



A FRINGE OF LEAVES
THE EDGE OF THE SACRED

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One of the lingering mysteries of Australian culture is the persistence of the myth of secularism. The characteristic of a society sceptical of anything spiritual lies near the heart of the stereotype of the Australian identity itself: laconic, masculine, anti-intellectual, practical, grounded. But the assumption that the sacred has no place in Australia is quite erroneous. At one level, the political, the presence of the sacred in the form of religious affiliation has been ubiquitous: in the cultural and political polarity of Irish Catholic and Establishment Anglican Churches, in the vigorous and formative intervention of Church politics into Australian political life. One definition might see the role of the sacred as *fundamental* to Australian history. However, it is still the case that the “sacred,” in the form of religion, does not figure prominently in Australia’s cultural imagination. The remarkable thing about the sacred in Australian culture is that, despite this, it has been pursued in a rich diversity of ways in cultural production rather than overtly religious observance, particularly literary writing.

The issue for Australian writers has been the relocation of a received tradition of sacred representation in a different place, a re-placing of the sacred into a post-colonial context. This generated a powerful tradition of the sublime in the colonial nineteenth century, but the challenge of *resituating* the sacred remained and has continued to remain with Australian writers [Ashcroft]. Two of the most prominent and overt demonstrations of this project have occurred in the poetry of Francis Webb and the novels of Patrick White around the middle of the twentieth century [Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden]. This was a significant time for Australian culture. The period which saw the painters Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale and Arthur Boyd locate and revivify the metaphors of Australian experience, also saw an attempt by many Australian writers to locate [for the third time since the 1890s] the mythic sources of Australian experience of the land, with its inevitable suggestions of hardship, and the stereotypical qualities of toughness, resilience and independence with which it invested its occupants. For the next two decades many Australian writers, led by Webb and White, searched for a sense of the sacred, a Christian sacred relocated in Australian place. This drew heavily upon indigenous representations of the

sacred but also saw its project in a kind of contrapuntal relationship with that indigenous past.

This is the case with Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*. Written relatively late in White's career, this is one of his most adventurous and politically risky works, incorporating one myth, writing back to another, but bent on the task of imagining the possibility of a dimension of the sacred in Australian that might scandalise the received tenets of even his own faith. The myths on which the novel is balanced, the Eliza Fraser, or female captive myth, and the myth of the *Heart of Darkness*, both provide an historical and imaginative architecture for the narrative. But this novel, unlike other works devoted to "writing back," is more concerned with using the myths for an overarching purpose that suffuses, one might even say obsesses, White's work, the task of conceiving a way of approaching the sacred in the Australian bush, a way that breaks out of the strictures of a colonial religion. The fact that White does not formulate the nature of such a "re-placed" sacred is irrelevant to the task of the critique, shock and paradigm-shift in which he is engaged. The novel, quite clearly a journey into what civilisation might regard as the Heart of Darkness, is concerned with possibility and failure: the possibility of imagining a different way of experiencing the sacred and Ellen Roxburgh's ultimate failure to bring that experience back into the world.

In this respect, the novel is utopian in a way shared by many Australian novels: a prophetic view of the past that begins the task of imagining what *might have been*. But in order to demonstrate both possibility and failure the journey structure is important. The journey into the primitive heart of the country and back to the fringe of civilisation is a journey that writes back to *Heart of Darkness* in one major respect: it reverses the binary of light and dark, showing that the cultural and spiritual darkness brought to the country by the colonisers lies in great contrast to the possibilities that lie within it. For this purpose, the idea that the primitive "darkness" may be the avenue to light is the central opposition to Conrad's classic. The journey is one in which language and literature, the most far-reaching instruments of colonial power, are shipwrecked and the possibilities beyond them explored, but explored ultimately without success. What might have been has not occurred.

The structure of the novel is interesting from the point of view of the journey on which it embarks because it is geographical rather than temporal. It begins in Sydney when Austin Roxburgh and his wife Ellen are returning Home after a visit to Garnet Roxburgh in Van Diemen's Land; it moves back

in time to Van Diemen's Land to investigate Ellen's encounter with her deeper self; then to the journey on the *Bristol Maid* on which she recalls her Pygmalion-like rescue by Roxburgh; then to shipwreck, "kidnap" by the Aboriginal tribe; rescue by the escaped convict Jack Chance and back to civilisation.

