Psychological Dynamics of the Desert in *Voss*

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This essay will discuss only limited aspects of the consistent theme in Patrick White's works. That is mainly the problem of identity in the hero of *Voss*, a German explorer who dies in his failure to cross the interior of Australia. Although there is a strong temptation to examine other works of White, here we shall chiefly concentrate on *Voss*, the fifth of White's long novels.

It is well known that R.F.W. Leichhardt, a German explorer of the nineteenth century is the model of this novel's hero. Leichhardt explored the untrodden parts of Australia several times succeeding in his second expedition wonderfully: then he started for the fourth, and the party never returned. They disappeared in the desert of Central Australia. The actual man as a model is naturally of interest to readers of the novel, but Leichhardt and his party will not be discussed here. The author himself tells as follows:

> It was only after returning to Australia and reading a school textbook that I saw the connection between Voss and Leichhardt. This led to research and my borrowing details of the actual expeditions from the writings of those who found themselves enduring the German's leadership. The real Voss, as opposed to the actual Leichhardt, was a creature of the Egyptian desert, conceived by the perverse side of my nature at a time when all our lives were dominated by that greater German megalomaniac.[1]

So the first image of Voss emerged from the Egyptian desert during the war while White was an R.A.F. Intelligence Officer in service. His remark about Hitler will not be considered now. What is most essential in his words above, is his image of the desert. The question is this: why does Voss, a German explorer, have to go into the Australian desert, to die?

I. The Framework

In the inland desert of Australia, Voss attempts justification and exaltation of himself as God. For this "megalomaniac" German explorer, the desert offers itself as the place of mortification, through the conquest of which divinity would be attained. Laura Trevelyan, a young Australian woman who develops strange empathy with Voss, remarks on the arrogant aim of the man at their third encounter:

> "You are so vast and ugly," Laura Trevelyan was repeating the words; "I can imagine some desert, with rocks, rocks of prejudice, and, yes, even hatred. You are so isolated. That is why you are fascinated by the prospect of desert places, in which you will find your own situation taken for granted, or more than that, exalted. ... Everything is for yourself." ... She saw him standing in the glare of his own brilliant desert. Of course, He was Himself indestructible.(pp. 87-90)[2]

Voss rejects all human ties since he values his "completeness" above all. He refuses love and sensuous beauty, for fear that they may intrude upon his isolation. He despises physical strength because "his own strength ... could not decrease with physical debility."(p. 212) His anger against "mediocre, animal men"(p. 61) is fierce: they pull him down from his throne back to the human body.

The mortification in the wasteland naturally evokes the image of Christ. What Voss is trying to accomplish in the exploration is revealed to the members of the expedition on several occasions when the image of Christ mixes with the figure of Voss. Palfreyman, an ornithologist who witnesses Voss sleep-walking under the pale moonlight, says to himself shivering; "Ah, Christ is an evil dream."(p. 177) As A. G. Wilkes says, "Voss's drama is worked out as an attempt to rival Christ, to undergo the same sufferings in order to deify himself, to prove that man can become God."[3]

Voss's strong hatred of "humility" arises from his conviction, or rather, his will for the conviciton that he can become God. Of course he is not utterly convinced himself; that is the reason he needs mortification. His divinity would be accepted by all others "after he had submitted himself to further trial, and, if necessary, immolation."(p. 145) He would

ascend to the height of God, or, would equal Christ, so the humility, a sentiment too human, must be cut off. Voss says; "I do not intend to stop short of the Throne for the pleasure of grovelling on lacerated knees in company with Judd and Palfreyman."(p. 217) "'I detest humility,' ... 'Is man so ignoble that he must lie in the dust, like worms? If this is repentance, sin is less ugly.'"(p. 151)

Yet no man can deny his sense of humanity. As Laura says in her letter to Voss "some odd streak of humanity that will appear in you [Voss] in spite of all your efforts"(p. 186) always betrays Voss in his struggle to conquer the interior.

The German's impractical leadership leads the party to destruction: the party splits into two groups after the ornithologist has been killed by an aborigine. Le Mesurier, the recorder of the "damnation" of Voss and his party, and Harry Roberts, a half-witted boy who literally believes in Voss, remain with the leader — those who are "alike only in their desperate need of him."(p. 39) Finally Voss admits his human weakness when they are under the captivity of aborigines.

