

 This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0

**Antonella Riem Natale**

*Theodora as an Unheard Prophetess in Patrick White's The Aunt's Story*

**Abstract I:** Il saggio analizza alcuni temi cari a Veronica Brady, presenti nella sua profonda analisi critica della letteratura australiana. Veronica ha spesso letto l'opera di Patrick White alla luce di una ricerca spirituale e di una visione mitico-mistica. Obiettivo di questo saggio è studiare come la figura della zia in *The Aunt's Story* (1948) incarni uno dei personaggi isolati e visionari di White che si fanno portavoce di un messaggio incomprensibile per la società contemporanea, incapace di vedere oltre la realtà ordinaria. Intendo dimostrare come il suo ruolo di esploratrice nella terra interiore del Sé connetta Theodora Goodman agli antichi archetipi di partnership (Eisler 1987) e della Dea, in particolare della vecchia saggia (Crone), che incarna una "woman of age, wisdom and power" (Bolen 2001). Questa figura aveva un ruolo importantissimo, ora dimenticato, nelle antiche società gilaniche (Eisler 1987). *Theadora*, il dono della Dea, come dovrebbe suonare il nome della protagonista, rimanda in termini chiari alla funzione spirituale e sacra delle antiche donne-sacerdotesse. Theodora è in realtà *Theadora*, una sacerdotessa amata dalla Dea, ma la società contemporanea, incapace di vedere oltre la realtà ordinaria, può solo catalogare queste figure sacre come 'pazze'.

**Abstract II:** This essay takes into consideration some of the themes dear to Veronica Brady's heart and present in her profound critical analysis of Australian literature. Veronica often read Patrick White's work in the light of a spiritual quest and a mystical-mythical vision. Aim of this essay is to investigate how the figure of the aunt, in *The Aunt's Story* (1948), embodies one of the isolated and visionary characters in White's work who transmits a message that superficial contemporary society is unable to understand. I will show how Theodora Goodman's role as explorer in the inner land of the Self connects her with ancient partnership (Eisler 1987), Goddess' archetypes, in particular that of the Crone, embodying a "woman of age, wisdom and power" (Bolen 2001). This figure had an important but now forgotten role in ancient gylanic societies (Eisler 1987). *Theadora*, the Goddess' gift, as the protagonist's name should read, is a powerful reminder of the sacred spiritual function of ancient women-priestess. Theodora is *Theadora*, a priestess beloved by the Goddess. Contemporary society, being unable to see beyond the ordinary, can only catalogue these sacred figures as 'mad'.

### Introduction

*The Aunt's Story* is a challenging novel, published in 1948, regarded by some critics as genuinely experimental, for it moves between realism, stream-of-consciousness and a visionary and surrealist writing that were rather original in those times. The novel is divided into three parts, indicating at first the *places* (physical and symbolical) Theodora inhabits: *Meroë*, the name of the Goodmans' home, which Theodora inherits when her mother dies, to the anger and regret of her sister Fanny; *Jardin Exotique*, the garden of the Hôtel du Midi in France, where she lives for some time; and finally a small village in America, where she meets Holstius in a lost hut in the woods.

Since "the relationship between reader and writer, or reader and text, is never innocent, but reflects the social concerns of the time" (Ashcroft 2014: 22), *The Aunt's Story* has received manifold readings and interpretations. White's fiction has often been "discussed in the context of building Australian identity, or of challenging the realist tradition by insisting on a mystical or transcendental dimension of human life" (McLaren 2014: 82-83). These areas of critical interest are certainly focal in a reading of *The Aunt's Story* as a journey of self-discovery, a "Modern Odyssey" (Morley 1972: 63), a search to "achieve a state of wholeness" (Panaghis 1977: 30) in the mystical/mythical sense. As Ashcroft aptly points out, for White this wholeness is not a utopia "imbued with the idea of the sacred" but could rather be seen as Foucault's heterotopia, which is a reflection of that utopia: "This partially desacralized space is perfect for the author's task of chasing down a postcolonial earthed sacred" (Ashcroft 2014: 26). Theodora is looking for this *earthed sacred* and, as Veronica Brady states in one of her many seminal studies on White's work, the heroine is:

a Ulysses figure, seeking to return home to the land of vision she knew as a child on her parents' property in Australia – named significantly *Meroë* – the name Herodotus gives to the capital of Abyssinia, traditionally the seat of the Happy Valley (Brady 1981: 70).