The rough colonial town in which the narrative begins is a society out of place, superficial and maladjusted. The sense of imperial civilisation bringing order and good government to the wilderness is revealed in all its hypocrisy. In Sydney, the novel explores the ambivalence and at times absurdity of a genteel English civilisation transported to a setting in which it feels marooned and out of place. The manners and mores, the conventions and hypocrisies of this kind of society are all the more openly displayed by their transportation to this inappropriate locality. We think of Marlowe's view in *Heart of Darkness* of the company's home city as a "whited Sepulchre" [CONRAD 35]. This is precisely the tone of this view of colonial society except that here the whited sepulchre is transferred to the colony and clearly revealed by being so out of place. This theme of "displacement" is, of course, prevalent in Australian writing and the settler colony consciousness in general. But it is a stage of the journey towards the heart of darkness that is continued into Van Diemen's Land.

It is through the eyes of this marooned society that we first catch a glimpse of Ellen Roxburgh, not exactly beautiful and too silent by their standards. Although well married, she is already marginal, being from Cornwall, a "remote county," says Miss Scrimshaw, "Of dark people" [15]. This is a beautiful irony, but reinforces the fact that the *process* of marginalisation central to imperial rule occurs in Britain before it extends to the colonies. Ellen is a figure of the colonised "primitive" removed from her crude situation and raised in class through the disciplines of education and instruction. The metaphors with which Ellen is described bear a strange resemblance to the metaphors of country: she is a "mystery," "a clean sheet of paper which might disclose an invisible writing" [20]. So, as a "mystery" and a sign of the country herself, Ellen Roxburgh is protected by a shawl whose colours keep fluctuating "from sombre ash, through the living green which leaves flaunt in a wind, the whole slashed with black as far as the heavy woollen fringe" [28]. She is protected by the fringe of shawl just as the country itself is "protected" by the fringe of civilisation hugging its shores. Her difference, even primitiveness, is reinforced by her inability to share Austin's knowledge of Latin and his love of books. Ellen is loaned a book by her husband, "She had scarce read it, for it made her nervous to have a

gentleman's book in her keeping" [35]. The story of the marriage of this rough Cornish girl to the gentleman, Roxburgh, is a web of several interrelated discourses: he, like the empire in which he is a privileged member, colonises a person who is subject to imperial rule in terms of class, gender and culture. In all these respects she is subject to his greater power, but this power is nowhere more evident than in his passion for books.

Ellen becomes colonised by language and writing: she is encouraged to keep a journal and she regards it as an obligation to Austin and his mother to remake herself in this way.

After her marriage, her mother-in-law had advised her to keep a journal: *it will teach you to express yourself, a journal forms character besides by developing the habit of self-examination.* [47]

Austin fancies marrying Ellen and making her his work of art, his Pygmalion, so she is taken away from her own Cornish land to be installed as Roxburgh's wife and his "achievement." The civilising mission has been effected in her, the wilderness tamed by culture. The snobbishness of Roxburgh's literary interests suggests he symbolises a class and way of life that are both out of place in Australia and a demonstration of the dislocated power of imperial inscription. Ellen's own writing, her reconstruction of self, is an obligation of gratitude: "I owe it to them" [73]. Writing is a simulacrum, the imperial inscription constructing a narrative of self. Thus her journal, her own life story is a demonstration of the colonial power of history, a narrative of gratitude and purpose. Ellen's journey after the shipwreck is as much an escape from this discourse of civilised reconstruction as it is a journey into the new and wild.