> "Good Lord, sir, what will happen?" asked Harry Roberts, rising to the surface of his eyes.
> "*They* will know, presumably," replied the German.
> "Lord, sir, will you let them?" cried the distracted boy. "Lord, will you not save us?"
> "I am no longer your Lord, Harry," said Voss. (p. 366)

Laura Trevelyan follows Voss in their telepathic communication all the way through the expedition. Laura sacrifices herself so that she might save Voss from his damnation as the result of his arrogance. She suffers from some unexplicable disease in Sydney at her uncle's house while Voss proceeds towards his doomed failure. Voss rides into the visionary valleys of exquisite beauty with Laura the night before his death.

> ... a cool wind of dreaming began about this time to blow upon his face, and it seemed as if he might even escape from that pocket of purgatory in which he had been caught.
> ... they dismounted to pick the lilies that were growing there. They were the prayers, she said, which she had let fall during the outward journey to his coronation, and which, on the cancellation of that ceremony, had sprung up as food to tide them over

the long journey back in search of human status. (pp. 392-3)

Thus "three stages" of human existence are completed: "... God into man. Man. And man returning into God."(p. 386) Or so Laura understands as she says "when man is truly humbled, when he has learnt that he is not God, then he is nearest to becoming so. In the end, he may ascend."(p. 387)

However, there remains some uneasiness. The scheme of the story is seemingly religious; man's attempt to become a god and the corruption of the daring, which is a theme repeated in European myths, or three stages of man, which could perhaps be understood by White's interest in Cabalistic incarnation.[4] Now we are left to wonder and question: but why did Voss have to become God, in the first place? Wilkes asserts that Voss's ascension in consequence of his humiliation "is something that the novel has hardly demonstrated."

> We are to see Voss becoming human again, acquiring the inadequacies that "human status" implies. Voss's attainment of humility is nevertheless not so compelling dramatically as his resistance of it had been, and the earlier tortured Voss, trying to annihilate human feeling in himself, remains the dominating figure.[5]

If Voss's humility is unconvincing, it is not that way without ground. The obsession of Voss overflows the mystical, mythical and religious frame of the novel: the prevailing vision of the interior desert implies some mental necessity working under the Germans's fate which has been given the apparently theological interpretations.

II. Between isolation and engulfment

Henceforth we will deal with the dynamics of the counteractive inclinations in Voss which I believe to be the source of his obsession, with the help of R. D. Laing's concepts. Liam Hudson also provides us with useful means for interpretation, himself adopting Laing's ideas, such as the following:

> All who search ... do so, I would argue, from a sense of personal incompleteness similar to that described by Laing. They look for some ideal outside

themselves. In a word, they are nympholepts. One notes, too, that nympholepts' goals, or ideals, occupy a continuum, from the personal to the impersonal. At the "human" end there are those who search for a state of complete openness with some other person. ... At the other end of the scale, ... for an insight or theory which is, in itself, completely impersonal.[6]

Hudson gives a schematic viewpoint of two contradictory forces counteracting each other in the mind of Voss; the impersonal will for isolation, and the desire for engulfment by human relationships. The latter is usually repressed by the former, yet in the world of dream the hidden wish is disclosed.

The following passage is Laing's observation of a patient in a psychoanalytic group.

Richard was ... an extremely schizoid individual. Once, recently, he had left his books to have a walk in the park. It was a beautiful evening in early autumn. As he sat watching the lovers together, and the sun setting, he began to feel at one with the whole scene, with the whole of nature, with the cosmos. He got up and ran home in a panic. With relief he "come to himself" again. Richard's identity could be sustained only in isolation. Relationship threatened loss of identity — being engulfed, fused, merged, losing seperate distinctiveness.[7]

Feelings of fusion with nature or of engulfment by others such as Richard here, occur frequently in *Voss*.

... it was the valley itself which drew Voss. Its mineral splendours were increased in that light. As bronze retreated, veins of silver loomed in the gullies, knobs of amethyst and sapphire glowed on the hills, until the horseman rounded that bastion which fortified from sight the ultimate stronghold of beauty.
"*Achhh!*" cried Voss, upon seeing. ...

