

IV

The Alienated Australian Intellectual

I wrote this essay in 1963, but on rereading it I have felt that it was better to leave it as it stood than to try to rewrite it, with some changed points of reference, in the terms of a decade or so later. A few aspects of what is said may have become dated; but the essence of the problem as stated, it seems to me, remains unaltered. Again, though much more could be said on the subjects broached, I feel that the essay stands well enough as an introduction to the studies of particular Australian writers which here follow.

In recent years the term *alienation* has become ever more fashionable, and is continually used by persons who have little or no knowledge of what it means. The reason for the vogue of the term is the discovery of Marx's 1844 Paris Manuscripts, which were first published in Moscow in 1932, became known to a few intellectuals in the following decade, but only reached a wide audience in the postwar period. These writings opened a new dimension in Marx's thought, or rather they made this dimension for the first time clear and accessible. Lukács, for instance, in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), had already realized that Marx's work was built up on the concept

of alienation; he did so because of his profound knowledge of Hegel, which enabled him to divine how Marx had taken over and transformed, as the foundation of his thinking, the Hegelian scheme in which alienation plays a key-part. Hegel saw alienation as simply a necessary phase of the spirit's process of objectifying and realizing itself: the moment of separation and division when the spirit confronts the objective world as otherness, before it proceeds to overcome the antagonism by grasping the essential unity of the opposites and thus discovers the alien thing as an aspect of itself. Feuerbach adopted the term to describe the way in which religion robs earthly life of its significance, its essence, by an alienated version of man as God and of earth as otherworld; then Moses Hess took the decisive turn, seeing money as the alienating force that cuts man off from his own reality and turns all relations upside down in his mind. On the basis of the work of Hegel, Feuerbach and Hess, Marx developed his own highly complex ideas of estrangement and of alienation, which the Paris Manuscripts set out. It is sufficient here to point out that he saw the division of labour (above all the division of mental and physical labour) and the concomitant systems of exploitation as playing a central role in the alienation of man from himself, from his fellows, and from nature, and that he laid stress on the consequent separation of the intellectual and sensuous elements in man, with particular degradation of the latter. The aim of all significant struggle he saw as the quest for wholeness. (His term *estrangement* I take to apply primarily to the unresolved conflict of man confronting a largely unknown and overwhelming nature.)

What Marx was attempting to deal with had close affinities with what T.S. Eliot has called dissociation of sensibility, a breakdown of sensuous wholeness that becomes especially apparent from the seventeenth century on; what Ruskin passionately realized as the fragmentation of man in a mechanized world; what Morris saw as the withering-out of all joy

from the human personality through the ending of labour as a creative process concerned with the making of whole things; what modern social and psychological analysts of all sorts have described as a worsening world-condition of anxiety, frustration, and rootlessness; what others have seen in the fields of science as a trend of extreme specializations that threaten to destroy all possibility of any effective general knowledge; and so on.

I have made these preliminary remarks so that we may have some idea of what we are discussing when we turn to the Australian intellectual and his alienations. We have to understand that we are not dealing with some isolated phenomenon, but are looking at a particular example of a universal problem; and we must be able to distinguish what is here particular and what is general. My stimulus in setting out on this search is the September 1962 issue of *London Magazine*. For there we find several Australian writers jeering at the Australian scene as though they have no more responsibility to it or for it than if they were superior visitors from Mars making their derisive report. Here we have persons alienated in the simple sense that they feel quite outside the thing they describe; they are cut-off and view the idiot scene from the other side of the asylum-wall.

Now, if an intellectual is worth tuppence he clearly must respond to the alienating pressures around him. If he is not aware of those forces, and aware of them with passion and anger, he is aware of nothing and deserves no attention; he is floating on the surface of things without spiritual or artistic penetration. In thinking the *London Magazine* sort of diatribe to be wrongheaded, one is not then protesting against an awareness of what the alienating forces do to men; one is raising the question of what that awareness implies, what artistic and moral problems it precipitates, and what are the various directions in which it can look and move.