Austin's passion for books signifies the power of writing and the power employed by imperial discourse to inscribe reality, and notions of culture and value, onto colonised space. His bookishness is not so much an effete passion for unreality, as a sign of the power of writing to create reality. Writing is also, in Austin, the entire edifice of Culture which imperial rhetoric employs in its mission of dominance and enlightenment. However, pertinent to the issue of the imported sense of the sacred, Austin's books are ultimately impotent, destroyed by water, vulnerable to the greater reality of Australian place. The shipwreck is therefore a metaphor for the dangerous experience of stepping off the safe support of the imperial language into a space where language must be re-learned, where, as Dennis Lee says, there is a cadence, "a luminous tumble, a sort of taut cascade" [LEE 3]. The ship of language may also be seen as the ship of State because the State and language are so intertwined. But even more so, the language is the safe

vessel of our traditional values, ethics, morality and conventions. When these are left behind the self becomes the Other and value, rationality, purpose and logic must be relearned. That which we take to be universal and self-evident becomes entirely open to question. This is borne out in the absurdity of Austin retreating into the wreck to retrieve his precious Virgil. Life had till now been a literary conceit for him, a man “clogged with waste knowledge and moral inhibitions” [146]. But clearly the solidity of the classic poetry stands for the solidity of language itself, of the discourse of civilisation that may well disintegrate as quickly as this flimsy book, not to say this flimsy man.

When they leave ship, they leave a physical safety, a perch, but also the safety of culture. In many different ways both sailors and passengers attempt to cling to a life they know, but they are constantly thrown upon the reality of a very different place. This is a metaphor, in dramatic terms, of the movement of consciousness that must occur in post-colonial space. It is a movement in which the received language must negotiate a perilous engagement with place. She, because less attached to the language of civilisation, is able to step beyond it towards the shimmering vision of self that had always existed for her in some form or another.

It is, ironically, in Van Diemen’s Land, almost literally the end of the earth, where the story of Ellen’s yearning for discovery, for Otherness, emerges. As a rough farm girl her greatest ambition had been to visit Tintagel, the Norman castle in Cornwall built on the legendary site of King Arthur’s Camelot. “What an unambitious ambition!” replies the gentleman, Mr Roxburgh, “Tintagel is practically on your doorstep” [57]. Yet when she is married to Roxburgh and her upward journey in society assured, the unfulfilled yearning remains, as she scratches the word TINTAGEL on an attic window in the Roxburgh mansion [77]. Tintagel is the yearning for spiritual possibility that will take many forms during her life. The time in Van Diemen’s Land is a struggle between her different selves: the one that could easily throw over the strictures of civilisation in an abandoned coarser self and the spiritual self that continues to seek Tintagel beyond the mundanity of life. Both selves are in their way a kind of transcendence of the oppressively ordinary life in which she is trapped. The Garnet brother-in-law reminds her of her coarser self [80], of the possibility for passion, lust and abandonment, like the country, both “cultivated and wild” [84]. It is these very different forms of transcendence that play a counterpoint in this place far from Home.

When the party attends a Christmas Day service, her frustration is rekindled by the manifest inadequacy, even irrelevance, of an imported religion in this place. The Protestant church is suitably free of adornment, but cold, and with a banner in gold lettering, "Holy Holy Holy Lord God of Hosts. While Mrs Roxburgh was pondering why the text should not be altogether to her taste, her brother-in-law came and took his place beside her" [107]. The proximity of religion and passion here is the proximity of two forms of escape that are totally at odds, but inhabit the same realm of unconventional and passionate desire.

As the hosts swept onward towards the foe, Mrs Roxburgh was again disturbed by her reluctance to accept the text on the riband garlanding the archway ahead. Yet there was no reason to complain when she was on the winning side. [108]

The colonial religion, both in its English character and overblown sense of triumph, is out of place, perhaps being too revealing, but just as out of place is the lust welling beneath the surface of her formal persona. The passion Garnet arouses is one form of escape from the strictures of "civilisation," but the sacred, so woefully trapped in imperial civilisation in the Christmas Day service, may dwell, we begin to sense, in some deeper and less acceptable experience of place.