This was for the moment pure gold. The purple stream of evening flowing at its base almost drowned Voss. Snatches of memory racing through him made it seem the more intolerable that he might not finally sink, but would rise as from other drownings on the same calamitous raft. (p. 128)

Two experiences of a beautiful evening which seduces men into drowning are strikingly similar, but the reactions of the two men are different, although both are perhaps caused by the same impulse. They both sense the danger of the *ecstatic* evening light in which they are threatened with the loss of their identity, only Voss is too conscious of this danger to fear it anew. He has been subjected to the temptations of dangerous beauty presumably often enough to regret that he will win this "calamitous raft" again, in spite of his strong desire to be drowned.

Voss is a man of will, or so he declares. He says to Laura Trevelyan that future is "will", meaning his destiny is never at the mercy of the others or God, but solely *his own.* He denies whatever human relationship that might interfere with his superior isolation, therefore he regards his relationship with his parents "incidental", for "destiny works independently on the womb."(pp. 111 - 2) His obsession is the "granite monolith untouched"(p. 44) that rejects all softness. He needs no love, no sentimental admiration, for the reason that he manifests himself: "he was complete."(p. 41)

Yet the necessity of such rigour to protect isolation implies another strength pulling in the opposite direction. If he was settled peacefully in his self-sufficiency he would have no need of the mortification to exalt and justify his completeness. Sometimes he must admit that he is "after all, a man of great frailty, both physical and moral" when he is "filled with terrible longing."(p. 285) While Judd and Palfreyman were talking to each other intimately "he almost experienced a state of panic for his own isolation— it was never to him that people were saying good-bye."(p. 138)

Voss desires to mix with the external world and feels that this desire is wrong. After the experience of ecstasy in the beautiful evening light on coming to Rhine Towers, he refuses the kind offer of the Sandersons to rest in their house because "he had been wrong to surrender to sensuous delights, and must now suffer accordingly."(p. 129) The whole expedition can be conceived in the similar idea of punishment. In other words, he is not cutting off ties with others; rather, he is cutting off his desire for human ties— to go out of his isolated self.

In Voss's mind, to fight against the desire for engulfment stands for the test of his moral strength. Since the conflict is tinged with moral meaning, his detestation for humility becomes a perverse display of morality, such as is seen below:

> The nurture of faith, on the whole, he felt, was an occupation for women, between the preserving-pan and the linen-press. ... there were the few men who assumed humility without shame. It could well be that, in the surrender to selflessness, such individuals enjoyed a kind of voluptuous transport. Voss would sometimes feel embittered at what he had not experienced, even though he was proud not to have done so. (p. 48)

He does not allow himself to lose his ego in the hands of his Creator, even though it is most likely that he unconsciously longs to, according to Laing's reasonable opinion.

> ...It seems to be a universal human desire to wish to occupy a place in the world of at least one other person. Perhaps the greatest solace in religion is the sense that one lives in the Presence of an Other. (*Self and Others*, p. 136)

Voss cannot accept to live "in the Presence of an Other" except on condition that he can be the One so that he does not have to relinquish his pride in being a complete self. Although the passage cited above from the novel(p. 48) shows that he has resolved not to indulge himself in the "voluptuous transport" of humility against his desire to do so, he keeps hiding with all his effort his need of God who can give him his "position" in the vast desert of emptiness. He fights against humility before Him until the very end, and even then we are not too sure whether he had really given up his desire for deification.

What is Voss trying to protect by his ascetic isolation? Remember the case of Richard who was afraid to lose his "seperate distinctiveness"— his identity. The problem lies in the uncertainty of the fact that he exists against the external world, against all the situations surrounding him. The significance of Voss's "moral strength" might become clear if we recall, by contrast, Mr Bonner, a well-off merchant in Sydney who is absorbed in his social status— there is no Mr Bonner, but "an English draper". Indeed, Voss devotes all his energy to protect the fact that *he exists* by his will, not by given circumstances. He fights against fusion with nature or others so that he will not lose his ego; this sense of resistance will explain his withdrawal into himself as described in the next passage.

> All that was external to himself he mistrusted, and happiest in silence, which is

immeasurable, like distance, and the potentialities of self. (pp. 21 - 2)

He denies all "others" including that in himself. His bodily self is to be extinguished when he realized his "genius"(p. 35), for he admits only the spiritual part of him: The rest of his self is to be thrown away. He punishes himself for his weakness in an effort to reach complete self-realization in the form of pure spirit through the mortification of the desert. His repulsion of humility and love which appears to be directed to weaker characters such as Palfreyman or Laura, have been meant to Voss himself: he is fighting against a "weaker self" in himself.