Also Gail Jones in her insightful analysis of White's 'ambivalent Modernism' in *The Aunt's Story*, notes how Ulysses is an important myth underlying the text: "Theodora's mother is at one stage figured as Penelope, her father as Ulysses, then Theodora is Ulysses *becoming-man* as it were" (2015, 157 italics in original). Aruna Wittman touches upon another field of analysis drawing an interesting comparison between *The Aunt's Story* and Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of my Nervous Illness* (1902), focussing on White's representation of madness (often a *sign* for the visionary character) and on how his stylistic effects "recreate encounters with radical, altered states while debating the issues of sanity" (Wittman 2015: 141). In White's work, these encounters give access to "liminal, often luminous, states of perception and consciousness" (Wittman 2015: 144) that are fundamental in Ulysses' journey, where the hero/heroine must face the continuous intersecting between the physical and spiritual worlds in search for a final, redemptive harmony that White concedes his characters often at the approaching of death, for: "the attempt to fix impermanence or to wed the personal to the universal brings death. The quest for certainty in a doubt-ridden world must be resisted" (Wolfe 1982: 68).

In most of her critical and teaching career, Brady, like White, was perfectly aware of the limitations and heaviness of physical reality and at the same time always alert to notice any opening towards the numinous, the luminous, the liminal. Her scholarly work (not only on White) has a depth of scope and knowledge that one can only aspire to emulate. She was always very well-versed in the most recent critical theories. However, she did not allow the excesses of leading theoretical *fashions* to condition her readings, for she believed that “every reading involves a kind of reinvention of the text” (Brady 1992: 24). This ‘reinvention’ had to take White’s reader:

behind the reticulated screen of language to the sources of the writer’s creativity, the crossroads between *physical and psychic existence*, the inner and the outer dimension, the public and the private, between belonging and the sense of alienation, all so important in White’s life and work (Brady 1992: 24, my italics).

In order to follow Brady’s blueprint for critical analysis as ‘reading’ and ‘reinvention’, this essay sets *The Aunt’s Story* within the frame of *Partnership Studies* literary criticism, highlighting dominator narratives and cultural belief-systems hidden “behind the reticulated screen of language” (Brady 1992: 24). This critical approach draws on Eisler’s *Cultural Transformation Theory* (1987: xvii ff.), which shows two cultural paradigms at work in most Westernized cultures: the *partnership*, which Brady shared and fostered, and the *dominator*, which Brady trenchantly criticised. The dominator model, usually termed either patriarchy (or, less frequently so, matriarchy) – posits the ranking of one half of humanity over the other” (1987: xvii) and operates through “technologies designed to destroy and dominate” (1987: xx). On the other hand, the partnership paradigm, works on the principle of ‘linking’ rather than ‘ranking’, and otherness and diversity (both in gender and cultural terms) are positive elements and not “equated with either inferiority or superiority” (1987: xvii), as in dominator systems.

Aim of this essay is to investigate how the figure of the aunt embodies one of the isolated and visionary characters in White’s work, who transmits a message the superficial middle-class is unable or unwilling to understand. She is naturally endowed for psychically *linking* with the other, while the society she lives in is continuously *ranking* everybody and, in her case, labelling her as alien, different, non-conforming to the accepted social norms. I will show how Theodora Goodman’s role as explorer in the land of the Self connects her with ancient *partnership* Goddess’ archetypes, in particular that of the Crone, which embodies wisdom and power (Bolen 2001). This figure had an important but now forgotten role in ancient *gylanic* societies (Eisler 1987). *Theodora*, the *Goddess’ gift*, as the protagonist’s name should read, is a powerful reminder of the sacred spiritual function of ancient women-priestess. Theodora is *Theadora*, a priestess beloved by the Goddess. Contemporary society, being unable to *see* beyond the ordinary, can only catalogue these sacred figures as ‘mad’. This critical *reading* is in line with Brady’s frequent reading of Patrick White’s work in the light of a spiritual quest and a mystical/metaphysical/mythical vision, where the “search for God is also at the same time a search for a place for the outsider, a demand for the acceptance of difference” (Ashcroft 2014: 24).

### The Aunt as Goddess' Prophetess

Theodora Goodman, the "mystical aunt" (Jones 2015: 156) of White's post-war novel, is the plain daughter of a vain mother and a dreamer father; her sister is the conventionally beautiful and socially gifted Fanny. Theodora is one of those typical White's characters who are outsiders, often despised, derided, excluded or ignored by middle-class society. She is a *spinster*, an outsider, an *odd one*, an elderly lonely woman who has visions. White presents her as a sort of prophetess in a society that has no respect or understanding for her role. She can tell other people's stories, even live their lives in her imagination, but only a few can notice and appreciate the richness of insight and illumination that she experiences: "This *thing* a spinster, she sometimes mused, considering her set mouth; *this thing* a spinster which, at best, becomes *that institution* an aunt" (12, my italics).

