

# *The Black Volcanic Hills of Meroë: Fire Imagery in Patrick White's 'The Aunt's Story'*

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WRITING in *Southerly* of *The Aunt's Story*, Thelma Herring has complained that 'a novel cannot well bear the strain of such a complex pattern of symbolic imagery'.<sup>1</sup> It is quite true that the diversity of the recurrent images in the novel is often confusing. Nevertheless, of all the images in the book, none recurs more often or in such significant contexts as that of the black volcanic hills of Meroë.<sup>2</sup> We propose in this article to indicate how Meroë continues to appear in France and the U.S. (in Parts Two and Three), and to study the fire imagery associated with it, for no image tells us more about the makeup of Theodora or shows more clearly the process of her disintegration. In consequence the novel is seen as a co-ordinated whole, unified by a set of key images, which progressively clarify the effect upon Theodora of her experiences in Part One, of which the inevitable outcome is the destruction of her identity in the ordinary world.

At the end of the novel, in the western United States, Theodora returns to Meroë, to 'the lost reality of childhood' (p. 264).<sup>3</sup> The motif of returning home had begun and ended her fantasies in the *jardin exotique*. In both cases, it is given voice by Katina Pavlou, who on these occasions is a representation of Theodora about to leave boarding school. Katina speaks the first words in the garden:

<sup>1</sup> See 'Odyssey of a Spinster: a Study of *The Aunt's Story*', *Southerly*, xxv, 1965, 6-22.

<sup>2</sup> We do not find the wooden imagery, for instance, discussed by James McAuley, in *Quadrant*, xii, 1959, 91-3, to be as central to the meaning of the novel as the fire imagery.

<sup>3</sup> *The Aunt's Story*, 1958. All page references are to this edition.

'I am tired of all this. I shall write and tell them I must go away . . . I must go home . . . Before I have quite forgotten. There was an earthquake, do you remember? . . . There was a black island that shook.' (pp. 147-9)

And Katina concludes her final colloquy with Theodora by announcing 'I shall go away . . . I shall go to my own country. Now I know' (p. 264).

Actually, Theodora had never left Meroë, not even in Europe. The *jardin exotique* is another Meroë, as she senses when she first enters it: 'she began to be afraid she had returned to where she had begun, the paths of the garden were the same labyrinth, the cactus limbs the same aching stone' (p. 146). It is in the United States, however — in Arizona or Nevada — that she finds a final and permanent Meroë. White himself emphasizes the resemblance between the U.S. and the Australian Meroë. Kilvert's hut on the hilltop suggests the hut on one of the hills surrounding Meroë, 'the madman's folly'. The landscapes are similar — black hills, dark pines, and dead yellow grass — and Theodora transforms the similarity to identity. As she looks out at 'the black sonorous islands' around Kilvert's hut she is again among the black volcanic hills of Meroë. The dust in the deserted hut, too ('The world was dim with dust through the coated windows', p. 290), recalls the volcanic ash she had seen as coating Meroë when her father described the Abyssinian original to her.<sup>1</sup> Holstius, to whom she assigns ownership of the hut, is a synthesis of her father and the Man who was Given his Dinner at Meroë. Some 8,000 miles from Australia, Theodora has returned home.

Theodora identifies herself closely with Meroë, particularly with the yellow house and the black volcanic hill surmounting it. When Frank Parrott is indicating his interest in her and she feels her defense of apartness dissolving, she sees Meroë's walls as crumbling:

she wanted him to speak more. The blood in her stone hands ran a little quicker, perhaps from fear also, that stone will crumble. Not even Father could hold up the walls of Meroë when it was time. (p. 83)

And at the death of her father, she feels that she, and Meroë with her, has disintegrated: 'I am dead, I am dead, Meroë has

<sup>1</sup> Note, too, that in the *Hôtel du Midi*, Theodora 'saw the ash trays, which had brimmed almost over, with ash' (p. 202).

crumbled' (p. 88). White links the yellow house and grass and the black hills of Meroë with Theodora's yellow skin and black dress or hat, and Theodora herself finds the black volcanic hills totally in harmony with her personality. Accordingly, the images connected with the black hills of Meroë, especially those of a volcano, fire, and lightning, reveal much about Theodora's personality and preoccupations. Similar to the volcano image is that of the brass filigree ball sometimes filled with fire and rolled downhill. Just as in the *jardin* 'the created lives of Theodora Goodman were interchangeable' (p. 300), so the various symbols relating to a volcano — fire and lightning — are almost interchangeable too.