It is Laura Trevelyan or her visions in the desert that threatens the strength of Voss most perilously of all. Voss knows "that part of himself, the weakest, of which was born the necessity for this woman."(p. 215)

White elucidates their relationship in a simple sentence: "I became in turn Voss and his anima Laura Trevelyan."[8] According to Jung, manliness or womanliness are personas chosen for social acceptance, hiding the opposite sexuality in one's self. Using this theory Voss and Laura could be understood not as two different personalities, but as two aspects of one single personality. Voss's will for "monolith" arises from his ego, which aims at an exclusive "one", keeps within its boundaries of isolation, and clings to the individuality. But this ego, the conscious realm of the mind, represents merely an aspect of the total self: there is an unconscious realm that works complementarily to the conscious. This part of the self has an inclusive, feminine, expansive nature that can flow softly to erode and devour the monolith of will. Voss projects, or maps this "anima" onto Laura, as Peter Beatson says, "Laura gives a face to Voss's anima."[9] When Voss rejects Laura's love, he is rejecting a part of himself that he considers "the weakest".

Projection also works on the other characters of the novel in a peculiar way. After Voss has seen Laura's vision at a camp, in a dreamy air he behaves in a strangely warm manner to Palfreyman despite his usual contempt for the man: "their voices were somehow complementary to each other. Like lovers."(p. 207) Here Laura is projected onto Palfreyman. She even intermingles with Judd, a hairy ex-convict of practical power that Voss usually keeps his eyes on enviously and suspiciously.(p. 208 - 9)

We notice the haunting image of light on these occasions of Laura's appearances through others, landscape or in her visionary figure itself. These luminous moments of

fusion are moments of completeness in the mind of Voss. They fill him with content. "The grey light" recurrent in the novel symbolizes happy infusion; for example, after Voss had dreamed of Laura at the Sandersons it brought him "the state of complete well-being which possessed him at least for that hour."(p. 140)

We must distinguish between two "completenesses" placed at exactly opposite ends of the scale. The completeness symbolized in the grey light is attained by engulfment, acceptance and infusion of others in the self, therefore utterly "selfless". Also it is sexual and physical as it appears in the dreams of Voss. On the contrary, the other completeness symbolized in ascetic mineral forms cuts off others.

At any rate, it is clear that Voss's aim is his complete self-realization, either he should deny his anima or accept it; he craves to be *one*. While in the conscious realm of his mind he wishes to repudiate Laura ascetically, in his unconscious part voluptuous desire for union with her seduces him. The conflict between two "completenesses" is evident in his dreams pervaded by sexual images. Released in his dreams, physical desire gushes onto him to imperil his solid existance as in the following.

> ... Now they were swimming so close they were joined together at the waist, and were the same flesh of lilies, their mouths, together, were drowning in the same love-stream. I do not wish this yet, or *nie nie nie, niemals. Nein.* You will, she said, if you will cut and examine the word. *Together* is filled with little cells. And cuts open with a knife. It is a see seed. But I do not. All human obligations are painful, Mr Johann Ulrich, until they are learnt, variety by variety. (p. 187)

To accept one's unconscious self is a painful obligation of human beings for a man can never perfectly dominate one's own existence. Man has been irrevocably divided since he realized that he exists. Knowledge of existence is the original sin; to hide oneself is the first act of knowledge. There is a man looking into a mirror, then he starts to question: Who am I? In the beginning of the novel Laura Trevelyan admits "no necessity to duplicate her own image, unless in glass, as now, in the blurry mirror of the big, darkish room."(p.9) She has kept her physical self hidden under her "marble perfection" so her question is suppressed, until Voss makes her "know". On the other hand, Voss plunges into his image in the mirror in search for the answer to the mystery of being, forgetting his human body, to

be crushed eventually. Thus he is forced to accept Laura in his vision when failure becomes clear in the blazing sunlight surrounded by hostile natives:

> Then they were drifting together. They were sharing the same hell, in their common flesh, which he had attempted so often to repudiate. She was fitting him with a sheath of tender white.
>
> "Do you see now?" she asked. "Man is God decapitated. That is why you are bleeding." (p. 364)

Holstius, "the tree walking" appearing in the end of *The Aunt Story* as some means of salvation to Theodora Goodman, who is "torn in two", says:

> We are too inclined to consider the shapes of flesh that loom up at us out of mirrors, and because they do not continue to fit like gloves, we take fright and assume that permanence is a property of pyramids and suffering. But true permanence is a state of multiplication and division.[10]

These words tell us where Voss has made a wrong step. Completeness lies in a state of division — true self is not the image in the mirror or the blind bodily self, but the gazing eyes between them. An untenable position is the fate of those who are aware of his division.