The objectification of herself, "this thing", is due to the patriarchal stigma on unmarried women as useless because lacking something or someone – a husband, children, a family, a house; the derogatory term 'spinster' enhances this idea of uselessness. Only her family relation to her sister's children can improve the absolute disapproval of patriarchal society. She can be at least 'that institution', something predictable, which can be classified and named within an ordered system of accepted normality. She can be 'at best' an aunt, the maximum recognition of existence this society allows her. However, the novel suggests that "Theodora is limited neither by sex or age, as her face appears ageless by early middle age [and] fertility or creativity is not limited to physical reproduction" (Morley 1972: 77).

This was especially true in ancient traditional cultures, orienting to the partnership matrilineal paradigm, which do not centre on 'male' lineage and give a great importance to the network of female relationship within societies, clans and families. For Australian Aboriginal groups, or for the Mosuo people, children are not a personal family *property*, they do not *belong* to their parents, but rather the whole community, or tribe or group, lovingly protects and looks after them. According to the wisdom of these cultures, the aunt's role is extremely significant and as important as that of the mother; actually, their roles are interchangeable and equal. For example, in ancient Egypt there are no specific words to differentiate family relationships. 'Mother' is also used for 'grandmother', and 'father' for 'grandfather'; likewise, the words for 'son', 'grandson', and 'nephew', or 'daughter', 'granddaughter' and 'niece', are the same; 'uncle' and 'brother', or 'sister' and 'aunt' are also described by the same word (Douglas & Teeter 2001: chapter 7). Moreover, often 'sister' is used for 'wife' as an indication of the deep and equal relationship between spouses and of the importance of sisterly/brotherly relations. The aunt in Aboriginal Australia, as with other family ties, is a very important figure, who keeps the group safely together and transmits the Ancestral wisdom and lore:

When you go to community events there's Aunties and Uncles and extended community that watch your children. That's what I like about the Aboriginal community. Wherever you go, and there's a group of you, your child's safe. You know, you might misplace them for a few minutes, but they're off playing and someone else is watching them... You'll go looking for them and they'll go, "It's alright Aunt, they're here". Your child's always safe, there's never a moment when they're not in the community. That's what I like! Aboriginal Auntie and grandparent (Vic) (Lohar *et al.* 2014: 5).

Theodora, though, lives in a Westernised society that exclusively values blood ties with the male, the patriarch, God the Father, who destroyed women's ancient communities:

Patriarchy breaks up the female collective by forcibly capturing and imprisoning each woman's female energy within the patrilocal family. Within this isolation cell, each woman's creative energy becomes servant energy, dictated and owned by men (Sjöö & Mor 1987: 241).

Theodora, like many women, will be 'imprisoned' only in her outward existence, while inwardly being a visionary priestess able to perceive the sacred secrets of life, which are untellable and unexplainable, but which can be spiritually experienced as "the mystery of unity" (Morley 1972). In the ancient ecstatic rites priestesses led pythonic divination and the celebratory cults of regeneration and rebirth in the rhythmical cycles of Nature. Adolescence is the age of initiation into adulthood and it is especially important for the gifted girls who are to become priestesses of the Goddess. Theodora, at twelve, is struck by a lightning together with an oak, symbol of the rootedness and grounding force of the feminine. Theodora survives this symbolic *striking* that re-enacts and recalls the typical death/rebirth experiences of initiation rites. Because her gift cannot be openly manifested in patriarchal society, like many other White's characters, Theodora has to live a double life: in the dominator patriarchal paradigm she is the spinster, isolated from everyone else, apart from her nephews and most especially her beloved niece. Lou, being defined by her mother Fanny as "yellow, scraggy, and unattractive" (18), can be seen as an heir to the feminine lineage of priestesses that Theodora leads: "As Theodora nears Ithaca, Lou is about to embark" (Morley 1972: 81). On the other hand, in the partnership world of those few who can perceive Theodora's gift, she is a true visionary:

"You'll see a lot of funny things, Theodora Goodman. You'll see them because you have eyes to see. And they'll break you. But perhaps you'll survive. No girl that was thrown down by lightning on her twelfth birthday, and then got up again, is going to be swallowed easy by the rivers of fire".

And now Theodora began to think that perhaps the man was a little bit mad, but she loved him for his madness even, for it made her warm (45).