A crucial point about Australian culture is that in the pioneering last-century, when production was at a comparatively crude level and the division-of-labour correspondingly simple, there existed among the common folk a definite sort of popular culture, with its key-emotion in "mate-ship." Because of the situation, this popular culture was something quite different from anything in Europe or even in the United States; it had its valuable elements despite its harsh limitations. However, by the turn of the century its validity was waning and the need to break through into new regions and levels of culture was growing every more apparent. The need for a critical attitude to the culture of mateship had arrived as a national necessity, and we see it starting in such work as Barbara Baynton's. The conflict thus opened up is still in various degrees unresolved.

On the one hand we meet an effort to overvalue the pioneering phase and its expressions because of their simple sense of human solidarity, or rather of the solidarity of the commonfolk against the obvious large scale exploiters, whether the State or the squatters, the banks or the British investors. And because of this overvaluation there is the effort to carry on straight from the old forms in situations where they are increasingly inadequate or even phoney. On the other hand we meet the wholesale rejection of the pioneering phase and its expressions as a mere vulgarism that is best forgotten, or a depressing conviction that, while the rest of the world has continued to grow, the mass of Australians still remain hopelessly tethered to the superficial and sentimental coarseness of the past, which is now seen as philistinely false. Thus in his *London Magazine* piece Ray Mathew writes:

"This convention in politics, sex, and religion has not changed because Australia has not changed. Nothing has happened to force Australians to reconsider themselves and their values. *The War* and *The Depression* — the shibboleths of my generations's childhood — merely emphasised the protective possibilities of union, against the foe and against authority, the

way mates help or lie if one is hungry or AWL. Despite the achievements of some writers and some painters, most of us are still sheltering under the nineties image of ourselves. Discontent with society is expressed usually by a renewed nostalgia for the world the nineties writers reconstructed."

There is a tincture of truth in that statement; but only a tincture. I hope to show in my following comments that it is the kind of truth which one discovers as the only truth when one awakens to something of the nature of alienation and its omnipresence, and when one halts at that first blink of separation-out, with a sense of total alienation from the social scene that has begotten one. It implicitly denies that the awakener is himself a part of the scene; for if he were a part he would have to explain what there is in the scene so different from what he describes as to bring about his own consciousness of disillusion and opposition. His consciousness appears as something quite outside the situation of which it is in fact a product; we can then describe it as alienated, but unaware of alienation except in a passive way.

I have tried to show in my essay on Katharine Susannah Prichard that the direct transition from the pioneering expressions into an artform related to our own world is possible. To achieve that transition the writer needed on the one hand knowledge of the pioneering community when it was still a vital aspect of national life, and on the other hand an understanding of the political and economic forms of struggle which gradually compact an industrial proletariat and drive it along the confused, complex track toward socialist brotherhood — a journey that has its aspects of tedium and corruption, and its more-than-zigzag involutions, as well as its heartening aspects. But this does not mean that every novelist has to be a Katharine Susannah Prichard; there are as many ways in which the problems of art and truth can be approached as there are individual talents. However, Katharine Susannah Prichard stands out as an example of the maximum extent to which the past

elements can be validly absorbed and carried forward into our own world. Her work in any event cannot be repeated, since no young writer today could have her roots; he would have to begin from a quite different stage of the national formative process.

By the rapid industrialization that went on in Australia during the second World War a new situation was brought about; or rather, the conflict that had been building up ever since Barbara Baynton, emerged with an enormously intensified force. For alienation, in Marx's sense, had inevitably developed at a pace and to an extent with which nothing in the past national life was comparable. While making the problem very much more acute and distressing, this development has also made possible a deepened consciousness of what has happened, what is at stake, what is the nature of alienation and how one struggles against it. There has appeared the chance of clarifying the confused battle that has been going on ever since Christopher Brennan took a *symboliste* Eden as the touchstone of criticism of Australian society and Norman Lindsay flung the Nietzschean challenge of his early work into that society's furious face.

