessimistic, and often obsessional, White's plays, like his novels, explore the dead heart of Australia and find it not only teeming with life but endowed with a leathery will to survive. The theme of all the plays [...] is the journey towards a recognition of the basic forces of life. In *The Ham Funeral* the young poet makes his way slowly from the shelter of his dreams, through the ugly assaults of birth, death and lust, to the emotional freedom he longs for. In *Season at Sarsaparilla* puberty, maturation and reconciliation are the recurring cycle. In *A Cherry Soul* the comforts of ignorance give way to the rude recognition that life cannot be easily contained; and in the last play *Bald Mountain* is the scene of a heroic tussle between the forces of sterility, represented by the intellect, and those of the flesh. (iii-iv)

To recapitulate, it may be argued that *The Ham Funeral* is a complex, radically modernist play, drawing on many theatrical traditions and styles, with few naturalistic elements and an inward looking main character. As Akerholt says, it anticipates Beckett and Ionescu (Akerholt 1988: 9). *Waiting for Godot* was first performed in 1953, six years after White's play was written in 1947. Had White's play been performed closer to the date of its composition the history of modernist theatre might inscribe White rather than Ionescu and Beckett as its "father figure." As Barry Oakley stated, the play "was ahead of its time in Europe as well as in Australia. Its boldness lies in its attempt to project dramatically the deeper states of the psyche" (Oakley 1989). John McCallum states that White was "the first successful modernist dramatist – in the special Australian sense of the word, meaning non-naturalistic" (McCallum 2010: 140). Walker herself notes the "expressionistic, surrealist, poetic and vaudevillian" elements of the play (Walker in Pender 2001: 7). These elements are found in "all of White's plays and create enormous challenges for actors, directors and audiences" (84). On top of that, it may be stated conclusively that Patrick White shares with Samuel Beckett and other modernist Europeans their fundamental faith in humanism and universalism.

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