The warmth and love the young Theodora feels for the man springs from a sense of unity with the deep beauty and truth of life and other human beings and nature, which she can sense and perceive. What will break Theodora are not the things she sees, but the impossibility to act out her role as priestess publicly, fully voicing her powerful visions to her community. She will survive, but society will judge and catalogue her as 'mad', like she is herself doing with the Man Who Was Given His Dinner, because he tells her a visionary truth. She is 'mad', like him, because they do not conform to the expectations of dominator society. Like White himself, who strives to "create completely fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words" (1958: 39), Theodora would like to write "a poem about rocks [...]. And

fire. A river of fire. And a burning house. Or a bush fire" (53). She wants to plunge into the depth of a burning spiritual fire, to capture the essence of a rock, the foundation of the Earth, thus she too begins "to see things for the first time" (White 1958: 39). However, the conformist society she lives in will not allow her to manifest her gift publicly:

But she knew already that he would not come. In all that she did not know there was this certainty. She began to feel that knowing this might be an answer to many of the mysteries. And she felt afraid for what was prepared. The magpies sang in the warm air of Meroë (46).

Magpies, like crows, carry wisdom and ancient medicine, they help shaman/priestesses enter into the darkness of the Self, the obscure recesses of the psyche; their crowing often signals a transmutation of conscience, of a further step into the sacred mysteries. In her naked simplicity and poetry, but also in her inner strength and clear purpose, Theodora well represents a powerful Goddess archetype, the Crone, or old wise woman, who is able to listen to the voices of nature and whose function in matrilineal societies is that of prophesying for her tribe, of seeing and telling stories that can elevate her people in the understanding of the mysteries of life. Magpies were also sacred to Hecate of the crossroads (Walker 1985), indicating the capacity to discern the path to be chosen. In her ability to ride and hunt in the bush with her father, she is close to the Artemis archetype, a virgin Goddess. She does not need the company of a man to feel complete, she is "one-in-herself", motivated by her need to follow her own instincts; she is not conditioned by the male-determined dominator social and cultural expectations on what a woman must be like; she keeps her secret life "sacred and inviolate", without "modification to meet male standards" (Bolen 1984: 36).

### Fellow Seers

Only a few characters can understand and endorse Theodora's gift of poetic vision and prophecy: her father, to a certain extent, the Man Who Was Given His Dinner, the Syrian hawker who tells her she has eyes to *see*; Moraïtis, a visiting Greek cellist, who recognises in her a kindred prophet-spirit and tells her it is good "to come from a country of bones", like Greece or Meroë, because it is "easier to see" (108); and Holstius, at the end of the novel. Also Miss Spofforth, a spinsterly headmistress, acknowledges a spiritual kinship with her, even if never outwardly spoken:

She would have touched her head and said: Theodora I shall tell you the truth. Probably you will never marry. We are not the kind. You will not say the things they want to hear, flattering their vanity and their strength, because you will not know how, instinctively, and because it would not flatter you. But there is much that you will experience. You will see clearly beyond the bone. You will grow up probably ugly, and walk through life in sensible shoes. Because you are honest, and because you are barren, you will be both honoured and despised. You will never make a statue, nor write a poem. Although you will be torn by the agonies of music, you are not creative. You have an artist's vanity, which is moved finally to express itself in its objects. But there

will be moments of passing affection, through which the opaque world will become transparent, and of such a moment you will be able to say – my dear child.

All these things would have been said by Miss Spofforth if they had struggled out of her squat body and her heavy face (63).

Solid as a fortress (*fort*), the headmistress is anchored to her proper place (*spot*) in society. She is familiar with what Theodora will have to face, but cannot tell her. Social conventions and mores would never accept such a declaration as goes on in her mind. White's satire of the hypocritical society of Australia is at its best here, when the inner voice of Miss Spofforth is subdued but definitely clear in its criticism.

### Different Therefore Mad

For the rest of the world, for her mother and her mother's friends, her sister, for all the exponents of that Australian middle-class White so much criticises, Theodora is just a funny child and later old lady, a spinster, disturbing in her difference and strangeness, or, maybe, even madness: "Theodora had begun to accept both the contempt and the distances. Because there are also moments of insight, whether with Father, or the Man Who Was Given His Dinner, or even with the Syrian" (52). However, her journey is not that of a madwoman, but it embodies the "more difficult and worthwhile quest of a visionary in pursuit of authentic being" (Lang 2015: 196). As Foucault shows, we know that madness is connected to 'civilisation' and is a cultural stigma used across cultures to dominate and control:

Throughout Europe, confinement had the same meaning, at least if we consider its origin. It constituted one of the answers the seventeenth century gave to an economic crisis that affected the entire Western world: reduction of wages, unemployment, scarcity of coin (Foucault 1972: 49).

