

Paddy's Pictures

Chris Wallace-Crabbe

Helen Verity Hewitt

PATRICK WHITE, PAINTER MANQUÉ: PAINTINGS,
PAINTERS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON HIS WRITING
MUP, \$49.95hb, 195pp, 0 522 85032 4

THE SPREAD OF Patrick White's fiction and drama has many mansions, to borrow a trope from the King James Bible. Many interpretations, too, the texts being so dense and overdetermined. Accounts of his career go all the way across the spectrum, from Simon During's portrayal of it as a national construction to David Marr's reading of a modernist romance. And there is some truth in all of them. The novels are vitamin-rich, full of extra minerals and difficult chewy bits.

The latest interpretation comes from Helen Verity Hewitt, who builds convincingly on her assumption that '[i]n his writing White is constantly attuned to the possibility of borrowing from the visual arts'. Starting out from a suasive account of how Klee and the cubists played their part in the middle section of *The Aunt's Story*, Hewitt describes the likeliest filiations from White's fascination with paintings to his building of fiction. Book by book, she moves through White's career, from the early days of Roy de Maistre's influence in London down to the exuberant *The Twyborn Affair*, a favourite of mine. Fortunately, or perhaps I should say wisely, she does not touch on *Memoirs of Many in One*, nor on the memoir that has become so widely known as *Claws in the Arse*.

Hewitt is at once thorough and agile, her open-faced prose moving between the novelist's friendships, the pictures he currently admired, and the novels into which they cast their shadows or their colours. Her three-ring circus act is not easy, yet it is done with real modesty. In an age of flashy writing about the arts, she is content to keep the ship steady, to look and to search for connections.

This book traces the influence of painterly images, including abstract forms, of the artistic vocation, and of painters' company, on the novelist: a paradoxically sociable man. This does not mean that White understood the painting process from the inside. Many Australian painters have shown their scorn for *The Vivisector*, readable though it certainly is, seeing the narrative as a writer's fancy about life in the visual arts. Not only because of its romanticism: one painter remarked on how much more convincing was rambunctious

Gulley Jimson in *The Horse's Mouth* than White's Hurtle Duffield. Hewitt suggests that the materials that went into Duffield's construction were extremely disparate, Francis Bacon providing the mess, Miller and Passmore the reticence (the latter pair being Marr's suggestion). Short of this, however, White's knowledge of successive schools of Sydney painters was deep-rooted.

The influence of European artists is also explored here. Prominent among these harbingers or mentors were Blake, van Gogh, Odilon Redon, Munch and, from a different paint-pot, Sickert, whose work provided the novelist with some good, stabilising grunge. And like many of us, he was swayed, provoked and persuaded by André Malraux's *Saturn: An Essay on Goya* when it came out in the late 1950s.

Friendship blurred White's clear eye, no doubt. His collection included some abominable Whiteleys, one of which is reproduced in the book. But his generosity, both to painters and to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, was on the grand scale. A thirty-six-page appendix documents the works he gifted to that Gallery, including fourteen de Maistres, fifteen Chris O'Dohertys and twelve James Cliffords. His buying was idiosyncratic and parochial. But as a quickly canonised novelist, he had nothing canonical to prove about the visual arts.

White's closeness to Sidney Nolan, and that savage break with him, are gently handled here, and there is a wonderful account of their cooperation shortly before the bust-up. White had just conceived his transvestite protagonist for *The Twyborn Affair*. 'For the rest of the dialogue White sat with Sidney Nolan on the Embankment improvising; Nolan was Eadie and White Edith.' What a splendid yarn that is, and what fun to visualise.

There are a few flaws, to use a Patrick White noun. Hewitt repeats the old furphy that A.D. Hope judged *The Tree of Man* as 'pretentious and illiterate sludge'. Despite his cavil at some of the prose, Hope was clear that this was a substantial novel. And the 'firm moral line of Poussin, Blake and de Maistre' is incomprehensible. Blake would surely have thought Poussin utterly dead wood.

The representation of visual art in words is always difficult, always problematical, even when as grandly wrought as Pater's dithyramb on Leonardo, or careful, like Bernard Smith on Glover's landscapes. For example, Hewitt strains too hard when she writes that: 'Psychic upheaval is expressing vertiginous dynamic lines in Munch's landscapes. White incorporates such symbolism into his novel.' But this is a deeply thoughtful study, always responsive to White and to the intensities of romantic modernism. It will appeal to some sections, at least, of White's Australia. Certainly, it will speak to art collectors in Sydney.