Early in the novel, her father's mention of the Abyssinian Meroë is significant for Theodora in clarifying her feelings about the Meroë she knows. She immediately equates the 'dead place, in the black country of Ethiopia' (p. 23) with her own Meroë, and is disturbed at the identity. 'In this dead place that Father had described the roses were as brown as paper bags, the curtains were ashy on their rings, the eyes of the house had closed.' She goes outside 'to escape from this dead place with the suffocating cinder breath', but finds no escape as she looks

with caution at the yellow face of the house . . . Even in sunlight the hills surrounding Meroë were black . . . So that from what she saw and sensed, the legendary landscape became a fact, and she could not break loose from the expanding terror.

Only in time the second Meroë became a dim and accepted apprehension lying quietly at the back of the mind. (p. 23)

If 'She could not set down on the black grass of the country that was called Ethiopia their own yellow stone' house, it is not from a feeling of inappropriateness but rather from terrifying appropriateness. The picture her father has painted is of her own deadness and the deadness of her family: 'the eyes of the house had closed.' She is preoccupied with the dead bones of Meroë, still at times filled with fire. The name Meroë, we are told, smouldered — chiefly with the murderous anger of Mrs Goodman, but also with Theodora's.

Theodora is herself a black volcano, dead yet living, capable of erupting with destructive power. The volcanic quality is what she has in common with the hawk that she comes to identify with

herself, speaking of 'worlds that were brief and fierce' (p. 33). When Frank aims at the hawk in their shooting contest, she directly associates its red eye with her volcanic core: 'she quivered, and the whole hillside, in some other upheaval of mythical origin' (p. 73). Her humiliation of Frank on this occasion by outshooting him is re-enacted years later when she terminates her relationship with Huntly Clarkson by a display of sharpshooting at a gallery. As she leaves the gallery after this eruption, she recalls the hawk and the black volcanic hills of Meroë. Returning home, she erupts briefly against her mother, accusing her of having been born with an axe in her hand, but quickly contains greater eruption by self-recrimination: 'I have a core of evil in me that is altogether hateful' (p. 126). It is appropriate that she should end her relationship with Huntly with these volcanic associations, for on her first visit to him she had asked him, perhaps in unconscious warning, if he had ever seen a volcano (p. 108).

Volcanic fire and fire generally are closely linked in Theodora's mind. Even as a schoolgirl, she is obsessed with the power of fire. To Violet Adams she confessed that she would like to write a poem about 'fire. A river of fire. And a burning house' (p. 54) — a clue that the fire that is to consume the Hôtel du Midi is born in Theodora's fantasy. As she lives with her mother's murderous hatred in Sydney, Theodora feels the atmosphere on fire: 'the whole air burned scarlet'. Her own volcanic core shows signs of activity as her awareness of her mother's destructiveness grows. To the fire in the atmosphere she adds her own:

Scarlet lit her face. It ran like blood beneath her brown skin. So that people stopped to look, sensing something strange . . . People mopping their heads wondered uneasily into what they sank in Theodora Goodman's eyes. (p. 100)

Directly thereafter the story of the Jack Frost murders is told, which Theodora finds difficult to discuss because they are so personal, 'Like something one has done oneself'. Later in the Hôtel du Midi, when Lieselotte destroys her pictures, proclaiming 'We must destroy everything, everything, even ourselves' (p. 176), Theodora retreats to the garden, '*because she knew that this was not yet her crisis*' [our italics]. Her crisis, we will see, is directly brought on by a feeling of hopeless sexual frustration. Then, in an angry eruption, she consumes the Hôtel with her

fire and disposes of 'the figments of Mrs Rapallo, and Katina Pavlou, and Sokolnikov' (p. 292). As it rages, she considers 'the phases of the fire', presumably the fire that has burned within her. Once having in the personage of Katina 'seen the face of fire' (p. 263), she can no longer repress it and proposes to return to Meroë. In her journey across America, she no longer feels safe against the violence of her own personality, 'less controllable than fire' (p. 274), and retreats from the ordinary world around her. Just because it does not look as if it might be carried away like the Hôtel by the passions of fire, Kilvert's hut is comforting to her. When she is angry and agonized there, however, the walls bend outward 'under the pressure of the hateful fire' (p. 293) until Holstius calms her. Burnt out, she finds final peace in 'airy disintegration' (p. 100), in the annihilation of her identity in the ordinary world; henceforth only fantasy can give significance to her existence.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond its destructiveness, there is another important aspect of fire: its association with sexual passion.<sup>2</sup> Dancing with Frank, so 'close to his fire', Theodora herself 'streamed with fire' (p. 78). Her other deeply sexual experience, Moraïtis's playing of the 'cello (with which she identifies herself),<sup>3</sup> Theodora sees primarily in volcanic terms:

She watched him take the 'cello between his knees and wring from its body a . . . passionate music . . .