In particular, madness is used to demonise someone who does not conform to the social norms, especially if a woman:

Another means of controlling large numbers to their detriment is the invention of madness, and its institutional punishment. Among all ancient, pagan and shamanic peoples, "madness" is a spiritual category; exotic behaviour, "schizophrenia", or hallucinations can mark a person destined for seership or shamanic psychic powers (Sjöö & Mor 1991: 295).

Laura Trevelyan, in *Voss*, lives under very similar circumstances and is criticised by the Bonners and their friends because she is not married; they cannot understand the depth of her feeling, she goes against their utter materialism describing Australia in mystical terms, thus upsetting their material certainties. According to this dominator society, the main concern of a woman should be that of getting married, but Theodora, like Laura, rejects this imposition and convention from the start. According to the standards decided by others, she

is not pretty like her sister and lacks the accomplishments required for a woman: she does not embroider or play the piano; she can use a rifle instead, to the horror of her mother. Theodora is different from the other girls even at an early age; she does not want to get married but wants to *see* (52); and, as the Man Who Was Given His Dinner perceives and anticipates, she will see. These qualities remain in her older age; she preserves her deep understanding and affinity with nature and people, especially if young. When her mother dies, "But old Mrs Goodman did die at last" (11), Theodora can finally lead her own life and become an explorer of life and the Self. Before, Theodora was imprisoned in her role as *caregiver* (Pearson 1991); she "was the spinster. She had lived with her mother, and helped into her clothes. She came when the voice called. [...] I am free now, said Theodora Goodman" (11).

### *Theodora, the Goddess' Gift*

Now she can fully be *Theodora, the Goddess' gift*, like *Godiva*, the Anglo-Saxon *gift* of God; and she is *Goodman*, the Good human being, the good woman, a sort of medieval *everywoman*, who experiences other people's lives and dreams. Her surname, Goodman, is a status name from Middle English *gode* 'good' and *man* 'man', in part from use as a term for the master of a household. In Scotland the term denoted a landowner who held his land not directly from the crown but from a feudal vassal of the king; from the Old English personal name *Guðmund*, composed of the elements *guð* 'battle' plus *mund* 'protection', so she also is protector and fighter.

There are many important Theodoras in history and White was always particularly purposeful in choosing his characters' names. His aunt has a long-standing genealogy of powerful women behind her, and this signifies her important status, in spite of her low social consideration in a world dominated by "material ugliness" (White 1958) rather than visionary power. Just to mention a few: a famous Theodora, probably born in Syria, was actress and temple priestess-prostitute (a later derogatory term indicating the temple-priestesses, who also had the role to sexually initiate men into adulthood), and then became the wife of Emperor Justinian I and thus Empress of the Byzantine Empire in the sixth century. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, Theodora and Justinian are saints. Theodora of Alexandria, who married a prefect of Egypt, is a Desert Mother and Eastern Orthodox saint who, dressed as a man, joined a monastery in Thebaid. Theodora Tocco was the first wife of Constantine Palaiologos, the last Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire. Episcopa Theodora is the mother of Pope Paschal I, who was known for her Christian virtue and purity. We find her in the Greek inscription on a 9<sup>th</sup> century Christian mosaic in the Chapel of Bishop Zeno of Verona, in the Church of Saint Praxedis the Martyress in Rome. Such a lineage of powerful and spiritual women guarantee aunt Theodora important antecedents for her sacred quest for inner freedom and understanding of the Truth. She can see beyond the limitations of what we consider reality and enter into a spiritual realm, full of welcoming, love and acceptance, where differences are annihilated and we all are one with the divine source.

### **The Aunt's Visionary Journey**

After her mother dies, Theodora can finally move away from Australia, where past and present are too closely interwoven. She realizes how the possibilities of being understood

by the “nearest of kin” are very limited and soon you “have to enter the solitary land of individual experience” (epigraph to part I, *Meroë*).

In Part Two, we encounter Theo in a small hotel in southern France with an eccentric list of fellow guests in the years just before World War II. In the decadent “Jardin Exotique” of the Hôtel du Midi/Europe, she will discover and experience “the great fragmentation of humanity”, (epigraph to part II, *Jardin Exotique*). Here, at first, she seems completely severed from her past and plunged into a totally new and often obscure series of visionary experiences: “She could breathe the soft light. She could touch the morning, already flowering heliotrope and pink” (180). However, past and present, both on the personal and socio-historical levels, are never completely disjointed.