Voss's craving for a complete self reminds us of the concept of eroticism presented by George Bataille, eroticism as a momvement of nostalgia for lost continuity. The continuity is lost forever, as long as one remains conscious of his division. The solitude of existence begins at the moment one recognizes that he *is*, and it would become perpetual if one is determined to be absolutely true to his being — since a man is inevitably divided.

One night during the party's sojourn at Rhine Towers Voss "dreamed of the goat butter, in which the convict's [Judd's] wife was about to mould a face."(pp. 151 - 2) The dream works marvellously on him, so appeasing that he becomes "possessed even of something of the humility" after the night. The face is known to be undoubtedly Laura's as he remembers her figure while watching at the house of the Sandersons the next evening.

> Standing by the brown waters of the friendly river as it purled and swirled over the stones, and looking back to where the house was fastened, so it appeared, to the bank, with much hopefulness and trust by human hands, the man was drawn nostalgically towards that strength of innocence which normally he would have condemned as ignorance, or suspected as a cloak to cover guile. (p. 152)

Voss misses the strength of innocence under the releasing influence of Laura's dream. The house "fastened" to the bank causes him painful longing for a steady position in society, for the lost relation with the external world, and for a part of himself he has deliberately suppressed. Yet he cannot return to the happy innocence, since he knows there is mystery of being which is the division of the human spirit, although he does not know the solution.

There are moments when the desire for the lost continuity, the desire to be engulfed, are satisfied, if only transiently. They are moments of revelation; when the mystery of being is solved, perfect contentment comes. These moments are recognized in the novel by the experience of light, particularly the grey light previously mentioned. The light, however, does not persist long. Eroticism is of the moment.

We have discussed the two conflicting wishes in Voss's mind; the will for isolation, and the desire for engulfment. Mineral forms symbolizes the former, whereas the latter is given the image of water that flows away to drown him. It also appears in the form of light when infusion is acceptable. Both cravings seek for the completeness of his self but in different ways. The isolation of the ego aims at the existence that is self-sufficient in itself, thus personification of his anima, an "other" in his self that represents inclusive femininty and the physical aspect, is to be refused. On the contrary, the total selflessness of engulfment suggests the mode of existence in continuity, in which he melts with his anima Laura. The latter imperils the individuality, therefore in the mind of Voss who is conscious that *he* exists against the world, its satisfaction can never be attained except in moments of revelation. Fluctuation between these two extreme modes of existence issues from the severe wish to be "true" to one's divided self.

Now we have a scheme of Voss's psychological dynamics developed from the beginning of this chapter. Next on the foundation of this structure we shall consider the significance of the desert.

III. The Sphere of Nothingness

Laura Trevelyan suggests to Voss in their earlier telepathic encounter on the expedition; "human relationships are vast as deserts: they demand all daring (p. 192)." Laura encourages Voss in this visionary communication to touch her, but Voss finds himself incapable of the act, for he is "afraid that he might receive the impression of ungainliness, dressed as she was in her thick, travel-stained habit." We sense a contemptuous air for physical existence in this hesitation. It is hard to conquer the desert between the spiritual self and the physical self, or the exclusive internal world and the external world of other people. Le Mesurier, the recorder of Voss's "damnation", writes in his notebook of prophetic poetry a prose poem titled *Childhood*:

> All were turning gravely in the dance, only I was the prisoner of stone.
>
> When I no longer expected, then I was rewarded by knowing: so it is. We do not meet but in distances, and dreams are the distance brought close. (p. 295)

As Voss recognizes with resentment on reading it, this poem is about "the most personal thoughts" of Voss. Voss is obsessed by his "stone" will so that he cannot "meet" others "but in distances." Only in his dreams is he released from stone isolation. The harsh desert connotes the difficulty of regaining the lost continuity.

