

“The Twyborn Affair”: “the beginning  
in an end” or “the end of a  
beginning”?

S. A. RAMSEY

To read *The Twyborn Affair*<sup>1</sup> as a literary white elephant or a burst of novelistic venom, intended, as Robert Nye sees it, “to clear the decks of the imagination for something extraordinarily good next time round,”<sup>2</sup> is to ignore much of the impact, not to mention the genius, of White’s latest novel. The quotation at the head of this discussion, taken from one of his earliest works, *The Living and the Dead*, is intended to indicate the degree to which *The Twyborn Affair* fits perfectly in to the White canon — supplying, as it does, both an extension of the settings and preoccupations of his earliest novels and an expression of the depth of allusion and artistic maturity to which the later novels have given rise. But the relevance of the question inherent in the quotation from *The Living and the Dead* goes further, it seems, than this. At the very core of White’s latest novel lies the whole notion of beginning and ending in its many aspects and the action itself centres upon the two most traumatic embodiments of this process — birth and death. The richly imaginative exploration of this concept provides a poignant expression of the mystery (and the misery) of the human condition as well as a peculiarly illuminative exposition of the progress and development of White’s art.

The novel’s title itself contains an overt clue to the deeper issues involved in its unescapable puns — both in the name of its “hero” (Twyborn = twice-born) and in its choice of the ambiguous word “affair” to evoke the history of a man whose whole life has been devoted to various kinds of love affair (although the word “love” can only be taken at its face value). But it is the idea of birth and rebirth which dominates and gives expression to

these other issues. During the course of the novel, Eddie Twyborn is re-incarnated three times as three wholly different people, although, intrinsically, he only suffers two births — as a man and as a woman. One of the epigraphs quotes David Malouf's definition of existence as "a series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown" and this is the basic pattern of Eddie Twyborn's life. If the emphasis is upon pain, then that is because essentially birth is "hard and bitter agony", like death — or, for White, life itself. The similarity between the states of birth and death is stressed by Eadie Twyborn when she writes to Eddie's ex-mistress, Marcia Lushington, on the subject of Eddie:

As the first time, so the second. He is swallowed up,  
whether in death or life, it is the same.

(p. 302)

For Eadie, of course, oblivion itself signifies death. But for most of the characters who weave their way through the novel, life itself is either pain, or, worse, a spiritual stagnance, enlivened only by flashes of inspiration on the one hand and evil or perversion in their various forms on the other. There is more than a hint of Baudelaire behind White's reasoning (as there is of Eliot, to an even larger degree). So, Eddie as Eadith Trist comes to the conclusion that what surrounds here is "a world of fragmentation and despair in which even the perversities of vice can offer regeneration of a kind" (p. 420). Again, the notion, if not of birth then of new life, is stressed. But clearly, that new life is itself only another aspect of death — of moral and spiritual decay if not of actual physical lifelessness. "I am the Resurrection and the Dead," says Eddie when he appears as himself for the first time — and the lack of any emphasis upon Life underlines the sense of gloom. In fact, Eddie *has* given birth — to the character of Eddie Twyborn D.S.O. from out of the ashes of the Empress Eudoxia — but this aspect of his personality is shown to be as incapable of experiencing real life as his former self was unable to achieve fulfilment in its relationship with the old Greek, Angelos. Moreover, each of the three sections of the novel (corresponding to each of Eddie's separate "lives") is brought to a

close with an actual death — a progression which inspires an increasingly gloomy outlook as Eddie loses his lover, Angelos, (and the nearest thing to perfection he has ever experienced), and then his sole heir, until finally he himself dies — a violent, though understated death.

White's intention in choosing to tackle in detail the question of transvestism and its concomitant issues of split personality and loss of individual identity, seems to be closely bound up with this notion of death and re-birth. The epigraph to *The Eye of the Storm* quotes from a Nō play the words, "I was given by chance this human body so difficult to wear." In *The Twyborn Affair*, although the sense of pain underlying the human condition remains an important factor, the element of chance is seen to apply not so much to the fact that the body proves to be a human one, but that it should be a masculine rather than a feminine one. It is just as Eudoxia suggests: "The difference between the sexes is no worse than their appalling similarity" (p.63). By making Eddie capable of convincing both as a man and a woman White is able to break down the barriers of personality, social conditioning and sexual separateness and reduce the human spirit to its most elemental form; and it is in this condition that man is forced to confront the whole of experience and what Malouf calls, "the mystery of what we have not yet become." The search, as always with White, is for fulfilment, and, in particular, the fulfilment that results from a perfectly harmonious love relationship.