The image of the garden is symbolic of the elevation and refinement of art, indicating at the same time the danger of a decadence into mere aestheticism. European society has a great cultural tradition that is however already showing signs of decay. The “Jardin Exotique”, that at first sight Theodora would like to consider as “the goal of her journey” (103) is smothering in its over-abundant growth. The garden of the Hôtel du Midi is connected inevitably to the “Gothic Shell of Europe” (146) and Theodora soon realises that her journey might have brought her nowhere. She “might have returned to where she had begun” (146), in the historical sense, for she is not in touch with a new culture but with an older one still characterised by a dominator paradigm – and in the psychological one, for she is immersed in her own personal past still. She seems not to have moved away from Meroë, for all the important figures of her life are there, duplicated in the guests of the Hotel: her father is Alyosha Sergei Sokolinov, her mother Madame Rapallo, Katerina Pavlova is Theodora herself when young. However, in the process of understanding these figures of her past through their doubles, Theodora liberates herself. As a shaman priestess does, in order to prophesise and heal, she lets herself be possessed by them, becoming a figment of their imagination, a creation of their minds, but, at the same time, she accomplishes what Henry Miller’s epigraph (part II) had anticipated, in that she unites in herself the “myriad iridescent fragments” of which we are composed:

Henceforward we walk split into myriad fragments, like an insect with a hundred feet, a centipede with soft-stirring feet that drinks in the atmosphere; we walk with sensitive filaments that drink avidly of past and future, and all things melt into music and sorrow; we walk against a united world, asserting our dividedness.

All things, as we walk, splitting with us into a myriad iridescent fragments. The great fragmentation of maturity (133).

In this section realism is abandoned for an overly-symbolic stratification of often contradictory meanings and everything fades, veiled by the haze of pre-war decadent Europe: it “can be read an almost Vorticist explosion, its imagery is reminiscent of surrealism” (Jones 2015: 159). Theodora does tell the stories of other lives, she begins to experience and inhabit different personalities. Her fellow guests seem to be vivid tale-tellers but the whole experience could also be Theodora’s stream-of-consciousness: she projects into the screen of her

mind a series of stories that she uses to describe the inhabitants of the Hôtel du Midi and her own personal and family history. The hotel's name itself represents the middle passage, the 'middle-world', or *mundus imaginalis* (Corbin 1979), which is the connecting link between the material world experienced in Australia (in spite of her obvious gift for seeing) and the spiritual world she will experience with Holstius.

In this liminal space (*mundus imaginalis*), one of the ancient prophetess' testing grounds, she dreams of herself as "Epaphroditos" (198), the "beloved of Aphrodite" (Bliss 1992: 47), even if sensual Aphrodite seems to be the most distant goddess from the spinster Theodora. However, having both feminine and masculine traits, she is also *Hermaphroditos*, the son/daughter of Hermes and Aphrodite and can represent both "bisexuality (erotic attraction toward both sexes) or androgyny (the existence, in one person, of qualities and abilities traditionally considered either masculine or feminine)" (Bolen 1984: 235). Working through "attraction, union, fertilisation, incubation and a new creation" (Bolen 1984: 241), Aphrodite is the powerful force of transformation Theodora needs to activate when she decides to move onto the next phase of her journey.

### The Woods of Revelation

The place suddenly changes in section three and Theodora leaves a train on which she is travelling across the United States, supposedly on her way back to Australia. Having crossed the Great Plains, Theodora decides not to go back home. Theodora leaves the train at a small station, moves up into the wooded hills and takes temporary refuge with the Johnson family, who are yet another manifestation of her own. She shares closeness with their son Zack, but when Mrs Johnson asks her name, she renames herself "Miss Pilkington" (269). Finally deciding to abandon her own identity, she destroys all the tickets that are supposed to take her back to Australia, which "have the purpose of prolonging herself through many fresh phases of what was accepted as Theodora Goodman" (263). In ancient traditional societies, names are given and changed according to the different stages of a person's growth in the community. Thus, the act of changing her name marks *Theodora's* final acceptance of her role as Goddess' priestess. She is ready to pass the last tests of her initiation, and moves further into the woods, which from time immemorial have always been the Goddess' temples, where rites and festivities took place. The oak struck by lightning when she is twelve, and all the native woods in "what is now called America", both represent the rootedness of feminine spirituality on the earth, the "earthed sacred" (Ashcroft 2014: 26). *Theodora* is slowly reaching her full maturity as a priestess/shaman; of course this can only be labelled as *madness* by dominator society. *Theodora* has an inner dialogue with Holstius, a sort of pagan-like shamanic counsellor. Since the German word *Holz* means wood, his name connects him to the woods-as-temples, and White "liked the suggestion of *Holz* (wood) for a sturdy, though non-existent character" (Southerly 1973: 141). It is not important to establish whether he exists within or outside *Theodora's* mind, for, as he tells her, "there is little to choose between the reality of illusion and the illusion of reality" (278). With this acceptance of the perennial dialogue and interchange between the physical and spiritual planes of life, Holstius brings *Theodora* to a poetic and loving reconciliation with all her multiple fragmented selves:

In the peace that Holstius spread through her body and the speckled shadow of surrounding trees, there was no end to the lives of Theodora Goodman. These met and parted, met and parted, movingly. They entered into each other, so that the impulse for music in Katina Pavlou's hands, and the steamy exasperation of Sokolinov, and Mrs Rapallo's baroque and narcotized despair were the same and understandable. And in the same way that she created lives of Theodora Goodman were interchangeable, the lives in which she had entered, making them momentarily dependent for love or hate, owing her portion of their fluctuating personalities, whether George or Julia Goodman, only apparently deceased, or Huntly Clarkson, or Moraitis, or Lou, or Zack, there were the lives of Theodora Goodman, these too (284).

The novel ends with *Theodora* meekly accepting to be brought to a place "where there are folks who'll make you comfortable" (287). Holstius explains this is the way the dominator world works:

"They will come for you soon, with every sign of the greatest kindness", Holstius said. "They will give you warm drinks, simple nourishing food, and encourage you to relax in a white room and tell your life. Of course you will not be taken in by any of this, do you hear? But you will submit. It is part of the deference one pays to those who prescribe the reasonable life. They are admirable people, though limited". [...] "If we know better", Holstius said, "we must keep it under our hats" (283).

"Reasonable" people are "limited", they live on the surface only for they fear the depth and chasm of the psychic life: they want to define, circumscribe, control and restrict. In this dominator society, Theodora can only submit, but in the outward appearances only, under the mask of deference, while her spiritual visions will continue to illumine her life. She must accept this duality, because, as Holstius tells her, one has to accept the "two irreconcilable halves" (277):

"You cannot reconcile joy and sorrow", Holstius said. "Or flesh and marble, or illusion and reality or life and death. For this reason, Theodora Goodman, you must accept" (278).

*Theodora's* illumination comes from the firm acceptance of what is and must remain hidden from uncomprehending society, which considers her spiritual understanding as madness. Wisely, she hides her gylanic partnership knowledge under her hat: "The hat sat straight, but the doubtful rose trembled and glittered, leading a life of its own" (287). Like the black rose of her hat, trembling and shining of the secret sacred Goddess' wisdom, *Theodora* will hide her inner visions of beauty and peaceful reconciliation, to be the silent Goddess' prophetess and lead a life of her own.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- A Conversation with Patrick White*. 1973. Australian Writers in Profile. *Southerly*, 3: 132-143.
- Ashcroft, Bill. 2014. Horizons of Hope. Vanden Driesen Cynthia & Bill Ashcroft eds. *Patrick White Centenary. The Legacy of a Prodigal Son*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 22-42.
- Bliss, Caroline. 1992. *Patrick White's Fiction, The Paradox of Fortunate Failure*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bolen, Shinoda Jean. 1984. *Goddesses in Every Woman. A New Psychology of Women*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Bolen, Jean Shinoda. 2001. *Goddesses in Older Women. Archetypes in Women over Fifty*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Brady, Veronica. 1978. The Novelist and the Reign of Necessity: Patrick White and Simone Weil. *Patrick White. A Critical Symposium*. R. Shepherd & K. Singh eds. Adelaide: Centre for Research in New Literatures in English, 108-116.
- Brady, Veronica, 1981. *A Crucible of Prophets, Australians and the Question of God*. Sydney: Australian and New Zealand Studies in Theology and Religion [chapter 4, *Patrick White and the Difficult God*, 69-89].
- Corbin, Henri. 1979. *Corps Spirituel et Terre Céleste*. Paris: Buchet-Chastel.
- Devlin-Glass, Frances & Lyn McCreddon eds. 2001. *Feminist Poetic of the Sacred. Creative Suspicions*. Oxford: University Press.
- Docker, John. 1973. Patrick White and Romanticism: *The Vivisector*. *Southerly*, 33, 1: 44-61.
- Douglas J. Brewer & Emily Teeter. 2001. *Egypt and the Egyptians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eisler, Riane. 1987. *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Foucault Michel. 1972. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason [Folie et Dérison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique]*. New York: Random Vintage.
- Hardgraft, Cecil. 1977. The Theme of Revelation in Patrick White's Novels. *Southerly*, 37, 1: 34-47.
- Jones, Gail. 2015. Desperate, Marvellous, Shuttling: White's Ambivalent Modernism. *Patrick White Beyond the Grave*. Henderson & Lang, 155-162.
- Lang, Anouk. 2015. Queering Sarsaparilla: Patrick White's Deviant Modernism. *Patrick White Beyond the Grave*. Henderson & Lang, 193-204.
- Lohoar Shaun, Nick Butera & Edita Kennedy. 2014. Strengths of Australian Aboriginal Cultural Practices in Family Life And Child Rearing. *CFCA (Child Family Community Australia)* paper no. 25, 1-20. September 2014 <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/sites/default/files/publication-documents/cfca25.pdf> (consulted on 10 May 2016).
- McLaren, John. 2014. Patrick White: Crossing the Boundaries. *Patrick White Centenary. The Legacy of a Prodigal Son*. Vanden Driesen & Ashcroft, 82-97.
- Morley, Patricia. 1972. *The Mystery of Unity*. Brisbane, St. Lucia (QLD): University of Queensland Press.
- Panaghis, Afroditi. 1997. Questing for Identity in Patrick White's *The Aunt's Story*. *The International Fiction Review*, 30-35.

