A Fringe of Leaves: From Western Taboos to Australian Myth

> I cannot give you an exact account . . . of the impression Mrs Roxburgh made on me. Unless to put it at its plainest — she reminded me of a clean sheet of paper which might disclose an invisible writing — if breathed upon. Do you understand?
> (Patrick White, *A Fringe of Leaves*, 17)

> My task is done:
> Thy lore is learned. Earth's wonders are thine own,
> With all the fear and all the hope they bring.
> My spells are past: the present now recurs.
> Ah me! a pathless wilderness remains
> Yet unsubdued by man's reclaiming hand.
> (Shelley, *Queen Mab*, 798-99)

At the beginning of *A World on the Wane*, Claude Lévi-Strauss warns his readers about the danger of travel narratives in which too many exciting details and too much suspense may be mistaken for what matters and thus hide the true meaning of discoveries, the significance of anecdotes. The obvious, the fabulous is not necessarily what matters. The weaving of minor descriptions is what reveals society as a texture and the readers should pay attention to banality, to the repetition of occurrences. This may also apply to any narrative that takes up the outer characteristics of the travel narrative. In *A Fringe of Leaves*, Patrick White plays with this traditional literary form and seems to shape his novel according to some of its rules. However the text starts with the preparation for the journey back to civilisation, and the discovery of Australia already belongs to a relative past. Even if it is set in the Victorian era, the novel cannot ignore the

deep similarities between puritan society in Britain and its supposedly exotic counterpart in the new world. The point of view of the outer narrator is definitely modern if discreetly so. The starting point of the story is Australia, the penal settlement, the place devoted to the punishment of those who have transgressed the taboos meant to ensure the safety of Victorian society, back in Europe as the Americans would put it. Significantly both civilisations and both countries are remembered through a series of flash-backs that stage the crucial alterations that have taken place in the heroine's destiny. Thus a relatively banal and traditional character becomes the instrument of a post-colonial analysis of both societies.

To further question the novelty of white Australian society, a series of echoes between the two worlds is underlined in contrast with the paradoxically liberating experience of the heroine's captivity in an Aborigine tribe. From the set code of restrictions enacted by Western society, the main protagonist travels back in time to a primitive form of society but also to the depth of her own unconscious. The description of original Australian culture does not matter as a picturesque reminiscence of an idealised past, or as the denunciation of an inferior form of social development, but rather as an instructive insight into the basic instincts of the human mind and as a revelation of taboos that are meant to hide these unsettling instincts. The narration insists on the impossibility to reconcile these cultures and on the necessity to adopt a system of protection in order to survive in the so-called civilised world. The book itself is the only place within which such a reconciliation could take place as a kind of utopia deprived of any sentimentality, defined by its capacity at integrating various forms of expression that would be taboo in actual society.

England has been left behind, but the heroine and her husband represent its social elite abroad. They have travelled in all simplicity but still manage to impress the poor exiles who have to be content with a mere ersatz of civilisation. Victorian society, however, is embodied in two very specific ambassadors: Mr Roxburgh's poor health announces the decadence of his class whereas his wife's sturdiness reveals her popular origins. Since the heroine does not naturally belong to this

upper class, her behaviour remains constantly careful and numerous comments are passed on the restrictions to her instincts. Thus Victorian taboos are underlined in the narrative as the major characteristics of this society. The heroine has forsaken a natural if uninteresting existence for the somewhat stilted advantages of culture. This social promotion has first entailed a loss of innocence and spontaneity. Restraint is perceived as an important achievement towards perfection and as part of an initiation rite comparable to what the heroine will have to submit to again when she joins the Aborigine tribe later on in the novel and is given a husband once she has started to behave like the other women in the group: "It was decided by Mr Roxburgh and his mother to delay the honeymoon, that the bride might be *initiated* without delay into the customs she was expected to adopt" (63, my emphasis). To define Victorian England, the narrator often uses words that he also uses to picture primitive Australia. He never underlines them but systematically points out the similitude. Thus English society seems to become the object of an anthropological description as much as Aboriginal customs would have been in an English text. When Ellen Gluyas sheds her identity to become Mrs Roxburgh, she adopts the sartorial habits of her new class but she also changes her relationship to food. Tea is used as the easily recognisable symbol of the English gentry, but it has to be tasted in a Worcester porcelain cup so that the ceremonial becomes more important than the act of drinking itself. Mrs Roxburgh's sexual life also becomes strictly regulated and totally deprived of spontaneity: "She herself had only once responded with a natural ardour, but discovered on her husband's face an expression of having tasted something bitter, or of looking too deep" (67). To be accepted in a new group she has to give up her own wishes and endeavour to please her husband according to his own code.

