

My Brother Jack: an Australian Masterpiece?

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THE Australian literary establishment's confidence in Patrick White was impressively and rightly endorsed by the award of the Nobel Prize in 1973. Yet a certain sense of disappointment in the *oeuvre* that has emerged since *Voss* may strengthen, given time, into misgivings about even his finest work, or at least about the status of that work in the history of the novel. An intimation of a sort of unease on the score of White's status as novelist is heard in a recent brief note on White by a young Australian critic, Adrian Mitchell.¹ Proposing *Voss* as White's "crowning achievement," Dr. Mitchell sounds some warning notes about White's characterisation ("Hurtle Duffield exists as a focus, or better a catalyst, for the various relationships which *The Eye of the Storm* exposes . . ."²) and concludes his article with an emphasis which seems to discourage us from regarding White as a "novelist" in the classical sense:

But wherever we look . . . we find everywhere a novelist who explores the full variety of effects that language is capable of expressing, and whose achievement is primarily in his exploitation of language rather than in the creation of fable.³

The purpose of the present article is not to relish any coming discomfiture of Patrick White's admirers. It is, though, partly concerned with suspicions of White's standing as a novelist, though not with his ability as a writer, and thereby to throw in doubt the enthronement of White at the expense of some other novelists who might be doing, or have done already, more significant work in the development of the Australian novel, and indeed in the under-

standing of Australian society altogether. It seems to me significant that Dr. Mitchell should have laid that sort of emphasis on White's language. The same kind of stress might be laid on two of White's contemporaries (whose claims to the Nobel Prize of 1973, incidentally, seem to me as valid as White's), William Golding and Saul Bellow. In all three writers (whose role and general position are remarkably similar, given their different circumstances) an impression of tightness, compact of "accurate" observation and a kind of coiled-up mental intensity which just might be inanition, is continually evoked at the expense of a more general ease and life in the world of their novels at large. A senior colleague in the field of Australian studies who had agreed heartily with my general views on Patrick White suddenly expostulated — as though he had caught himself out in some treachery — "But the prose! he has it in the palm of his hand." Yes, I might have said, but having it in the palm of his hand, what does White do with it? And the possible answer to the question seems to me to be related to the academic disdain in Australia of the author of *My Brother Jack*. The same colleague, having agreed wholeheartedly with the estimate of Johnston's book put forward in this article, still left it off his next year's reading list as usual, in favour not only of White, understandable enough, but of a host of minor writers about whose mediocrity the senior colleague had no doubt whatever.

The whole syndrome is instructive. The Australian academics are as contemptuous of Johnston — a vulgar trade-writer — as they are proud of the more intellectually impressive White. Yet there are good reasons for pushing Adrian Mitchell's reservations about the novel-writing a little further, and suggesting that in a material sense, White is not a real novelist at all, while Johnston, in *My Brother Jack*, at any rate, takes his place confidently within the great classical tradition of the novel that leads back through *The Great Gatsby* and *Great Expectations* to *Don Quixote*.

To cite these titles in picking out a "great tradition" of the novel, must suggest, as indeed the drift of my whole argument hereabouts does, a debt to Lionel Trilling's essay "Manners, Morals and The Novel."⁴ And it is worth recalling that in that essay Trilling suggests that in a strict sense the novel "has never really established itself in America."⁵ An honorable exception, one supported at several points in the essay by Trilling himself, is Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, and an exception to a rule which would seem to apply with a vengeance to Australia is George Johnston in *My Brother Jack*.

Trilling, it will be remembered, is concerned to define the novel in terms of such things as snobbishness, social mobility, money and of the conceptions of illusion and reality which these social phenomena generate. Americans, he asserts, just do not have enough material to work on, and they lack the expertise of Balzac, Dickens and Dostoyevsky to deal with the material they have (It could be observed that Trilling's thesis remains largely unaltered by the "fiction" Americans have produced since the essay first appeared in 1952). A still younger, "rawer", community, Australia has still less to work on and still less time to have acquired the expertise; and it is in this context that Patrick White appears as the Great Australian Novelist. A parallel with Herman Melville could be made, but it should be noted that Melville was aided by an implicit acceptance of nineteenth century manners and morals, as by an inherited familiarity with a rich and relevant literature (he is on intimate terms with Shakespeare, Milton and the Old Testament), where White is hindered by a disintegrating moral world, and a realist novelistic tradition which cuts across his own real bent. Melville could concoct an outrageous, in many ways absurd hybrid; part poetic epic, part Jacobean drama, part Old Testament prophecy, which enabled him successfully to consummate intense repressed drives and to achieve the full articulation of a transcendental vision of the universe. *Moby Dick* is serious about its