It is absolutely right, let me stress again, that the intellectual should wish to expose and attack the alienations of which the mass of the people are unaware, however much they may suffer from them; and in this urge his impulses are inevitably ambivalent, contradictory, and complex. His problem is not, and cannot be, one of simply separating-out the lords of the system and attacking them — though if he is to be effectively clear-sighted, he will have to grasp to some extent the mechanisms of oppression, exploitation, and power-domination which play a key-part in perpetuating and deepening alienation. His artistic problem must be incomparably wider than the political task of isolating and pillorying the persons or groups who supremely profit by the systems of alienation. He may, and should, feel pity for the victims of the system, but he is forced

at the same time to recognize the complicity of the victim in his own murder. For if the victims were to face their own nature, the whole system would end overnight. Compassion and anger must then go hand in hand, and will certainly become inextricably entangled in the artist's images, his definitions. There is nothing wrong about that so long as his sense of values remains unaffected, so long as he sees the link-up between the individual distortion and the general structure and movement of alienation.

From one angle then he must fight against the pressures that tend to overwhelm him with a sense of the hopeless and pervasive alienations at work in people. In this mood he cannot but echo the words of the Russian poet Yesenin-Volpin, which, as I write, are being denounced in the Soviet Union: "I know not why I live, / Nor what I want from the animals who populate this evil Moscow." That is, if the poet, as I take him, is using his words in a sense that implies the possible substitution of London, New York, Sydney, etc., for Moscow in his lines. A sense of horror before the vast unconsciousness of the alienating forces that mould and condition people is inevitable and, in its place, necessary and salutary. Yesenin-Volpin's terms might be defended as precisely correct from a Marxist viewpoint, since Marx stressed that alienation cuts man off from his own senses, which then become dehumanized, animal, degraded and insofar as alienation exists in a socialist country, this process of dehumanization is present, even if not in the same way and in the same complex of relationships as in a class-world.¹

But if this anguished discovery of alienation is the root of all wisdom today, it does not mean that we can halt at it. For the process that has made us aware of alienation cannot but carry at its heart a system of values that condemns alienation root and branch. The horror is meaningless unless it implies an outlook that denies alienation and opposes it. The notion that

one can expound the doctrine of alienation from some superior or neutral point of vantage is thus the first and worst falsification that one can make of one's realizations; and it is inescapably present if one resorts merely to denunciations, whether in direct rhetoric or in the indirect form of art-images. Such a notion seems to me present in fulminations like those of Ray Matthew.

A second falsification seems to me to come about if one uses one's vision of the alienated nature of one's people in their way of life in order to excoriate them as nationally peculiar in their distortions and backwardnesses. Each people, it is true, has its national tradition of the philistine and the insensitive, and its intellectuals need to know and understand this tradition. But they should see it as one aspect of a wider problem, in a perspective of world-philistinism. To stigmatize the Australians as specially and peculiarly backward and empty — with the implication that the English whom one is addressing are a superior cultured race, lacking in all such stupidities and aberrations — is to confuse the issue at the outset and to reduce the serious problem of attacking alienation to a game of bear-baiting and cock-pelting. Indeed it is to show oneself afflicted with the barren and arrogant sense of unsubstantiated superiority that one is castigating in the herd.²

As I have said, all this is not a new problem for Australia, though since 1945 its extent and its intensity have probably kept on fast increasing. It began importantly when Chris Brennan, Norman Lindsay, Hugh McCrae and others launched their onslaughts, their attempts at kinds of art that had little or no connection with the pioneering phases. And yet, for all their bitter sense of separation, they had also their own brands of union with the people, the nation. Brennan, with his vision of wholeness symbolized in the Eden that "lives by strife / of loving powers that all may reach / the plenitude of beauty and

life," expresses in *The Burden of Tyre*, written against imperialist war at the height of his powers, both his anger and his feeling of unity with "the Folk."

Another day is dead and they
have lived it not: such price they pay
daily, to fend the hunger-dread,
that death may find them in safe bed.

Pale wretches! yet this hour at least
they spend, when yon dark hive releas'd,
in dreams that soar beyond the night
and cheer the heart to front the light:

for lo! each steadfast window fire;
would you not say, tho' stars may tire
and the heavens age, man yet maintains
his watchfires o'er the homeless plains;

close worlds of love and hope, that glow
more golden-soft for that they know
how one undying fire in all
burns, and the march harks to one call . . .