The outer expression of this code is, of course, language. Cornish vernacular disappears to be replaced by proper standard English. Words that become taboo correspond to thoughts that are prohibited. Mrs Roxburgh as a creation of her husband takes up a totally new identity which is supposed to control even her most private thoughts. The diary that her mother-in-law recommends her to write is meant to teach her to master language, not to indulge her private longings. The

difficulties she encounters in such an undertaking reveal that writing can only develop if it transcends these taboos to reach a deeper level of identity, thus giving a clue as to the true meaning of the book itself.

However the heroine herself lacks this insight into her own personality and is so impressed by the standards of her new family that she fears retribution whenever she fails to meet the demands of her new role. Prohibitions are never questioned, they are accepted as customary and punishment also comes naturally. Whenever Mrs Roxburgh fails, her husband is the victim of a fit, and finally dies, possibly because his wife has been unfaithful to him. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud underlines that when a taboo is transgressed punishment comes naturally as if by itself and that it often affects the transgressor's relatives more than the transgressor himself, hence a feeling of guilt. In the novel the feeling of guilt is exemplified by the heroine's inability to give birth to a living child. She is condemned to failure and barrenness because she does not deserve to perpetuate her image. This fear of sterility also appears in her incapacity to write about important events and is thus related with the author's relation to the writing process.

Victorian society seen from a distance does not lead to a glorious future. Its colonial counterpart suffers from a similar artificiality as far as the so-called gentry is concerned. The only promise of a prolific future is given by Mrs Lovell, the wife of the humanitarian officer, whose love for all announces a new generation that trusts more in the individual. But this hopeful vision only occurs at the end of the novel after the heroine has had to face hypocrisy and gossip. The artificial and upholstered atmosphere described in the enclosed carriage at the beginning of the text stresses the similitude with English society. Social discrimination refuses upstart citizens the right to claim their full position whereas a character like Garnet Roxburgh, the dishonest outcast from the English gentry, benefits by the power endowed with his name, in a country where nobody has heard of his past fall.

The name of his estate, Dulcet, reveals the hypocrisy of his situation and uncovers the forbidden sensuality he hides from society. His own name Garnet evokes lusciousness and reappears throughout the

story with the image of the garnet ring that will be given back to the heroine — and rejected — after the wedding ring has been lost, and with the colour of the fitting dress that underlines the charms of Mrs Roxburgh. He is the instrument of the heroine's fall and leads her to commit adultery, the transgression.

Garnet is the main link between the colonial society and its model at home, but other male characters in the book stand as figures of authority that constantly deny women their right to autonomy, or anybody in a position of weakness the possibility to assert themselves. Injustice is clearly perceived by the reader when the young servant is sent back to the factory because she is pregnant — although the word is taboo in this Victorian background. The slaughter of the mare by Garnet who resents Ellen's reserve adds to the climate of violence that pervades the penal settlement. There is no way to forget in a place where sounds evoke torture, where looks suggest brutal irony and systematic hostility, where some routes are prohibited to honest citizens — especially women — because they are used by the prisoners. Even the doctor becomes a figure of harassment when his diagnosis condemns the heroine to live.

The penal settlement serves as an allegory of retribution and its atmosphere haunts the heroine who is refused the right to face its meaning: when she goes on a solitary walk, she is saved from murder by Garnet himself, the hated seducer. She has to wait till the end of the story, once she has gained self-knowledge, to be able to steal away from her protectors to face humiliation openly and without real physical risk. Even then she owes her safety to the presence of guards. However her encounter with the female prisoners suggests the similitude between Ellen, the lady and the Irish girl who helped Jack Chance, Ellen's rescuer, to escape.