At the same time, the desert indicates the difficulty of attaining the complete self by means of isolation. Trying to reject all externality together with his bodily self, Voss is compelled to face the overwhelming power of external reality. The interior desert that tortures him physically works destructive also on his presumed superiority, as in the scene below:

> So the party entered the approaches to hell, with no sound but that of horses passing through a desert, and saltbush grating in a wind.
>
> This devilish country, flat at first, soon broke up into winding gullies, not particularly deep, but steep enough to wrench the backs of the animals that had to cross them, and to wear the bodies and nerves of the men by the frantic motion that it

> involved. There was no avoiding chaos by detour. The gullies had to be crossed, and on the far side there was always another tortuous gully. It was as if the whole landscape had been thrown up into great earthworks defending the distance. (p. 336)

The desert "defending the distance" has to be crossed; or both distances, between one and the other, and one and God. Surely perfection would be in his hands if he could conquer the distance, but Voss is heading for contradictory completenesses at the same time. Ostensibly the purpose of the crossing is his deification, self-realization in isolation. But under the will for the throne, lurks the desire for engulfment— the craving for human relationship. As for Voss, the dreadfulness of isolation is far easier to accept than that of engulfment. Fierce and endless suffering of the progress on "the humped and hateful earth" does torment him, "but it is what we expected,"(p.210) he says. To Voss, most fearful is the human relationship.

> ...How much less destructive of the personality are thirst, fever, physical exhaustion, much less than people. ...words, ...would leave him half-dead. (p. 18)

> He himself, he realized, had always been most abominably frightened, even at the height of his divine power, a frail god upon a rickety throne, afraid of opening letters, of making decisions, afraid of the instinctive knowledge in the eyes of mules, of the innocent eyes of good men, of the elastic nature of the passions, even of the devotion he had received from some men, and one woman, and dogs.
>
> Now, at least, reduced to the bones of manhood, he could admit to all this and listen to his teeth rattling in the darkness. (p. 390)

The last citation is from the scene in Chapter 13 where Voss finally admits his failure, his need of God, his mortal existence. Distance between Voss and others or "an Other" is so immense that once Voss admits his manhood the vast emptiness becomes terrifying. He is, after all, nothing in regard to the external reality. He has devoted all his strength to prove that he *is* regardless to the circumstances imposed upon him; yet after he has realized that he neither can shut the material world out, and returned to a mortal being, his nothingness in the world of others utterly defeats him.

In social terms, Voss's will for isolation and desire for engulfment can be perhaps explicated in the same word: identification. Whether by immersion in some social relationship or by isolation in a perfectly self-sufficient "one", he can erase his doubt as to the question of who he is. The problem lies in the fact that he is pulled in two ways so he cannot answer the question but in the future tense. The position is no doubt "untenable". He is, at the most, *not yet* anything. There arises his need for a declaration of will and a confirmation of superiority, in an effort to "situate" himself.

> He stood there moistening his lips, and would have repudiated kinship with other men if it had been offerd. In the presence of almost every one of his companions, ... he was drawn closer to the landscape, ... and of that landscape, always, he would become the centre.(p. 169)

His incapability of a mutual relationship of which he is deadly afraid, results in an ostensible manifestation of his self-centred view of the world. Laing's explanation helps in understanding his state of mind.

> What constantly preoccupies and torments the paranoid is usually the precise opposite of what at first is most apparent. He is persecuted by being the centre of everyone else's world, yet he is preoccupied with the thought that he never occupies first place in anyone's affection. ... Unable to experience himself as significant for another, he develops a delusionally significant place for himself in *the world of others*. Others see him as living in a world of his own. Ironically this is true and not true. For there is also a sense that he lives not so much in his own world, but in the empty place he supposes he does not occupy in the *others*' world. He appears to be profoundly self-centred but the more self-centred he appears, the more he is trying to convince himself that he is the centre of *their* world. (*Self and Others*, p. 136)

The progress of the expedition is often discribed as somewhat drowsy: "the white men continued westward through what could have been their own perpetual sleep."(p. 210) A dreamy atmosphere pervades the interior since the substantial desert is the projection of "dillusionary place of significance". The desert is a vast mirror reflecting a man's empty

illusion. Voss lives in "the empty place he supposes he does not occupy in the others' world" trying to convince himself he is the centre of the place. As soon as he is awake from the dream cast upon the inland, the vast distance smashes him. His air-built position of supremacy in the world falls apart: he is nothing.