Lines that may be relevantly cited here; for they bring out powerfully the way that a great artist cannot but feel a twofold impulse in regarding the city of alienation, a scorn and a love. Brennan here recognizes in the dream of the exploited and deprived the counterpart of his own vision of Eden. In a different way, Norman Lindsay, while violently repudiating the pioneering phases, yet hoped to help in bringing about a great renaissance in Australia, in which all vital past forms would be taken over and revalued. In despising nationalism, he paradoxically uttered his faith in a national rebirth that was to be brought about by the arts.

Such conflicts had their vital aspect; and we find them again

in the 1920s, begetting such poets as Kenneth Slessor and R.D. FitzGerald, while Vance Palmer in his own way, as Katharine Susannah Prichard in hers, drew on the pioneering world, but with a critical focus that purged the earlier tradition of elements liable to turn into falsity and sentimentality if applied to a more developed Australian society. At the same time various weaknesses or insufficiencies in the Australian situation tended to make writers look to England and visit there. On the one hand there was the poverty of the critical tradition and the consequent feeling that a merely Australian reputation was of little value; and on the other hand the primitiveness of the book-producing trade system, which made it impossible for an author to live on his work unless he were ready to do a crushing amount of hackwork as well. But though Lawson, Prichard, Palmer, McCrae and many others felt impelled to try their hand in England for a while, they were never dominated by English values and soon returned home. Whatever emotions of national inferiority they had to struggle with, they overcame them; they found a fruitful relation to the Australian scene, however numerous may have been their criticisms of it or their angers at its frustrating aspects.³ It is only in the last decade that the exodus of intellectuals has become large-scale and significant.

I am told that now some 20,000 Australians visit England yearly by sea, and some 12,000 by plane, and that about half are persons who plan to stay in England. A large proportion of these are members of the arts or professions; and it is certainly unfortunate for Australia — at any time, but particularly at the present phase of its expansion as an industrialized country — that it should lose these intellectuals. What is of interest in relation to our argument is that this exodus should come about just as it is becoming possible for the previous Australian weaknesses to be overcome and as the situation in England is weakening and worsening all along the line.

There is thus no comparison with the movement of the

American exiles in the 1920s; for those intellectuals clustered in Paris, which was then a centre of important intellectual advance and artistic experiment, and despite the inevitable casualties, many of them were able in time to return with important gains to the United States. England in the 1950s and 1960s, a decayed imperialism (as the USA is rudely rubbing in at the moment), has had no outstanding new talents, no vanguard movements of any wide significance — unlike England of the 1920s and 1930s when important things were happening culturally. I pointed this out to an intelligent young Australian in London, and she was staggered. She considered England still the cultural pace-setter and, when pressed, cited the theatre, which is certainly the brightest spot in the intellectual sphere though hardly vital enough to justify London as a centre of pilgrimage. She added: "And anyway it's impossible yet to get a real reputation in Australia. Look at Nolan. He's achieved fame of a serious and stable kind only by coming here." No doubt there is truth in the latter statement, which brings out some of the elements of cultural immaturity yet holding back Australian developments. But I cannot think the solution lies either in mass-exodus to England or in the acceptance of English judgments as constituting the sole way for an Australian to gain a widely accepted status in the arts. We see in such attitudes a survival of the old inferiority-complex, which once had understandable roots in the comparative backwardness of many national fields, the lingering tradition of colonial dependence, and all the rest of it — an inferiority-complex which had as its complement an aggressive affirmation of bumptious superiority that still persists. As a friend recently said to me: "You need only look in at the pub near Australia House where they sell Australian beer to have any doubts settled as to who is the master-race."⁴

Certainly then we find many of the worse elements from the old Australian tradition still alive in the new situation, and

growing yet more unpleasant in the process: the earlier forgivable crudities and narrow outlooks corrupted into suburban stereotypes. And here is a field crying out for the satirist. But the satire cannot be artistically or socially effective if its wielder is in any way himself the dupe of the situation. I have tried above to suggest the pitfalls lying all around for the intellectual who begins to awaken to the realities of postwar Australia — and the postwar world in general. And I think we can exemplify them at length from the work of Patrick White, who is certainly the most talented writer coming up in postwar Australia and who appears with an excellently characteristic story ("A Cheery Soul") in the complained-of issue of *London Magazine*. White is sharply and continuously aware of existing in a society of alienation, and this is what gives the sustained force and passion to his work. He is therefore a portent in Australian letters and can be truly said to mark a radically new phase. But at the same time he shows the blind spots to which I earlier drew attention as the dangers besetting the intellectual who grasps with any fullness the forces of dehumanization and inner division let loose by a matured capitalism. All his weaknesses stem from an unconsciousness of his own relation to the world he condemns, and for this reason he is unable to define relationships within that world itself. His people can collide, but not really impact; they are in the last resort dummies of isolated force, of totally intuned and alienated essence.