Within the society of miscreants a new code of taboos is established, the transgression of which, however, restores humanity in this almost animal world: tobacco is smuggled to the prisoners, sexual intercourse or at least some parody of love relieves the prisoners' solitude. So when social rules of punishment are carried too far, the values are finally reversed. The description of penal life constitutes a

serious criticism of the system.[1] The term used to identify the prisoners, miscreants, stresses the problem of belief, the misunderstanding about values.

This questioning also characterises the journey into the world of the Aborigines. Their rough appearances could lead the reader to dismiss this group as deprived of human feelings. But the heroine is obviously taken care of and becomes part of the group, gradually sharing both hardships and joys. The narrator repeatedly compares this experience with her previous initiation into high society:

> Ellen Gluyas had not encountered a more unlikely situation since forced as a bride to face the drawing-rooms of Cheltenham. The difference in the present was that she had grown numb to hurt, and that those she had loved and wished to please could no longer be offended by her lapses in behaviour or her scarecrow person. (217)

The reader comes to realise that her physical martyrdom may be less painful than her past initiation because she has gained independence and is no longer afraid to displease or to hurt anybody she loves. Again she sheds her clothes to don a new personality. But the apparent nakedness is hidden by a form of make-up and the heroine, as well as the reader, gradually understands that she must be reduced to a banal appearance to stem the fear of her new companions. Ellen, the white woman is a kind of fearful divinity for the Aborigines as she was a dangerous divinity for her own civilised husband: "it pleased him to think he had dominion over a divinity" (35). Her ambiguous position corresponds to the ambiguity of the totem as described by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*. The heroine is such a mysterious character because she has crossed the boundaries that protect each social group from the unknown. Just as she is fascinated by her inclinations to her unconscious wishes, she fascinates her husband who has always lived cut off from the joys of physical fulfilment and fascinates the Aborigines who have never seen such a delicate creature. Her crossing the water to end up on the island is the re-enactment of her crossing the river from Cornwall to England to marry Mr Roxburgh when she was a younger and more

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[1] "*Summum jus summa injuria*," a precept of Roman Law.

innocent woman. This experience must not be read as a narrative of exotic adventures but as a voyage in the dark, only unlike her previous daydreams this is running out of control and can no longer be termed "a self-guided tour into the backwaters of experience" (24).

The journey into the wilderness makes it possible to get rid of ordinary restraints and provides the opportunity to test the limits of one's power of resistance to stress and capacity of adaptation. As in other narratives of the kind, the heroine has to re-invent the various stages of human development through history. The value of this experience has been announced at the beginning of the book by the chorus: "I wonder . . . how Mrs Roxburgh would react to suffering if faced with it?" (21). This question is asked by Mr Merivale, a character who only appears in the first chapter of the book and who seems to be endowed with some form of foresight and wisdom. This first chapter is meant to underline the true importance of the novel beyond mere plot and ends with a stress on literary form that emphasises the philosophical ambition of the novel: "The occupants of the carriage were rolled on into the deepening afternoon, and finally, like minor actors who have spoken a prologue, took themselves off into the wings." (21) This similitude with Greek tragedy also limits the scope of suspense; the reader may only expect to witness a sort of scientific experiment that will force out the character's core of darkness but that will not change its essence. Mrs Roxburgh will be studied as an individual deprived of the usual landmarks provided by social codes.

The idea of the scientific experiment is taken up at the end of her adventure when she faces the officer who tries to sum up her story in an official report deprived of the embellishments of literature: "The commandant was standing above his victim, looking down upon her with what could have been scientific detachment or vindictiveness, though if taken to task, he might have professed solicitude" (331). The attitude of the narrator cannot be as remote and uninvolved as the position of the officer who has not followed the meanders of the heroine's itinerary, but the general framework of a scientific narrative provides clues to the reader who might be disoriented at times.