whaling, moreover, at the same time as it is fully alive to the symbolic or should we say allegorical interpretations such works as *The Ancient Mariner* and the Book of Jonah had given to similar tales. White, on the other hand, never succeeds wholly in freeing what loom as powerful repressed instincts from the trammels of social custom; there is a hiatus beneath his work, a lacuna, to which the more and more verbose novels appear as more and more remote clues. He takes his place uncomfortably in a tradition of the sort described by Trilling; the orthodox classical tradition of the realist novel with its emphases upon versimilitude, social discrimination and natural emblem. In a novel the interest must be generated — Trilling is so far right — by a direct experience of man-in-society. But White has apparently no interest in society and shows little understanding of its processes. So that his impressively worked writings seem to adumbrate a scenario which is “given” beforehand, its constituent attitudes — sympathy with the Lonely, the Outcast and the Deviant, scorn for the Normal and the Orthodox, unimpeachably liberal, but as unsurprising. The symbols which give this scenario its supernal dimension — the Tree of Man, the Chariot of Fire — hold the sort of relation to the characters — external, arbitrary — which the letter A holds to the lives of the New Englanders in Hawthorne’s Romance. It is not so much that these devices, Symbols, belong to an older sort of novel, as that they do not properly belong to the novel at all: they belong to Romance and Fable.

To turn from the best of White’s novels, from *Voss* let us say, to Johnston’s *My Brother Jack*, is to turn from literary artifice to a journalistic ease which, careless of bookish effect and indifferent to any supernal dimension, momentarily crystallizes about the stages of myth. Myth, we might say, is White’s concern in *Voss*; the myth of the white consciousness in its Australian expedition. Lawrence long ago charted the progress of this kind of myth in Melville.⁶ But as far as Australia is concerned, the confronta-

tion between the European mind and the outback, a confrontation which though it is studiously ignored by most Australians today, remains dramatically set forth in the way the cities and towns clutter the coast, with their backs turned upon the dry heart of the continent, was more lucidly diagnosed in Lawrence's own *Kangaroo*, perhaps too lucidly, for no Australian novelist has yet gone beyond Lawrence in the analysis of the essential "Australian experience."

The myth that informs *My Brother Jack*, the myth is both referred to and pilloried in the novel's title, partakes of the consciousness of a still recent confrontation with the colonial experience that is so central an element of Australian life: Jack Meredith represents the Australian male hero, as Voss had, with all the camaraderie which Voss, guttural outside, naturally lacked: a near-religious faith in mateship, boxing, wenching, beer — being "a man." At the same time the novel enacts a very different and much older myth, the myth of social rise and wordly success in the bourgeois-capitalist world, and of this mythic drama, the hero is not David Meredith's brother Jack, but Jack's brother David. It is in this sense that Johnston's book takes its place, as nothing by Patrick White does, in the great tradition of the novel. And it is in combining and interweaving his two myths that Johnston succeeds; succeeds so well in fact that I think I ought now to withdraw the interrogation-mark from my title: *My Brother Jack* is, I think, a masterpiece, though of a limited kind.

Experience qualified Johnston to write the Australian novel of Success as it has disqualified White from participating authentically in Australian life. From this point of view, Johnston's book is simply more authentically Australian than anything by White, for all White's Lawrentian concern to isolate an "Australian consciousness." For Australia is a nation geared to the capitalist social process as well as (much more than) a fascinating island-atoll-continent with which the white soul is locked in a mystic

struggle, and Johnston's Melbourne, established at times with a Dickensian flair, can seem simply more relevantly real than White's outback. Like so many of the realist chroniclers — Chaucer, Shakespeare, Balzac, Dickens, Wells — Johnston was enabled precisely by being forced into the working world to analyse that world's workings.