Because the world Patrick White describes is one of pure alienation, it is not Australia any more than it is England or the USA. The wholly isolated individual cannot belong to any group or nation; he is abstracted and abstract, a cipher of anguish and loss. This quality in White's work puzzled me at first. While on the one hand he was obviously writing about Australia, in effect there was not the least fraction of a tone, colour, characteristic, etc., which had the faintest Australian note about it; in reading *The Tree of Man* I kept thinking I was

reading about the American Middle West, since the text had more literary affinities with the United States than with anywhere else, and had actual affinities (in its essential material) with no nameable country whatever. This sheer anonymity gives the book its undeniable and massive unity of effect, but also begets tedium, since nothing new is said, or can be said, after the first section.

In *Riders in the Chariot* White tries to overcome the rather crushing monotony of a vision of mere alienation by adding as sympathetic characters the few who by totally and voluntarily contracting out of a corrupted world achieve the vision of wholeness, of union with universal life. He comes closer here to communicating a genuine horror and to defining the existence of pure wells of feeling amid the socially-demented scene; but the inability to deal with more than the hopelessly-isolated individual deadens the impact. For this reason I cannot accept Matthew's evaluation: "In such a world, White's *Riders in the Chariot* is a rabbit-killer, a blow so foul it can be forgotten only in the sensual orgy of the Agricultural Show which each capital stages annually; there — sight, sound, smell, and touch — all combine to remind us of our world of once-upon-a-time." If White's novel was merely a debunker of the Australian once-upon-a-time, it would be small beer. The enemy is not the sentimental carrier-on of the past, as White himself well knows; the enemy is the entire world of dehumanizing forces, in which, for Australia, the falsification of the national character in terms of outdated attitudes is only a minor factor, a mask for the deeper distortions. And the trouble is that the novel is not a rabbit-killer, much as I would like to hail it as such. White's inability to conceive any answer, any defiance of alienation, beyond the spontaneous harmonies of the crushed but unresentful soul, makes him unable to oppose effectively the thing that he so sincerely and fiercely hates. In the last resort it unites him with the hated thing, since no real alternative to the latter exists. There is thus an unresolved

contradiction between his act of writing, the whole motive force of the act, and the picture he presents.

To discuss White has not been irrelevant to my thesis. Though he is "sticking things out" in Australia and is doing his best to attack the enemy there, his inability to come to any terms with his own allies, with the elements in the people and the culture that also fundamentally repudiate the evil forces, marks him out as in the last resort manipulated by those forces. He is unconscious of the way in which his revolt has been generated; he flattens and narrows the complex social and spiritual pattern and thus shuts himself out of the universe of his own perception and creation. And what we see powerfully expressed in his work is what we see expressed in more trivial and superficial ways in the other alienated intellectual trends I have discussed. Further, it is clear after reading his early novel, *The Living and the Dead*, that many of his anomalous characteristics, such as the lack of any organic Australian qualities in the midmost of his grappling with Australian essences, derive from the fact that his roots lie in English culture and society. *The Living and the Dead*, though lacking the remarkably sustained force of his Australian novels, shows him at home in the environment of genteel English middle-class decay; here we recognize from last to first an authentic note, a concreteness, in the description of people, their social setting, their interrelations. What he has done in the Australian novels is to take external Australian conditions and details, and to infuse into them abstractions born from his English experience. If only he could come down to earth in Australia, the abstractions would become concrete, and his profound sense of what is truly evil in our world would at last find its effective outlet. But to do this he would have to realize what is alienated in himself as well as what is alienated in the world.