Beyond the anecdotes, the narrative concerns every man and every woman, which may be its most disconcerting aspect. The reader is faced with what he would have left in the dark as Miss Scrimshaw, the clairvoyant but prudent character who partakes both in the chorus and in the rest of the novel:

> Every woman has secret depths with which even she, perhaps, is unacquainted, and which sooner or later must be troubled . . . Who am I to say? I only had the impression that Mrs Roxburgh could feel life has cheated her out of some ultimate in experience. For which she would be prepared to suffer, if need be. . . . Perhaps it occurred to the sibyl that she was unveiling herself along with Mrs Roxburgh (17-18).

The framework provided by the artifice of the journey and the shipwreck constitutes the structure of a psychoanalysis or at least of a narration that could lend itself to analysis. The heroine herself echoes the preoccupation of the narrator and wonders about her true nature: "How much of the miscreant, I wonder, is in Garnet R.? Or in *myself* for that matter" (79). The question is asked in the diary and thus underlines the aim of the writing process.

Insistence on structure characterises the whole text and a series of echoes multiplies the impact of the experience described. Mrs Roxburgh is the creation of her husband therefore she must be considered as part of him. Her social accomplishments have been acquired through a long apprenticeship and her adventure among the Aborigines are the reverse journey to nature. However deeply she may regress, her super-ego remains as a kind of witness to her degradation and haunt her, reminding her of the taboos she is transgressing. Finally, in spite of the violence of her initiation, she goes back to civilisation and accepts the values that she has been putting to test. She may have transgressed the taboos but she still believes in them, illustrating Freud's theory, according to which transgression may be a way to reinforce prohibitions.

Her first major transgression, adultery, takes place while she is still in civilisation. But this episode is so short that it appears more as a kind of experiment than as a real fall and the rapidity with which she gathers up consciousness is unsettling for the seducer. In the structure of

the novel it is only a glimpse at the possible developments of personality out of the control of social coercion. The heroine accepts the full meaning of her acts and refuses to hide behind the role of a victim: "She must hobble as far as possible beyond physical contact with the one who was less her seducer than the instrument she had chosen for measuring depths she was tempted to explore" (104). Again the metaphor of the scientific experiment is used in combination with the image of the exploration. The narrator reproduces her inner judgement probably with even more precision than a first person narrative could provide, at least he can analyse straightaway what a character entangled in contradictory feelings would take time to clarify, thus making the heroine seem almost a cynic. Consciousness of sin remains, however, and Mrs Roxburgh is disturbed with her outer resemblance with common low characters such as Mrs Aspinall, the stereotyped coquette. "Mrs Roxburgh glanced through what she had written to see whether it looked too explicit on paper, and decided it did not; but knew that she would be haunted by the facets of vice she shared with Mrs Aspinall" (118). Her diary has become the embodiment of her consciousness and acceptance of taboos, and of her efforts to come to terms with her inner contradictions.

The complexity of her personality is reproduced in the story through the opposition between the facets of her split identity; from Ellen Gluyas, the Cornish hoyden, to Mrs Roxburgh, the accomplished lady, a work of art, a miracle that had transgressed the laws of social hierarchy. The experience with the Aborigines sends her back to her former identity and regularly "it was the spirit of Ellen Gluyas coming to Mrs Roxburgh's rescue" (236). Communion with nature is something that already belongs to her experience of life and corresponds to a state of development. But Mrs Roxburgh's education gives Ellen Gluyas an ability to remain distant and to contemplate herself even when she falls to the lowest degrees of regression:

> Nothing was wasted, and as her fingernails grew more skilful at crushing fleas and lice, she found her fingers straying to her mouth, then guiltily away, as they had if ever she was caught out picking her nose and disposing of the spoils when a little child. Surely she could not sink any lower? . . . At least it would never enter the heads of any

> of her acquaintance, . . . that Mrs Roxburgh could sink to the level of bestiality at which she had arrived" (239).

Once she has shed all pretensions at human sophistication, the heroine can aspire at the fulfilment of her most deeply buried wishes and reach pure enjoyment as she never could in society: "Now reduced to an animal condition she could at least truthfully confess that ecstasy had flickered up from the pit of her stomach provoked by a fragment of snakeflesh" (238). Significantly, her first experience of actual pleasure is connected with the oral stage of development, she enjoys her food at a time when she can only dream of sexual pleasure.