The dillusion has still not completely disappeared after the disclosure of his so far subterranean nothingness which has been agitating him towards his own deification. While Voss and two remaining party members are under the captivity of aborigines, the apparition of a comet that is considered to be the Great Snake, the origin of all lives in their creation myth, frightens the natives because they believed it has come down from the north in anger. Enraptured by its emergence, Voss talks to an aboriginal boy Jackie, who has betrayed his too simple confidence in the "innocent" natives.

> Voss addressed the aboriginal [Jackie].
>
> "You want for white man save blackfellow from this snake?"
>
> The explorer, however, was still laughing. He was so light.
>
> "Snake too much magic, no good of Mr Voss," Jackie replied.
>
> "Then you do not believe in me," said the German, suddenly sober, and as if he had really expected to find someone to replace himself in his own estimation. (p. 379)

If deification is the inhuman end of identification, at the human end there is Laura Trevelyan. When Voss starts to write a letter to her in a camp almost on an impulse, he feels that he is not "at that moment, self-posessed." He becomes aware of the fact that he has been "sitting in the middle of nowhere". In this state "too expressive of his nothingness", he can accept his love for Laura straightfowardly. He hesitates "at the prospect of certain words, of which the sentiments remained unfamiliar", that is, words of love, but then he starts writing "out of nothing."(p. 215)

However the letter does not reach Laura because the messenger Dugald, an old aborigine, tears it to pieces when he becomes released from "the white man's magic" and returns to tribal law. The inland desert shows its austerity through the seemingly unreasonable act of the aborigine. If Voss is to get out of his nothingness, the distance must be overcome.

It might be interesting to consider "nothingness" in relation to the nature of the

desert in general. There is a novel by Jean Cayrol, a survivor of a concentration camp under the control of the "Nacht und Nebel" order, whose "nostalgia for human communion is indeed the essence of his novels and poetry."[11] The hero, Géronimus, wanders in the desert where reality and fantasy are inseparably mixed so that all sorts and conditions of people he meets there seem most likely to be mere mirages.

> Il se coucha, exténué par cette course sans issue où il n'avait rencontré que lui-même, suivant seulement sur la piste des épines dorsales géantes et arquées dont les pierres grises avaient remplacé les os parmi les épineux et les euphorbes, ...[12]

We find an evidently similar experience of Voss in the scene in which Voss remembers his journey back from Moreton Bay and North riding in the blue bush near Rhine Towers.

> ...volcanic silence of solitary travel through infinity. The German had experienced this and had been exhausted by it, winding deeper into himself, into blacker thickets of thorns. (p. 124)

In both deserts, each hero sinks deeply into himself, turning round his body's centre, in captivity of his own bone. It is very exhausting, desolate, and feels endless.

What are they doing, Voss and Géronimus? They are desperately searching for the way out of the thorns of their bones, to reach for *others*, to situate themselves in the external world again, to regain union, identity. The desert is the sphere of "nothingness" that extends between self and other.

1. Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass: a self-portrait*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., Penguin Books, 1983), p. 104.
2. Patrick White, *Voss*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., Penguin Books, 1960). Henceforth the page number in parentheses with no reference indicates a citation from this book.
3. A. G. Wilkes, "A Reading of Patrick White's *Voss*", in *Ten Essays on Patrick*

White Selected from Southerly *(1964 - 67)*, (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1970), p. 140.

4. See Peter Beatson, *The Eye in the Mandala*, (Sydney: A. H. & A.W. Reed, 1976), for example, p. 10.
5. Wilkes, op. cit., p. 140.
6. Liam Hudson, *Contrary Imaginations,* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., Pelican Books, 1967), p. 170.
7. R. D. Laing, *Self and Others*, Second edition, (Harmondsworth: Penguine Books Ltd., Pelican Books, 1971), p.112. Henceforce the page number in parenthesis with the title *Self and Others* indicates a citation from this book.
8. White, *Flaws in the Glass*, p. 103.
9. Beatson, op. cit., p.15.
10. Patrick White, *The Aunt Story*, (Harmondsworth: Penguine Books Ltd., Penguine Books, 1963).
11. Mitsuo Yuge, in the commentary on his translation of Jean Cayrol's *Les corps étrangers,* (Tokyo: Hakusuisha, 1967), p.298.
12. Jean Cayrol, *Histoire d'un désert,* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1972), p. 120

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