It seems to me that to the half-truth of Yesenin-Volpin's lines, we must add the other half-truth: "I know why I live / and what I want from the people who inhabit this human city."

Then we attain the balanced relation which is implicit in the lines I cited from Brennan. But despite what seem to me the limitations of Patrick White's work, he has set Australian culture problems that cannot be ignored; he has permanently changed the perspective. What else can be brought forward as truly deep-going expressions of urban Australia, or what is done to people by the maturing industrial and capitalist formations? There is a handful of poems by Brennan that precociously grasp what is happening and going to happen; and there is Frank Hardy's *Power without Glory*. It may come as something of a shock to find Hardy's book linked in any way with White's; but in fact Hardy's novel is the only one that goes deeply and extensively into an Australian exploration of the Evil City. The overt stress on the political purpose, and the violent struggles waged round the publication of the book, have prevented critics from recognizing that Hardy has in fact a complex attitude toward his material. He is fascinated by the corruption he denounces, he sets out to expose West, and does so, but at the same time he makes West both a symbol of corrupter and corrupted, of socially-explained dereliction and of impalpable and ubiquitous evil. A rich interplay of hate and love goes to the unfolding of his character; what the book gives us in the end is a whole darkening phase in the development of a people, not an exposure of dirty work in some segments of the Labor Party. Hardy in writing the book lacked the many skills of White in handling his material; but he came closer to the full creative problem, to the revelation of what alienation is, in a human world, in a world struggling to be human or at least to preserve a criterion of what human wholeness is.

References:

1. I take it that alienation exists under socialism, since its prime sources include the State, money-values, commodity-production, division of labour, and mechanized science-systems. Insofar as a socialist society is developing all-round polytechnical education, drawing people into shaping and controlling their own lives at all levels, starting off the withering-away of the State, ending the use of money, and creating a unitary dialectical

(and non-mechanist) system of thought in all spheres, it is weakening alienation, which however can be eliminated only under communism proper. There is thus a difference here in direction between a class-society and a socialist one. The latter must as a whole move, despite delays and setbacks, towards the ending of alienation; the former despite all inner struggles, can only strengthen it.

What however we have sadly learned is the strength that can be generated by the forms of alienation under socialism, the particular kind of false-consciousness that those forms develop. A socialist country can plead that while it remains only a segment of world-society, it needs to strengthen the state, the armed forces and so on, as it will otherwise be attacked by imperialist forces; but this claim is used as an alibi for failing to do many things to advance socialist democracy which can certainly be done under the circumstances.

2. In much of the recent discussions on the Australian myth or tradition, the distinction of the typical from the average has been ignored. The aggregations in a few big cities do not impair the typicality of the pioneer. Much of the attempt to discredit the "myth" is simply based in political reaction. As Peter Porter wrote in *The Listener* (10 January 1963): "The Australian myth has always been a proletarian; and the suggestion is made now that the country really owes more to the ambitious middle-class emigrants of the last century who brought a sense of continuing culture to the raw continent . . . The New Right in Australia is now fully in the open."

Australian Civilization (1962), a symposium edited by Peter Coleman, is characteristic of the reactionary position, mingling correct criticisms with fundamental fallacy.

3. True, many Australian writers did like myself get stuck in the English situation and fail to return, but one cannot say that this happened to an extent widely harmful to their homeland. I myself never "decided" to stay here; circumstances engulfed me, as I tell in *Fanfrolico and After*, after the failure of the attempt to breach English culture by the Normal Lindsay Renaissance, Australian brand. It was in coming down to earth in the English situation that I learned to value justly the whole Australian tradition and realize my roots there.

4. I am not suggesting that there are no virtues or vitalities in the English scene; but I would argue that they are inadequate to the needs of the situation; and that in this respect the postwar period makes a poor showing against the works and activities of the 1930s. Australians should not look to London as a world-centre from which they take their criteria.

The *Times Literary Supplement* (25 January 1963), reviewing Bernard Smith's *Australian Painting* (1962), concluded with the comment that Australian art has shown a capacity for continual self-renewal and that "it compares favourably with that of many other nations including, certainly, our own — though perhaps that is not really saying very much." That puts the point mildly.