Sexual freedom only becomes possible once she has overtaken the major taboo linked with food and human life; the first stage of her initiation builds up in intensity till she reaches the ultimate in horror and fascination and tastes human flesh. It is important to notice that she is not invited to cannibalism by her new family but that she makes the decision herself to transgress a double taboo as both her western education and her new culture exclude her from the festivity. She is driven by a sort of fascination for the unknown that does not exclude consciousness, at least the narration suggests a certain form of reflection; she is already wondering about her own motivations: "She was less disgusted in retrospect by what she had done, than awed by the fact that she had been moved to do it" (244). The atmosphere of innocence and serenity that pervades the woods at the time of the ceremony alleviates the horror and focuses the attention of the reader on the meaning of the experience: "she could not have explained how tasting flesh from the human thigh-bone in the stillness of a forest morning had nourished not only her animal body but some darker need of the hungry spirit" (245). At the end of the novel the reader and the heroine will be able to compare this experience with Mr Pilcher's experience of cannibalism, but whereas Mrs Roxburgh has been reaching for a spiritual achievement, the sailor only tried to save himself from hunger. Cannibalism has been forced on him by necessity whereas she has chosen it. The taboo has played its religious part and her experience is close to a form of communion of the spirit; the girl who was eaten had been the victim of a fight for love and partook of the spirit of love. So the heroine makes her

part of this spirit and from then on can lend herself to a new stage in her development. Soon afterwards she meets Jack Chance and becomes his lover. She has discovered the language of the body after she has forgotten the use of words for communication. However, again, her Christian education cannot be totally eradicated and she makes the distinction between the beauty of the experience in itself and the horror it represents for her culture, therefore the necessity to forget it. But, of course oblivion is impossible. As a consequence, she becomes aware of how thoughts and wishes can be repressed, and gains important self-knowledge. This will be a new force when she gets back to civilisation; unlike Pilcher, she will be able to resist madness and to face herself in the looking-glass.

Self-esteem comes with the free relationship with the run-away prisoner who saves her. Symbolically physical love helps her rejuvenate and she will be so amazed at her new found youth and beauty that she will stand naked in front of the mirror, discovering her body with sounds evoking both pleasure and suffering. Even back in Victorian society, the heroine keeps the benefits of her long initiation and remains a modern character not just accepting her body but understanding its role in communion with the world and the men she has loved. She is no longer the Victorian wife submitting to the pleasure of her husband, she has been an actor in her own life and at the same time has accepted to share the intensity of this existence with others:

> On an evening when the light and sounds of life in house and yard were irresistibly benign, Mrs Roxburgh went so far as to drop the old woollen shift and stand fully revealed before the glass. She was at first too amazed to move, but then began to caress herself while uttering little, barely audible, cries of joy and sorrow, not for her own sinuous body, but for those whose embraces had been a shared and loving delight (314)

This episode is followed by her trying the garnet silk dress that so much enhances her femininity, and that recalls the name of her lover-brother-in-law Garnet Roxburgh; but what is acceptable as a private experience of understanding cannot yet be transformed into a public show of seduction. She wears this dress in the closing scene of the book

because she has no choice and feels ill-at-ease in the attire of the Victorian lady dressed-to-kill, so admired by the other outwardly Victorian character, Miss Scrimshaw, the spinster. Symbolically the dress is stained by the suitor and the accident allows a private conversation between the man seen as a "troubled bull-frog" (365) and Ellen speaking in her old vernacular, thus "sharing a secret." This allusion to a fairy-tale situation underlines the importance of the unreal and dream in the book.

The author plays with various levels of understanding but always privileges the unconscious and universal; he mixes different forms of folklore to widen the scope of his tale. As a young girl, the heroine dreamt of going to Tintagel, the cradle of myth, the seat of the Arthurian legends and their references to the taboo of adultery. Ellen would have liked to go there with her father but something makes her shy of him. The reader is given clues to interpret this fear of incest: she finds herself caressing the cheek of the unbearable brother-in-law just as her father caressed her when she rejected him and even as a girl she perceives the complexity of her feelings:

> On one occasion, unable to bear it any longer, she cried out, 'Cusn't tha see I dun't want to be touched?' and threw him off. He brooded and sulked a fair while, but it had been necessary; shame told her she was as much excited as disgusted (56).