Such an experience is one she recalls when she visited St. Hya's well as a young woman. This is an important incident from her past because it has the combined intimations of a religious rite and something "the presentiment of an evil she would have to face sooner or later" which represented some deeper level of experience and perhaps even of being. It is this ambivalent and mystical experience that links it later to the ritual experience of cannibalism. She undergoes a baptism in the well:

She found the well (or pool, rather) in the dark copse where they told her it was, its waters pitch black, and so cold she gasped as she plunged her arms. She was soon crying for some predicament which probably nobody, least of all Ellen Gluyas could have explained: no specific sin, only presentiment of an evil she would have to face sooner or later. Presently, after getting up courage, she let herself down into the pool, clothes and all, hanging by a bough. When she had become totally immersed, and the breath frightened out of her by the icy water, together with any thought beyond that of escaping back to earth, she managed, still clinging to the bough, to hoist herself upon the bank [110-111]

For years, or more precisely, since the training she received from her mother-in-law, she had taken it for granted that her Christian faith insured her against evil, until on Christmas Day doubts came faltering into her mind, even as the chariots of the hosts were charging through the stone arch towards assured victory. Nor could she look for assurance, here in a foreign country, in any of those darker myths of place which had dispersed her fears during her Cornish girlhood. [111]

The myths of this new place in which she finds herself seem to confuse the sacred with the baser instincts and so it is no surprise that falling from her horse in a little copse where she had previously dreamed of Garnet, she is discovered, and "rescued" by him. As he proceeds to consummate the passion sparked between them, "she closed her eyes again for an instant, to bask beneath the lashes in an experience of sensuality she must have awaited all her life [...] But this was the briefest sensation" [116]. Later, she ponders that Garnet is "the one who was less her seducer than the instrument she had chosen for measuring depths she was tempted to explore" [117]. The interweaving of passion and transcendence, of carnality and spirituality, are not only persistent, but may, we sense, open the door to some different experience of the sacred than that offered by the dislocated church in Van Diemen's Land.

The real journey begins when the *Bristol Maid*, the metaphoric ship of imperial state, the vessel of language itself, is wrecked on the Australian coast. Austin's pathetic fetishisation of his Virgil, retreating into the sinking ship to retrieve it, is a sign of the ultimate futility of the imperial language in the face of the immensity of the continent. Language and civilisation will be left behind, necessarily perhaps, if the darkness is to be penetrated. The novel engages head-on the modernist idea (suggested in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) that the primitive space symbolises the horrifying emptiness at the core of being. But White demonstrates that while Ellen discovers capacities she had only suspected, discovers a dimension of self which had only been intimated in her encounter with Garnet, it is by no means the horror of human life with which imperial discourse clothes the Other. Ellen finds in the urgent reality of hunger a complete logic in the Aboriginal lifestyle.

The key to the self-discovery and the attainment of some unforeseen, indigenous and darker concept of the sacred is, of course the issue of cannibalism. Clearly, White is unconcerned by the consequences of racial politics in the depiction of the Aboriginal tribe. Peter Hulme's superb description of the emergence of "Cannibal" into Western consciousness

during Columbus's journey to the Caribbean, reveals that the idea of anthropophagy, or eating of human flesh, became the absolute abject of civilised society only after the word "Cannibal" became attached to it. "Cannibal" and "native" became linked in the colonial project of demonisation and exploitation. No people in the world engage in cannibalism as a form of nutrition, yet the ascription of "cannibal" to savages begun in Columbus's journey became a central feature of the imperial adventures throughout the nineteenth century.

White's portrayal of the Aboriginal tribe as cannibals is therefore a politically perilous exercise, somewhat redeemed by the fact that he makes no attempt to explain what the function of eating human flesh might have had. Nor is it seen to be a common practice, either in black or white societies. Rather, the point of the cannibalism is to see the sacramental potential of breaking taboos, to expose in Ellen a perception, almost an epiphany, of the sacred possibilities accessible through some of the darker experiences of life. Cannibalism represents the very limit of rational being and this is its function in the novel: at the edge of the heart of darkness may lie the doorway to light. The transcendent experience of St. Hya's well is explicitly connected to what might easily stand as its debased opposite, the eating of human flesh. In the end, Ellen emerges from the moment of revelation at the heart of darkness unable to do anything but return to language and the façade of culture. But the journey itself is one that takes her in the direction of Tintagel, of St. Hya's well and illumination. Indeed, Ellen longed for a sense of "spiritual design" [247] in the actions of the Aborigines. What she discovers is the far more pressing rationality of hunger and necessity. Not far into her journey, she hears the natives wailing at their prayers:

for their wails sounded formal rather than spontaneously emotional [...] If she had ever worshipped a supreme being, it was by rote, and the Roxburgh's Lord God of Hosts, to whom her mother had also paid no more than lip service. Her father was of a different persuasion [...] A silent girl, she had inherited his brooding temper. As she now recognized, rocks had been her altars and spring-water her sacrament, a realization which did but increase heartache in a country designed for human torment, where even beauty flaunted a hostile radiance, and the spirits of place were not hers to conjure up. [248]