Unhappily, Eddie Twyborn is unable to enjoy such a relationship. As a hermaphrodite Tiresias figure he is only really capable of *observing* "love" even as he participates in the necessary physical and emotional interchange. The essential union evades him:

Yet whatever form she took, or whatever the illusion temporarily possessing her, the reality of love, which is the core of reality itself, had eluded her and perhaps always would.

(p. 336)

Does this mean that Eddie in his many forms is himself unreal — the "illusion of reality," longing to be made real by immer-

sion in the life of another? Or is it simply that life itself, in all but its most intense forms, is little more than a substitute for reality? Either way, it is only when we see the solitary Eadith Trist taking her early morning walks through the deserted London streets (itself an "unreal city"?) that we feel we are seeing the real Eddie Twyborn — and here sex is irrelevant. Having seen and foreshadowed all, he/she can only remain an observer to a reality that is, in itself, suspicious. This fruitless searching is rendered even more poignant by the fact that Eddie, though spiritually active, is physically barren — this, regardless of the fact that Marcia Lushington gives birth to what is probably his son. His inability to sustain life rubs off on the child, who dies. As a woman, of course, Eddie's masculine body makes it impossible for him to reproduce, so that what would seem at first to be a double fertility, Eddie being capable of the enjoying the sexual act from the standpoint of both male and female, is proved, in reality, to be utter sterility. Even his reincarnations are sterile since they fail to give birth to new life (either as a result of barrenness or because the characters he creates are in themselves unreal). Eddie's life, therefore, like his death at the end of the novel, simply confirms that an incapacity to achieve true integration signifies the end of all beginning, whether in the form of actual physical creation or simply the creation of new illusions.

Yet, if Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith is unsuccessful, whatever the guise, in achieving integration and giving birth to other lives, then this does not mean that others cannot have their being in him. The sardonic note that accompanies Eadith's acceptance of this fact does not mask the underlying seriousness:

Perhaps she was fated never to enter the lives of others except vicariously. To enter or to be entered: that surely was the question in most lives.

(p. 374)

Despite the pun, the less physical truth remains. Eddie, though rarely completely true to himself, does, in his various guises, present an embodiment of "the great fragmentation of maturity" (Henry Miller) which White explored earlier in *The Aunts*

*Story*. In other words, Eddie contains within himself elements (fragments) of all the other selves he has encountered or succeeded. In this sense, therefore, his person can be seen both to possess, and to give new life to, a whole cast of other characters. Like Theodora Goodman his soul breaks up into the splinters of past lives and experiences perhaps even with the same intention as Theodora's own — hoping that by a truthful confrontation with the past and the mysteries of personality he will both destroy and discover his true self in a final, triumphant re-birth. At the end, however, Eddie has not discovered himself. In his man's suit and whore's make-up he is an unresolved mixture of parts, and even though he may throw away his handbag, is it, as in Theodora's case, an attempt to shrug off personality altogether, or merely the exchange of one disguise for another, more equivocal, one?

"I like to think, Mother, we're all of us timeless," says Eddie as himself in Part Two. And so he is — being not simply Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith but Elyot Standish, Theodora Goodman, Nance Lightfoot, Hannah (the sympathetic whore from *Riders in the Chariot*), Katina Pavlou, Ludmilla, Stan Parker, Hurtle Duffield — the list is endless. He also incorporates characters from the European literary tradition, from T. S. Eliot, Thomas Mann, Flaubert, illustrating what Brian Kiernan calls White's "parodic" awareness (in his application of European models to other settings). In a similar way, *The Twyborn Affair* itself is not simply White's latest novel but a crystallisation of the preoccupations, as well as the characters and situations, of the previous novels and stories. The winter at Bogong with Eddie as a jackeroo calls to mind *Happy Valley*, as does Don Prowse in his more earthy impersonation of Clem Hagan (or is it Leo from *The Tree of Man*)? Mrs. Golson, in her "Louis whatever bergère," could be an Australian Mrs. Standish or a more girlish Mrs. Bonner. "The Mileses and Gileses who populate the F.O." have stepped straight out of *The Living and the Dead* — as have Ursula Untermeyer in her lacquered hat, and the children being evacuated from London. Eadie, with her corked-in moustache, provides a grotesque parody of the masculine Theodora (which, incidentally, is the name of Angelo's sister). The Sy-