- Pearson, Carol S. 1991. *Awakening the Heroes Within. Twelve Archetype to Help us Transform Ourselves and Our World*. San Francisco: HarperCollins. New York: Harper & Row.
- Riem, Antonella. 2014. The Spirit of the Creative Word in Patrick White's *Voss*. *Patrick White Centenary. The Legacy of a Prodigal Son*. Vanden Driesen & Ashcroft, 222-240.
- Sjöö, Monica & Barbara Mor. 1987. *The Great Cosmic Mother. Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Walker, Barbara. 1985. *The Crone. Woman of Age, Wisdom, and Power*. New York: HarperCollins.
- White, Patrick. 1959 [1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1948]. *The Aunt's Story*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode.
- White Patrick. 1958. The Prodigal Son. *Australian Letters*, 1, 3: 37-40 [also reprinted in Christine Flynn & Paul Brennan eds. 1989. *Patrick White Speaks*. Sydney: Primavera Press: 13-17].
- Wittman, Aruna. 2015. The Doubling of Reality in Patrick White's *The Aunt's Story* and Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*. *Patrick White Beyond the Grave*. Henderson & Lang, 141-154.
- Wolfe, Peter. 1983. *Laden Choirs: The Fiction of Patrick White*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.

#### WEBLIOGRAPHY

- <http://www.surnamedb.com/Surname/Goodman> (consulted on 26 April 2016).
- <http://www.rianeeisler.com/> (consulted on 26 April 2016). <http://www.partnershipway.org/>
- [http://all.uniud.it/?page\\_id=195](http://all.uniud.it/?page_id=195) (consulted on 26 April 2016).
- [www.forumeditrice.it/percorsi/lingua-e-letteratura/all/](http://www.forumeditrice.it/percorsi/lingua-e-letteratura/all/) (consulted on 26 April 2016).
- <http://www.hanksville.org/storytellers/henson/> (consulted on 26 April 2016).

**Antonella Riem Natale** is Full Professor of English Literature and Language, Pro-Vice Chancellor International, Director of the Department of Languages and Literatures, Communication, Education and Society, President of the Italian Conference of Modern Languages and founder of the Partnership Studies Group (PSG) at the University of Udine. She is also editor in chief of the series ALL published by Forum University Press and of the online A ranked journal on World literatures *Le Simplegadi*. Among her publications: "The Spirit of the Creative Word in Patrick White's *Voss*" (Cambridge Scholars 2014), *The One Life: Coleridge and Hinduism* (Rawat 2005), and, as co-editor, the volume *The Tapestry of the Creative Word in Anglophone Literatures* (Forum 2013). For the Forum ALL series, she edited the Italian publication of Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade* (Forum 2011), *Sacred Pleasure* (Forum 2012) and *The Real Wealth of Nations* (Forum 2015). She is working on a volume on the figure of the 'Goddess' in the literatures in English, both within the 'canon' and indigenous 'minorities'. [antonella.riem@uniud.it](mailto:antonella.riem@uniud.it)