Here the Cornish farm girl finds an empathy with the Aborigines that for Mrs Roxburgh might be more difficult. These two selves are indeed in constant conflict and it is Ellen Gluyas perhaps who is most amenable to the spiritual possibilities that lie beyond the fringe of civilisation. This journey beyond the fringe is replete with perils. The wedding ring she attaches to

her fringe of leaves is her connection with wholeness and reality, a reality not perhaps as readily available to the Cornish farm girl. The dimensions of her journey beyond the fringe are revealed in a dream in which it was not Austin, but Garnet, who had possessed her [255]. The dream condenses the present experience of travelling beneath the surface of her self, finding the deeper layers even at the risk of her self-disgust. While Austin represents her official self, her civilised and respectable self, Garnet represents the coarser dimensions lying just below the surface.

The journey takes her even beyond the certainty of her name. This name that "they had attached to her visible person at the font" is possibly her last connection to the official language of her identity and now "this label of a name was flapping and skirring ahead of her" [270]. It is significant that at the moment of detachment from the language of self, she encounters something that cannot be easily fitted back into it. Smelling a "most delectable smell" she realised she had stumbled upon rites she was not intended to witness:

The morning air, the moisture dripping from frond and leaf disposed Ellen Roxburgh, naked and battered though she was, to share with these innocent savages an unexpectedly spiritual experience, when she caught sight, to one side of the dying fire, of an object not unlike a leather mat spread upon the grass. She might have remained puzzled had she not identified fingernails attached to what she had mistaken for fringes [271]

Whatever the meaning of the feast, it is not intended for her. But the moment that locates the centre of the book, the moment of ultimate breach and the stepping into the unknown occurs as she straggles after her "family."

As she went, she tried to disentangle her emotions, fear from amazement, disgust from a certain pity she felt for these starving and ignorant savages, her masters, when she looked down and caught sight of a thigh-bone which must have fallen from one of the overflowing dillies. Renewed disgust prepared her to kick the bone out of sight. Then, instead, she found herself stooping, to pick it up. There were one or two shreds of half-cooked flesh and gobbets of burnt fat still adhering to this monstrous object. Her stiffened body and almost audibly twangling nerves were warning her against what she was about to do, what she was, in fact, already doing. She raised the bone and was tearing at it with her teeth, spasmodically chewing, swallowing by great gulps which her throat threatened to return. But did not. She flung the bone away only after it was cleaned, and followed slowly in the wake of her cannibal mentors. [...] The exquisite innocence of this forest morning, its quiet broken by a single flute-note

endlessly repeated, tempted her to believe she had partaken of a sacrament. [272]

It is a sacrament that assaults the mores of civilised society and it is a moment that she tries unsuccessfully to forget:

In 'not remembering' she continually recalled the incident of incalculable days ago. It seemed less unnatural, more admissible, if only to herself. Just as she would never have admitted to the others how she had immersed herself in the saint's pool, or that its black waters had cleansed her of morbid thoughts and sensual longings [273]

This central revelation has occurred beyond explanation and even beyond language: "She could not have explained how tasting flesh from the human thigh-bone in the stillness of a forest morning had nourished not only her animal body but some darker side of the hungry spirit." [274]

The novel clearly alludes to the sacrament of Communion, which in its Catholic form, involving the doctrine of transubstantiation in which the Host actually becomes Christ's body, rather than a symbol, is strikingly close to the moment of Ellen's epiphany in the bush. The allusion is passing, but helps make the passage between disgust and transcendence a contradiction through which the sign of a de-institutionalised sacred experience might appear. White takes great risks here, not only with the political implications of Aboriginal cannibalism, but also with the possibility of absurdity: why should nibbling a thigh-bone have such transcendent effects? But the moment represents a point at which Ellen comes, not so much to the heart of darkness, as to the very edge of "civilised" existence, and it is such edges beyond which the sacred may be truly apprehended. Clearly the novel suggests that it is at this horizon of the known world that moments of real illumination may occur. The agency of this illumination is not so much the eating of human flesh as the passage to the very edge of acceptable existence, a plunge into a well much deeper and darker than St. Hya's.