The 'cello rocked, she saw. She could read the music underneath his flesh. She was close. He could breathe into her mouth. He filled her mouth with long, aching silences, between the deeper notes that

<sup>1</sup> We disagree radically in interpretation here with J. F. Burrows. Burrows, in '“Jardin Exotique”: the Central Phase of *The Aunt's Story*', *Southerly*, xxxvi, 1966, 152-73, finds Theodora successful in achieving a genuine freedom through humility. She is clearly schizophrenic at the end of the story, having completely retreated from a reality she was never quite able to cope with.

<sup>2</sup> White used this association in his first novel, *Happy Valley*. In section 17, Sidney Furlow sits on a phallic horse, 'trembling between her legs', and thinks of a bushfire that has excited her: 'There was something magnificent in the progress of fire . . . You could feel the hot air of the flames on your face. Something you could not explain. Something fierce and irrational, in the striving of the horse, in the progress of the flame.'

<sup>3</sup> Compare Desmond Morris in *The Human Zoo*, 1969: 'The old-fashioned guitar, with a curvaceous, waisted body, was symbolically essentially female. It was held close to the chest, its strings lovingly caressed' (p. 109). As the fire rages in the Hôtel du Midi, Katina asks, 'Miss Goodman . . . have you ever seen a burning piano?'. The piano probably represents Theodora herself, her repressed sexuality now flaring forth with a destructive violence.

reached down deep into her body . . . The bones of her hands . . . were no indication of exaltation or distress, as the music fought and struggled under a low roof, *the air thick with cold ash* (p. 116, our italics).

If Violet Adams would write a poem about the lovely sentiments of love, Theodora would write about rivers of fire — her concept of love. Starved for love, she sees it in consuming terms, whether of a volcano or fire or lightning. As a girl, Theodora had been struck by lightning but survived. Shortly before the night of the dance with Frank, she has a dream in which the lightning again figures:

she woke in bed and found that she was not beneath the tree. She had put out her hand to touch the face before the lightning struck, but not the tree. She was holding the faceless body that she had not yet recognized, and the lightning struck deep. (p. 80)

Lightning here is clearly associated with sexual passion.

Lightning is also associated with destructive anger. In particular, lightning is linked with Mrs Goodman's strength, and so with her rings, in which her strength is seen to lie:

Theodora could feel the hatred in her mother's hand. She could feel the pressure of the rings . . . from the corner of the book her hand peered, diamond-eyed . . . Her rings scraped on each other. (pp. 99-100)

It is likely that Theodora sees the light that flashes from her mother's rings as a kind of concentrated lightning: 'Mother was more terrible than lightning that had struck the tree' (p. 43). As Mrs Goodman sits calmly in deadly judgement upon Pearl Brawne, 'her rings flashed' (p. 39). It is likely, too, that Theodora equates her own contained fire with her mother's garnet ring, seeing her destructiveness as similar to her mother's: as the fire begins to consume the Hôtel du Midi, she reaches for her mother's garnet ring and puts it on her finger: 'In the presence of the secret, leaping emotions of the fire she was glad to have her garnet' (p. 260).

Theodora was always fascinated by the notion of destruction at the heart of things. As a child, she finds 'a small pale grub curled in the heart of the rose' in the rose garden. 'She could not look too long at the grub-thing stirring . . . She could not subtract it from the sum total of the garden' (p. 21). The rose

stands for both Mrs Goodman,<sup>1</sup> who ordained the garden, and for Theodora.<sup>2</sup> A suppressed fire burned steadily within both, but Theodora's was normally kept under control. It first flared out when Frank shot at the red-eyed hawk that she had identified with herself. Unable to direct her anger at her would-be destroyer, she turns her rage in upon herself and shoots the bird.<sup>3</sup> This is the suicidal impulse of the person who feels his whole existence threatened and defiantly chooses his own way of death. Most of her fire is in fact turned in upon herself: 'I shall continue to destroy myself, right down to the last of my several lives' (pp. 74-5). Even the most 'outward' of her eruptions, the fire at the end of Part Two, ends in the destruction of her several lives, the creatures of her fantasy there. That conflagration follows Theodora's abandonment of the possibility of sexuality. Through the personage of Katina, Theodora decides that sexual experience is 'nauseating and painful'. Katina's experience inside the phallic tower is clearly sexual. She had 'chosen this as the moment of experience', which Theodora, with her memory of Pearl and Tom among the nettles at Meroë, expects to be violent. Her conversation with Katina is to be understood as basically concerning sexual experience:

'Have you ever been inside the tower, Miss Goodman?' Katina Pavlou asked . . .

*Theodora . . . dreaded, in anticipation, the scream of nettles.*

'No,' said Theodora, 'I have not been inside the tower. I imagine there is very little to see.'

'There is nothing, nothing,' Katina said. 'There is a smell of rot and emptiness.'

But no less painful in its emptiness, Theodora felt.

<sup>1</sup> Theodora recalls 'the canker of the rose mouth', her mother's scorn and anger, when *le petit* hands her Sokolnikov's note in circumstances resembling Huntly's invitation to dinner (pp. 105, 157).

<sup>2</sup> Theodora identifies with her mother in such actions as wearing her garnet ring and drinking camomile tea.

<sup>3</sup> Cedric Whitman, in his study of 'Fire and Other Elements' in the *Iliad* (*Homer and the Heroic Tradition*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1963, p. 142), finds a similar self-destructive quality in Achilles's fire, which 'finds its *telos*, or fulfilment, not in dislocating the world as it is, but in self-destruction . . . The all-destructive rage with which he assails the Trojans is directed in the last analysis against himself'. For Theodora, the fire at the Hôtel is destructive of both herself and of others — of herself, because she identifies herself with Meroë (of which the Hôtel is one expression), and of others insofar as they are represented in the fantasy figures there.

'Still, I am glad,' said Katina Pavlou, speaking through her white face. 'You know, Miss Goodman, when one is glad for something that has happened, something nauseating and painful, that one did not suspect. It is better finally to know.' (pp. 252-3, our italics)

Although she has previously tried to convince herself that sexuality is necessarily repugnant, Theodora finds no resolution now in Katina's words. Instead, hopeless and angry, she summons her forces for the great eruption. She and Katina arrive back at a blacked out Hôtel, in the calm before the tempest. As she unleashes the fire within her, she identifies her destructiveness with her mother's, and dons the garnet ring:

All the violence of fire was contained in the hotel. It tossed, whether hatefully or joyfully, it tossed restraint to smoke. Theodora ran, breathing the joy or hatred of fire. (p. 259)

One group of images, pertaining to bones, is frequently in Theodora's consciousness, complementing her preoccupation with volcanic fire. Bones to Theodora are the rib cage (especially her own), whether seen as bones themselves or in disguised form as the filigree work on the brass ball, the walls of a house, cactus spears, or the shell of a volcano. Wetherby's body is spoken of as contained in a cage of bones (p. 173), Lieselotte's within a cactus cage (p. 175). The cactus garden itself is a giant rib cage; when Theodora sits inside it she is making, like Voss, a journey into the country of the mind. Bones seem to represent to her a kind of protective defence against the outside world; from within them she can look out safely. The bone imagery, then, bespeaks her apartness and defensiveness, qualities which must somewhere be accompanied by hostility too. She is aware that her protection is vulnerable, that bones can melt and walls dissolve under either external threat (destruction from her mother or disarming affection from Frank or Katina) or internal threat (her own destructive anger).<sup>1</sup> When Theodora maintains to Lou at the end of Part One that she does not have much to tell, that she is empty as a filigree ball, she deceives herself, for her imagination is shortly to flare forth with a violence that terrifies her. She cannot live with it finally, and settles for the calmer fantasy of a Holstius

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 83, 149, 293.



in Part Three. At the end of the novel her fire is spent, and her shell is entrusted to the care of others.

Theodora has a strong attraction to a landscape of bones, whether the Australian Meroë or Moraitis's Greece or the *jardin exotique*. Sitting on the hill at Meroë, Theodora looks down upon the bones of the earth:

There are certain landscapes in which you can see the bones of the earth. And this was one. You could touch your own bones, which is to come a little closer to truth. (p. 61)

Since she is looking down upon 'the endlessness of bones' (p. 33), she evidently feels this dead world to be a representation of her family life:

Theodora looked down through the distances that separate . . . If I could put out my hand, she said, but I cannot . . . There is no lifeline to other lives. (p. 137)

The bone imagery in the novel is particularly difficult to interpret. Not that it is especially complex or rich, but that White himself fails to provide sufficient material for interpretation. There is in the novel a dazzling variety of imagery that sometimes frustrates just because the author withholds the clues to an understanding.