rian hawker appears at Bogong as he did at Meroë—to provide a little exoticism; and Australia itself becomes, at the end of the novel, a kind of innocent paradise of the imagination, rather in the manner of the Australia of White's own youth which emerged as the rose-tinted Meroë. Con-the-Greek appears here as a restaurant owner, as he did in *The Tree of Man*; and Eddie returning, disenchanted, from the war is for all the world like an effeminate Stan Parker. (Note that both view a disembodied hand, the difference being that in Eddie's case the hand is his own.) Furthermore, is the ending of *The Twyborn Affair* supposed to be an imaginative parody of the mandalic picture of harmony at the end of *The Tree of Man*? Joanie Golson's letter to Eadie with its startling disclosure is shredded to pieces like Voss' to Laura, while the soldier Eddie encounters at the end of the novel melts into the substance of the street leaving only a ghastly smile—like Voss. The very treatment of transvestism calls to mind *Riders in the Chariot* which incorporated Hannah, the perve party and the sluttish and sensitive whores at Khalil's. Mrs. Golson and Eudoxia forking up *Mt. Blanc* in the hotel tea room could be any of White's "society" women, although it takes the insidious malice of Mme. Sasso and Mrs. Corbould to imitate the tones of the Jolley / Flack partnership. Eadith, like Norbert Hare, constructs her own Xanadu which is probably destroyed, like his, in a more dramatic kind of Blitz. Joan Golson is investigating Christian Science like Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson before her, and Eddie becomes, like Himmelfarb, "a scapegoat . . . in search of sacrifice." In the incident in which he furtively dresses up in Marcia's clothes Eddie is echoing Waldo Browne in a similar escapade. The overtly sexual imagery employed in the descriptions of the Australian landscape in *The Vivisector* is used again here. So is the idea of incest which *The Eye of the Storm* hinted at. Finally, a number of details from the short stories (Russian tea in glasses, the hare lip, the Greek references) are also detectable here.

This list, by no means exhaustive, serves to illustrate not only the fragmentation but also the concentration of White's artistic maturity. If it seems that he has reverted in this novel to the less satisfactory style and substance of *Happy Valley*, *The Living*

and *the Dead* and parts of *The Aunts Story* (in other words, the beginning of his literary career) then further examination indicates that this is not altogether the case. Certainly, the settings for the three parts of *The Twyborn Affair* do correspond to some degree to the worlds of those first three novels. So, the "Côte Morte" of Southern France and the Grand Hôtel Splendide des Ligures are not so far away from the France of the Hôtel du Midi; just as the corrupt, squalid London of *The Living and the Dead* is reproduced in Part Three of this book, and "the bleak corner of New South Wales" which is Bogong could be an even lonelier Happy Valley. But the derivativeness of expression and ideas, which was so obvious a feature of the first two novels in particular, has here quite disappeared. If White has a debt to pay to Eliot, Lawrence, Mann, Flaubert, then it is a debt which has been utilised in an imaginative and totally original way. The hypnotic effect of the closing sentences is more reminiscent of White at his greatest (e.g. in *The Vivesector*) than of the laboured stream-of-consciousness of, say, *Happy Valley*. The whole work flows with a confident assurance of manner although it is still rich in that tortuous, interlocking detail which has come to be White's trade-mark. Moreover, in its entirety it is lacking in the stilted quality of the earlier works. Despite its division into three parts, *The Twyborn Affair* achieves a compactness which even surpasses the complex unity of a work like *Riders in the Chariot*. Throughout the novel, characters are introduced and re-introduced, retained within our memory, and endowed with significance by the unifying presence of Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith which joins past to present, masculine to feminine. So that, ultimately, whether Eddie is Eadith, Eudoxia, himself, Eadie, dead or alive, it is, as Eadie suggested, "the same."