In this respect, the novel's representation of indigenous subjects performs a stunning cultural reversal. While White refuses to enter into the consciousness of the Aboriginal people who rescue Ellen, and while they remain vague, even ghostly agents of her epiphany, the novel nevertheless reverses the myth of indigenous abjection. The indigenous subject, far from remaining the absolute other of civilised society through the trope of cannibalism, becomes the paradoxical agent of Ellen's (and potentially perhaps, white society's) entry into a totally different experience of sacred possibility. The abject Other of civilised society becomes the prophet of a hitherto unthinkable dimension of spiritual transcendence.

It is at this point, having reached the moment of illumination that she is rescued by a native who reveals himself to be an escaped convict. The sacrament of the human thigh-bone has represented a passage to a different dimension of the sacred for Ellen and with it a breakthrough to an understanding of what may be her "truer" self. The journey with Jack Chance is a journey beyond the body, the "edge" of her own continent, so to speak, beyond the mere lust that Garnet had inspired, but also beyond the prudishness that reacted so guiltily to the incident in the copse. The sacrament has initiated her into a journey beyond lust into a desperate experience of passion, but one at least truer to Ellen's self. Whether she can maintain the journey inward appears unlikely since civilisation intrudes, or beckons. She finds in Jack a lover completely free of the pretensions of genteel society and the mystery of a union that can only ever be a guilty affectation in her relationship with Austin Roxburgh.

The "chance" relationship with Jack Chance represents a fulfilment that has both personal and cultural dimensions. There are many "inner journeys" in *White*, but always the discovery made is that the self is not an object, but a subject in process, a subject who cannot be extracted from time and place, from culture and history. This is, in a very real sense, a *post-colonial* recognition and counters what many see as a modernist concern with fragmentation and wholeness. For one important demonstration of the *processural* nature of the subject is the importance of relationship, the importance of the Other. Significantly, this Other is never the Aboriginal Other, hard to imagine it otherwise, given the novel's faithfulness to the official details of the Eliza Fraser story.

This relationship with Jack Chance is also ambivalent because it is a stage on the way to her return to the "surface," a return to "normal civilised" society. But if Jack is a sign of the final coming together of the carnal and spiritual in love, it is a fragile and finally doomed unity. It is not so much Jack's role in bringing her back to settlement that is important as his function in demonstrating to her that the real darkness dwells in a society that can perform such "primitive" abuse on its miscreants and that love may have nothing to do with convention or normal expectation.

The journey is one of extremity. At the extreme limits of human existence perhaps not only may the self be found, but a final sacred oneness with the land. The fringe of leaves, therefore, has been to Ellen like a fringe of civilisation flimsily protecting the body, "the entire human façade of the body" [303] from exposure. The fringe of leaves she has continued to make to hide her modesty is the sign of the fragility of the protection, both social and psychological, that humans grasp for the business of avoiding their true

selves. On the journey back to Morton Bay, even the body itself becomes a "human façade."

This is a point at which she may become her true self at one with the earth. When she falls down exhausted at one stage:

She would have continued lying on the ground and perhaps become her true self: once the flesh melts, and the skeleton inside it is blessed with its final articulate white, amongst the stones, beneath the hard sky, in this country to which it can at last belong. [313]

However, the sacramental experience still remains a gap between her and Jack. Beginning to ask him at one point if he had tasted human flesh, she diverts it to a question about Dugong:

It was a relief at least to have averted the dangers surrounding her experience of tasting human flesh on a morning the stillness and pearliness of which seemed to set it apart. But with the passing of time she would not have known how to exculpate herself, or convey to the convict the sacramental aspect of what could only appear as a repellent and inhuman act. [315]

At this point Jack represents for her the possibility of human contact, of a discovery of a transformed self in the experience of love. But she realises "He would not have understood, any more than he had recognized the semblance of a feather boa she had hung frivolously round her neck" [315]. It is not only class that separates them, but even here in this land beyond class and civilisation, the enormity of the line she has crossed still stands as an ontological gulf. This is a metonym for the gulf between the superficial colonial fringe, with its establishment religion of the Lord of Hosts, and the inner discovery, the discovery of a self beyond the fringe, engaging in an atavistic sacrament, a self finally belonging to the land, but in so being, cut off from the fringe of colonial protection that hides it.