Although the wish reappears several times in the book she fulfils it but symbolically by marrying Mr Roxburgh whose name evokes the castle on the rock. But this name also refers to the superintendent who reformed the botanical gardens of India, gathering native plants thus acknowledging the value of the colony itself. Local breeds are given much importance in the description of the landscape of Australia, and New South Wales is the seat of the botanical gardens, but of course the story gives us a chance to see it in its wild state, before it has become acceptable, while it is still as threatening as a setting in a fairy-tale or a nightmare: "Clumps of low-growing shrubs were draped with parasite flowers as white and lacy as bridal veils. Fronds of giant ferns caressed her, and she in turn caressed the brown fur which clothed their formal crooks" (82). But the narrator refuses to use the landscape as an excuse

for the plot, thus distinguishing his narrative from Victorian prose that would associate tropical luxuriance with depravity. Unlike Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, for instance, Mrs Roxburgh is not a victim of circumstances, she is finding herself:

> On the one hand lay fields divided by timber roughly piled to form barriers rather than fences and divide crops from herds and flocks; on the other, forest which neither invited nor repelled those who might feel tempted to investigate a passive mystery. She thought she might be tempted, but for the present yielded herself to the glare from emerald pastures and delight in the rounded flanks of grazing lambs (81).

The great divide between civilisation and nature exists but the individual is free to choose between the two. At the end of her initiation, the heroine decides to go back to civilisation, making use of her new knowledge. Although the closure of the text remains fairly open, there is a hint at the possible understanding between Mrs Roxburgh and Mr Jevons, who typically shares the name of a pioneer of modern economy who worked for a while in Australia. If Mrs Roxburgh were to marry Mr Jevons, she would renounce her first transgression of social taboos by giving up her position in the gentry and entering a middle class of merchants. The author has chosen to leave the choice out of his narrative because he is not concerned with the destiny of a Victorian heroine who can only fulfil herself in marriage. The narrator mocks the final scene of love, that distracts the lover as much as the witnessing spinster but paradoxically leaves the heroine out, as an illusion for those whose "human nature cannot but grasp at any circumstantial straw which may indicate an ordered universe" (365). Thus the choice of an episode, that starts after the beginning of the heroine's ascension and ends before its conclusion, emphasises the experimental, almost scientific process of the testing of taboos and questions the usual perception of what matters and is reality.

When she comes back to civilisation, and before her official identity is forced back on her, the heroine asks to be called Mab, the name of the woman killed by her rescuer, but above all, the name of the fairy in Shelley's poem that glorifies the reconciliation of spirit and

body, of dream and reality. Thus the heroine reaches a status above the mere anecdotes described in the story:

> She would remain their glimpse of a never quite ponderable mystery, something more than a woman who had crawled naked out of the scrub into their regular, real lives: Mrs Roxburgh of *Bristol Maid*, the myth their children, sniggering and incredulous, would finally dismiss for being too familiar, yet incomplete (317).

The myth appears after the shedding of the protective fringe of leaves, the last remnant of Victorian hypocrisy. It is the hidden core that tries to remain out of reach just as the heroine tries to veil herself. This character re-discovers the full value of language as an object of pleasure, to be tasted in her mouth and becomes one with the book itself. She learns from the miscreant: "The man stood mouthing sounds, like an idiot, or one in whom time or shock had destroyed his connection with the past" (252). Although inarticulate to start with, Chance masters material adversity and regains his power of speech with his trust for his new audience. It seems necessary to convince others of one's strength to gain freedom of speech. The heroine who is afraid of being condemned echoes Jack Chance's fear as well as the narrator's: "Mrs Roxburgh realized that she was standing stripped before Mrs Lovell, as she must remain in the eyes of all those who would *review* her, worse than stripped, sharing a bark-and-leaf humpy with a 'miscreant'" (my emphasis). Even if the book is not as politically committed as Shelley's poem, the transgression of taboos may confer the status of myth, but the myth will not necessarily be understood by those who know nothing of the hardships of life in the Australian bush, and the author may anticipate misunderstanding in a society that is still influenced by Victorianism.

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