Much has happened in the space of time between the beginning of White's creative career and the writing of *The Twyborn Affair*. White has been separated from, yearned for, and returned to, his native land. Now, with that distance of both time and space between him and the Europe of his youth (as well as the Australia of his jackerooing days), he has chosen to return to the settings and peculiar characteristics of his earliest works.

The difference now, of course, is that, coming to these places and people with the experience, as well as the imagination, of his mature years, he will know them all "for the first time." But, if *The Twyborn Affair* is "the end of a beginning" in that the creative wheel has come full circle and the experience of the writing of *The Tree of Man* onwards has enriched the settings and characters of the earlier novels, allowing White to, as it were, start again, then it is also the "beginning in an end" because its vision is apocalyptic.

The London of the third section of the novel is a spiritual wasteland, like the London of *The Living and the Dead*. But whereas Elyot Standish turns back towards "life" and integration into that life, Eddie Twyborn, as we have seen, is unable to achieve integration either as a man or a woman, through lust or love. "Love," says Gravenor in a letter to Eadith, "is an exhausted word, and God has been expelled by those who know better, but I offer you the one as proof that the other still exists" (p. 426). Eddie's failure to achieve complete union and loss of self in any of his guises must point to an underlying lack of faith in the existence of a Godhead. This feeling is underlined satirically throughout the novel in details such as the men of the church attending Mrs. Trist's brothel, Lydia's "confessor" becoming her murderer, and the fact that the only religious presences are ironic ones (Mrs. Golson as an embodiment of "The Second Coming"; Eddie as "the prodigal son"; Mrs. Tyrrell as "Our Lady of Staines"). The epigraph to *A Fringe of Leaves* quoted Louis Aragon as saying, "Love is your last chance. There is really nothing else on earth to keep you there." If this is the case, then the message of *The Twyborn Affair* is a gloomy one. Love, however it is sought and in whatever guise, remains unattainable: Life is sad ("Trist"): Hell proves to be other people: and the only truth about existence seems to be that the individual soul is a solitary thing.

However, if the end of the world is envisaged here ("'She said to me what do you think you're preparing for — a war? I said no the end of the world.'") (p. 427), and if faith in God has foundered, then the final vision is still an apocalyptic, rather than a purely annihilatory, one. The chariots of ire which "race towards



brassy sunsets" at the end, are as much chariots of redemption as they are of judgement. Moreover, the number four is as significant here as it was in earlier novels (particularly *Riders in the Chariot*). It is no coincidence that two of the "lovers", Angelos and Prowse, are likened to the eagle and the ox. It only requires a little imagination to make the red-haired Gravenor (or should it be Marcia, the feline beast of prey?) into the lion, and Eddie himself into the (equivocal) man, and we are left with the ultimate picture of unity — the four faces of the riders in the chariot. In a similar way, Eadie stresses this notion of four being the perfect number when she talks of Eudoxia/Eddie and Eadith contributing to the wholeness of the fourth, Eadie herself. This stress upon completeness seems to be the only way of explaining the final paragraphs of the novel when, amidst the chaos of the Biltz, Eadie has a vision of complete harmony which parallels Stan's similar (though doubly spiritual) experience in the garden at Durilgai. So that, even in the end there is some fragment of a beginning. The fires which are destroying London contain within themselves some potential for regeneration (as we saw in *The Aunts Story* and *The Tree of Man*) and the little bird at the end raises his beak "towards the sun" in an affirmation of life.

Exactly where White will go from here it is hard to decide. Perhaps *The Twyborn Affair* is a kind of exorcism of all that has most intrigued and tormented its author throughout his actual and created lives. Certainly, there seems to be more of White himself, more involvement, in this novel than in any previous work. As a swan song, it would be perfect, yet, whatever we may feel about the novel as a whole, whether we consider it White's best (as Jonathan Webb tentatively suggests<sup>3</sup>) or his worst (which seems to be Robert Nye's opinion), one thing is sure: Patrick White, at least, is determined not to grow old gracefully.

#### NOTES

1. Patrick White, *The Twyborn Affair* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), £5.95.
2. Robert Nye. "Coasting along together", *The Guardian*, 27 September 1979, p. 10.
3. Jonathan Webb. "The Twyborn Affair", *The Literary Review*, No. 1, October 1979, p. 12.