

## PATRICK WHITE'S STUDY OF FRENCH AT CAMBRIDGE

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Some years ago in France there were held a series of linked conferences in Paris and in Rouen concerned with the France-Australia cultural connection.<sup>1</sup> Various papers from that enterprise appeared after long delays in the journal *Commonwealth*,<sup>2</sup> where my original offering, in abbreviated form, was entitled "Patrick White and the Study of French Literature". Since that published text omitted the details of White's formal university studies, these are offered now in the hope that they will amplify the novelist's specific statements about his knowledge of French which appear in *Southerly* in 1973 and in his *Flaws in the Glass: A Self-Portrait* (1981). It may also be noted that the current issue of *Australian Literary Studies* discusses the activities at Cambridge in the years 1934-38 of another Australian writer, John Manifold.<sup>4</sup>

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Despite some knowledge of French language from his earliest years, Patrick White's decision to read French and German was only made on the autumn day of his 1932 arrival in Cambridge ("A Conversation....", p. 133). When at the University of Cambridge Patrick White was a resident member of King's College from 1932 to 1935, and studied for the Tripos in Modern Languages. The official record lists<sup>5</sup> chart his progress thus

June 1933 Preliminary	French Class II(Div. 2)
October 1933	[French oral passed [German oral failed
June 1934 Mod. Lang.I	German II, 1.
October 1934	German oral passed
June 1935 Mod.Lang.Tripos II	B.A. Degree, II,1.

His tutor for French was Donald H. Beves, who was also very prominent in the University Amateur Dramatic Club. His first French examination consisted of three papers, each of three hours' duration, namely, French Translation, French Composition, and French Essay. The *Cambridge University Reporter* (3 April 1933, p. 838) gives the books prescribed for the examinations, written and oral of that summer, as being:

A. Daudet, *Lettres de mon moulin*;  
 Poincaré, *Ce que demande la Cité*;  
 L. Cahen and M. Hauser, *Institutions actuelles du peuple français*  
 (Vuibert, 1926).

In the actual results, 41 students obtained Firsts; 52, Seconds, Division 1; 44 obtained Seconds, Division 2 (of whom White was the last in the alphabetically ordered list of males); and 48 Thirds.

While it has not been possible to verify all his syllabus texts, a number of Patrick White's French potential subject areas and the set texts in relation to the tripos of those years may be listed:

- Subject 1. French Literature, Thought and History  
 Bartsch, *Chrestomathie de l'Ancien Français* (12th edition)
- Subject 2. French literature, thought, and history in the XVIth century, with special reference to the period 1500-1550, and to the following works:
- Loyal Serviteur: *Histoire du Seigneur de Bayart*
- Marot: *Poésies*
- Théodore de Bèze: *Abraham sacrifiant*
- Ronsard: *Discours*
- Calvin: *Traité des Reliques*
- Sibilet: *Art Poétique*

**Subject 3. French Literature, Thought, and History in the XVIIth century, with special reference to the period 1600-1660**

**d'Urfé: *L'Astrée***

**Scarron: *Le Roman comique***

**Théophile de Viau: *OEuvres***

**St François de Sales: *Introduction à la vie dévote***

**Balzac: *Lettres***

**Saint Evremond: *Critique littéraire* (Bossard)**

**Corneille: *Polyeucte***

**Racine: *La Thébaïde***

**Rotrou: *Saint-Genest; La Soeur***

**Molière: *L'Avare; Le Médecin malgré lui; Tartuffe; Le Misanthrope.***

**Subject 4. French Literature, Life and Thought in the XVIIIth century, especially 1720-1780.**

**Rousseau: *La Nouvelle Héloïse***

**Beaumarchais: *Théâtre***

**Fontenelle: *Eloges des Académiciens***

**Rousseau: *Poésies***

**Voltaire: *Essai sur les moeurs***

**Diderot: *Salons***

Subject 5: French Literature, Life and Thought in the XIXth century, especially 1825-1865.

Leconte de Lisle: *Poèmes barbares*

Tocqueville: *Ancien Régime*

Taine: *Littérature anglaise*, Tome I

Stendhal: *La Chartreuse de Parme*

A. de Vigny: *Chatterton*

A. Comte: *Catéchisme*

Balzac: *César Birotteau*

Musset: *Fantasio*

This last paper had been changing its books at this time and thus it included from 1934:

Verlaine: *Choix de Poésies*

Vandal: *L'avènement de Bonaparte*

Brunetière: *Evolution des genres*

Dumas: *Le fils naturel*

Renan: *L'avenir de la Science*

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An analysis of the full French lecture lists (tripos) for the years 1932-35 reveals a pattern of recurring courses available to White, including:

- in Part I: France in the XVIIth Century, French literature, institutions, and history, 1800-1850; and "La poésie française au XIXe siècle;
- and in Part II: Old French literature (by a Kings Fellow), France in the XVIth, XVIIth and XIXth Centuries; and special courses on Molière and Reynard, and on Rabelais.

Thus the range of French texts available for White's close formal study seems strangely limited since it concentrates on the mediaeval, post Reformation, classical and Romantic periods. The latest actual lecture topics (coming to c.1870) were: "Aftermath of the Romantic Movement", the "Parnassian Reaction", the "Realistic Novel" and the promisingly entitled "Drama of Social Manners". Yet the careful reader of the novels will already have savoured the reference above to Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme*, the text continually referred to in *The Eye of the Storm*, while the Rabelais reference must immediately call to mind Nance Lightfoot and her world in *The Vivisector*.

As the novelist has recalled recently, his studies in French "were... part of the blundering search for a means of self-expression and fulfilment" (*Flaws in the Glass*, p. 35), and his early novels in particular show him in the tradition of such "feminine" writers as Gustave Flaubert, Marcel Proust, Robert Musil and many others concerned with the interpretation of the female being and with the mystery and vitality of the inner life. In his more "European" early fictions the use of French analogues, references and actual language was both obvious and somewhat transparent, while the later novels are much more subtle. Yet it is the contention of the present critic - as in his Commonwealth paper - that France and French literature have proved to be for the novelist bridges to the esoteric, transforming his text

into the hieroglyphs of a vision disquieting to those reared in a predominantly secular society. Peter Beatson, *The Eye in the Mandala* (1971), p. 1.

Now that these texts and literary movements of White's close study are known in detail, there is no longer the need for the usually guarded qualifications as to his close familiarity with and potential creative enrichment from classic French literature.

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## Notes

1. The Australian conference following on this was held at the University of New South Wales in September 1983 and its papers published in 1984 as *The French-Australian Cultural Connection*, edited by A.M. Nisbet and M. Blackman. It included my paper, "The Influence of the French Literature on Patrick White's *The Living and the Dead*", op.cit., pp. 148-59.
2. Vol. 9, n° 2, Spring 1987, pp. 17-83.
3. *Southerly*, n° 2, 1973, pp. 132-43, entitled "A Conversation with Patrick White".
4. Vol. 13, n° 3, May 1988, pp. 371-80, "John Manifold: Poet at Cambridge", with an Appendix of poems written then.
5. The details of his examinations and tutors were prepared for the present writer in November 1974 by the late Dr A.N.L. Munby, then Fellow and Librarian of King's College, Cambridge. They were verified later from the Official Class Lists.