At a point at which their love seems to blossom [a time when the prospect of their union seems possible, the ring having been lost] the journey is over. Climbing a tree followed by the determined Jack who puts their lives at risk is metonymic of the relationship between them. At the very moment a forbidden and darker love appears to be possible, a love enabled by her new, darker self, she climbs the tree and sees civilisation, the fringe of colonial respectability that will now come to clothe her truer self. When she catches sight of Oakes' farm, their love is destroyed at the very moment of its realisation.

When Ellen staggers back naked into the Oakes' farm, she is crossing the boundary between two dimensions of consciousness. She staggers back into

discourse, a process represented in a similar trajectory by Gemmy Fairly returning to settlement in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*. The difference is that Ellen is haunted by her sense of betrayal, that she has freedom and Jack hasn't. The chapter seems longer than it need be but this is because it shows the relentless way the "civilised" subject is re-inscribed by various means, the way myth emerges, the way history fabricates, the way in which tendencies which are shared with the debased Other, such as cannibalism, are exorcised and negated. Ellen's passivity in concurring with all that her well-wishers plan for her, even to an imminent marriage to Jevons, demonstrates on one level that she has reached places that have changed her forever, but also how easy it is to concur with pressures which seem to suggest an ordered universe.

There is never a sense of arrival or completion in White's depiction of the "re-placed" or embodied sacred. The retreat from the sublime and the triumphalist that characterises ocularcentric views of transcendence on the one hand, and received religion on the other, could never arrive at the utopia of post-colonial completion. That would ironically occasion the degeneration of the very vision that impels him. But there are intimations of ways in which the encounter with the totally Other can lead to a radically different view of the sacred. Ellen's encounter with the Aboriginal "communion" as she describes the cannibal feast to the Commandant, Captain Lovell, is mirrored, it appears, in Pilcher's experience, in which lots were drawn among the survivors to see who would be eaten [an account that alludes to Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life*, but seems also to have historical precedent in parties of escaped convicts]. Pilcher's ambivalent recognition of the sacred comes in the chapel he builds, more a part of the landscape than a consecrated building, "something which at first suggested floating, flickering light rather than any solid form: it was such a refractive white" [389], but an attempt to conceive a form of sacred attuned to the place.

Ellen arranges to meet Pilcher and they touch on the taboo of eating human flesh [377]. Pilcher would have various reasons for not relishing this meeting, since, in the Eliza Fraser events, the pinnacle which he led mutinied and left the longboat with the Captain and Mrs Fraser to its own devices. This guilt, of course, is far outweighed in the novel by the memory of having reached the "heart of darkness" of human behaviour, of having eaten human flesh. It is this which Pilcher's chapel, his refusal to return to "civilisation," and his generally defeated countenance, demonstrate a desperate attempt to make atonement.

White is serious about religious experience and equally serious in his attempts to reject orthodoxy. The chapel Ellen stumbles into is rough, a bird's nest on the communion table "which may or may not have reached there by accident" [390]. But its roughness and "locatedness" has a powerful effect: "She did not attempt to interpret a peace of mind which had descended on her [...] but let the silence enclose her like a beatitude" [391]. For Pilcher, building the church is an act of atonement for what civilisation condemns as an abomination. Yet the way the chapel fits into its environment suggests that the region beyond the "fringe" of civilisation, clinging to the edge of the continent, may hold experiences of spirituality and sacrament that civilisation can never accommodate. It is to this inner dimension of experience perhaps that this crude "unconsecrated" chapel provides a kind of half-way house.