There is no such difficulty in understanding the choice of the volcano/fire/lightning imagery to express Theodora's makeup. Although she is externally passive, like a chair waiting for fresh acts,<sup>1</sup> the fire within her is shown as burning steadily, several times threatening to erupt. Until the end of Part Two, the eruptions are indirect and quickly checked, however violent the emotions involved. Most of her eruptions express her anger at her inability to take a man of her own. The first expresses itself in her self-destructive shooting of the hawk. In part, this is a response to what she feels as an attack by Frank upon her; but it also effectively cancels the effect of her feminine wiles in having let Frank outshoot her until then. Her second outburst, her taking of the silver paperknife away from her mother, signifies her intention to claim Frank for herself against her mother's hatred. Finally, however, her fear of the consequences wins out: while she somewhat encourages him, she also sharply discourages

<sup>1</sup> For chair imagery associated with Theodora see pp. 92, 112, 141, 227.

him. There is no doubt, we believe, that Theodora could have won Frank; her mother clearly sensed this, for in speaking later of Huntly, she confuses the two courtships and speaks instead of Frank:

'Why won't you take him?' Mrs Goodman said . . . 'I remember the other evening he rode across the bridge. Well . . . Fanny has been happy. It was different when one waited for the sound of horses' feet.' (p. 127)

When she has effectively sent Frank to Fanny, Theodora feels defeated and returns the knife to her mother in capitulation:

'I'm sorry,' she said . . . 'You see. You were right.' . . . Mrs Goodman took up the paper-knife in her small hand on which the garnets shone . . . Theodora waited. She waited to see if there was anything else she would be expected to give. She had come for this purpose. To her mother. (p. 86)

Her performance at the shooting gallery seems to be a hostile retaliation upon Huntly for bringing into the open her inability to marry. Directly after it, she erupts briefly against the cause of her inability, her destructive mother. The same night that she accuses her mother of a need to destroy Theodora is tempted to kill her, and guilt is as strong as if she had actually gone through with the murder: 'it is the same thing, blood is only an accompaniment' (p. 128).

The fire that consumes the Hôtel du Midi is precipitated, we have shown, by Theodora's angry abandonment of the possibility of sexuality. As the fire devours the Hôtel, the plants in the garden take on the colour of zinc, thereby recalling the sink from which Theodora had picked up the knife to kill her mother and the 'morning the colour of zinc old Mrs Goodman died' (p. 134). In destroying the creations of her fantasy through the fire, Theodora becomes frightened of her own violence. Unable to live in a *jardin exotique* or in the ordinary world around her, she creates in Holstius a calming blend of various father-figures. Her conversations with him prepare her finally to live in a world of her own, removed from people, without a lifeline to other lives.

*The Aunt's Story* is White's most detailed study of the disintegration of a personality. This disintegration is not shown by means of significant action, for Theodora is a passive character who goes through life waiting 'with something of the superior

acceptance of mahogany for fresh acts' (p. 141). It is shown rather by the recurrence of a group of central images that betray the obsessions eating deeper and deeper into her personality. At the end, she has no country, no family, not even a name. Her life, in sad irony, has fulfilled Gertie Stepper's aspirations for her own old age:

'When I am old all I shall want is a cup of tea, and die.'

It made Theodora laugh. As if it could ever happen this way. (p. 42)

But it does. We last see Theodora thanking the doctor who has come to take her to a mental home:

she held her head on one side as she had seen ladies do on receiving and thanking for a cup of tea.

Then they all laughed.

## *Before the Monsoon*

The parched brown plains of Hindustan  
drowse beneath the brass bowl of the sky.

Through clouds of dust the unrelenting sun  
opaquely glows above the huddled village

vaguely curled around its shrunken pool  
and almost empty tanks. In the furnace

of early afternoon nobody comes  
or goes down the narrow unswept lanes.

From exhausted fields the few gaunt cattle  
seek the engulfing shade of a ruined wall.

Everywhere there is silence, silence  
and the dull timeless ache of apathy.

RAYMOND TONG