Ellen's experience of the sacrament of eating human flesh was perhaps equally ambivalent but fitted into the mystical pattern of her experience at St. Hya's well. In both cases, hers and Pilcher's, there has been a glimpse of the sacred Other that both find impossible to fit back behind the fringe of civilisation. Looking back to the chapel, Ellen sees the disappearing form of Pilcher, and in reaching the settlement, "sensed at once that something out of the ordinary had happened" [391]. When the cutter arrives she refrains from joining the general excitement: "Had the walls but opened at a certain moment, she might even have turned and run back into the bush, choosing the known perils, and nakedness rather than an alternative of shame disguised." [392]

Ellen, it is clear, in meeting the merchant Jevons on the ship, will retreat from the touch of transcendence she has encountered: "I don't know what I any longer believe," she tells the clergyman Mr Cottle [385]. But she has returned behind the fringe of civilisation and the novel clearly intends to be inconclusive about the effects of her discovery of the sacred. Yet it is clear that the experience of the heart of darkness, the dark heart of an uncivilised sacred, will have an effect on Ellen forever.

This perhaps is the agency of art: the introduction of an unthinkable possibility that opens the door for possibility itself. It is also the agency of the post-colonial, the capacity to experience a reality beyond the fringe of colonial civilisation. White, the renegade Anglican, is committed to a vision of the sacred attuned to, and emerging from Australian place. Such a thing has possibly not yet occurred. But its possibility lies constantly on the horizon of consciousness because the creative writers, venturing far beyond the limits of orthodoxy have shown the possibility of such an Australian sacred.

The heart of darkness has revealed itself as the possible heart of illumination, if only the fringe of civilisation, an expendable fringe of leaves, is torn away. When it goes, so goes the perfect, but illusory, certainty of love symbolised in the ring Ellen loses. But in its place comes the horizontal possibility, the provisional region of discovery. This novel will not make the mistake of formulating a utopian resolution to this deep hope for an Australian sacred. But it is the function of language, of literature, to open the imagination to the possibility of an embodied, proximate Australian sacred.

The unlikely occurrence of the spinster, Miss Scrimshaw, declaring that she wished she were an eagle, "to soar," "to reach the heights" [402] provides the pivot of the novel's ending. For this, more than anything, rebukes Ellen's own inability to reach the heights briefly glimpsed in the bush, not the least in the "abominable sacrament" she so fleetingly encountered. The end is a comment on the failure of aspiration, the deflection of possibility that imagination has opened up in the scene of Aboriginal communion. The final words, describing Miss Scrimshaw, are equally directed at Ellen, a doleful reflection of the inability or refusal of "civilised" human beings to take the opportunities for discovery, for flight, for transcendence:

For however much crypto-eagles aspire to soar, and do in fact, through thoughtscape and dream, their human nature cannot but grasp at any circumstantial straw which may indicate an ordered universe. [405]

Ultimately, it is Ellen's return that describes the failure of Australian spirituality. Even she grasps at the straw of an ordered universe.

Cannibalism has not only been the paradoxical indication of some sacred possibility, but more pertinently, the indication of the failure or refusal of the civilised consciousness to seize the opportunities offered the imagination. White is, unsurprisingly, pessimistic about the capacity of the predecessors of Sarsaparilla to take the opportunities for renewal and transformation offered by a new country. But his novels persist in reaching out for the possibility of an embodied, a "re-placed" sacred, whether apprehended in love, in surprise, or in determination available to the inhabitants of this unrealised utopia.

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White's novel *A Fringe of Leaves* presents to us a mystery that affects almost every person's life. It is the mystery that we do not allow ourselves to act freely. We always seem to put some sense of order and structure into our lives. The mystery in this case, is presented to us through the travails of Ellen, who generally leads a structured life until her experiences after the shipwreck of the *Bristol Maid*. It is at the end of the novel where we see that Ellen has become a person who is free from the structures of life, who accepts the inevitability of disorder, while the rest of the character Patrick White's "*A Fringe of Leaves*" is exactly that, a historical romance set in Australia in the 1830s, when much of the country was as yet unconquered by its English and Irish settlers, a good number of whom were convicts. *Fringe* was first published in 1976, but in many ways it reads as a late-Victorian novel. There's a tremendous amount of Thomas Hardy about it, in subject matter, in narrative structure, and in its bitter-to-bittersweet outlook on humankind. There is a touch of the chaos in *Fringe of Leaves*. It is not boring and it is one of White's better novels. It has a good story and I will not reveal the plot beyond what the publisher reveals on the book jacket.