My Brother Jack is basically the novel of the Australian dream, and it belongs, in kind if not in stature, with *Great Expectations* and *The Great Gatsby*. Pip, Gatsby and David Meredith all experience initial obscurity or poverty and then bewildering good fortune. Although the success story, uncritically presented in innumerable lending library romances and Golden Age Hollywood films, is subjected to the most searching criticism by Dickens, Fitzgerald and Johnston, some of the beauty of their novels is undoubtedly to be explained in terms of the sheer glamour of outstanding worldly success: the aura of Success hangs over all of them; it is, indeed, precisely what makes the fall of the Hero so poignant in them. Another thing that the novel has in common with this whole tradition of fiction is the particular trend towards self-analysis, self-presentation and self-criticism. Johnston presents himself in David Meredith with no attempt at self-glorification, with no attempt to rub down the sharp edges of an unstable personality. Johnston rushes through life, never quite relishing the revelations about himself but never holding back from them. Throughout the book David is treacherous to people, and often behaves with an incredible unscrupulousness. His older brother Jack was a great fighter, very much the Australian hero figure, and David is trying to emulate him. Johnston's attitude towards this is rather breathtakingly cool. He does not flagellate himself for doing this, but he is under absolutely no illusions about what he did do. This peculiar detachment with which the narrator presents himself is really what is most impressive about *My Brother Jack*. It has become a mannerism for the hero to become a specialist in self-denigration of courage. But *My Brother*

Jack is significant because it never congratulates itself on its honesty. It is painstakingly involved in an act of self-exploration and I do not think this could be as interesting as it is if we didn't feel that Johnston weren't totally in earnest.

On one occasion, David is thrown out of his house by his father after establishing himself in a small way as a journalist. He goes to a friend and gets into a difficult situation where he is spending most of his time sleeping out in the park. He meets Jack and wants to be asked back to live with his mother and father because he is quite frankly afraid. To engineer this he quite unscrupulously steers his brother Jack to a particular street in Melbourne where there are some small shops advertising work, mainly up-country. He reminds his brother that he has always wanted work up-country, and urges him to do it. Johnston is quite clear about this: Davey does it in order that Jack should go away and leave him home to look after his mother. It is a mean-minded and, in a way, an unnerving act. It is a strength of the book that this frightened selfishness of the hero's is presented straight, without Johnston awaiting our applause for his "honesty." Yet at the end of the book there is a question mark over Johnston which his friend Gavin Turley poses over David Meredith himself, when he tells Helen that David has "no guarantee in him."⁷ What sort of man am I, really? Johnston's handling of the Turleys is extremely important: they represent, as a couple, a standard of good taste, refinement and civilisation which helps David to place his own marriage with Helen Midgeley. The novel, as Lionel Trilling has observed, is concerned very largely with the observation of behaviour and manners, and with what differences in behaviour and manners tell us about morals. From this point of view, as in many other respects in my opinion, George Johnston is a better novelist than Patrick White. White's concern for symbolism and his interest in rendering certain types of religious experience take him out of the traditional terri-

tory of the novel. Yet what was a natural exploration of religious experience for Herman Melville has become in White's case a painful contradiction: he seeks to prove with the eye of a "novelist" certain theorems about the nature of man, with the result that the social and psychological content of his books tends to seem laboriously manufactured to meet the requirements of his intellectual preoccupations. The treatment of, say, Mrs. Flack in *Riders in the Chariot*, hailed by many Australian critics as a masterly exposé of "Suburban" narrowmindedness, seems to me a prefabricated and lifeless exercise in Aunt-Sallyism: we are all committed to hate Mrs. Flack and her kind, and White is really just exploiting a fashionable prejudice, much as Barry Humphries is (though much more amusingly) with his Edna Everage. How much more subtle and open-minded is Johnston's no less formidable exposure of Helen Midgeley. It is a masterpiece of narrative, in fact. Johnston shows us Helen through David's eyes, so that first she seems unutterably superior to him, and genuinely civilised. Then, as David extends his acquaintance, she falls into her place, in our own eyes as well as David's, so that we are as surprised as he is to discover one day that she is rather dreadful; totally devoid of any real culture, shallow and supercilious. And it is meeting the Turleys *chez eux* that makes David's growing awareness of the limitations of the woman he has married suddenly unbearable. With great skill, Johnston conjures a devastating contrast between the impeccable dead vulgarity of the suburban paradise Helen has dreamed up in Beverley Grove and the rambling family mansion inhabited, with that carelessness that is always the envy of the underbred, by the Turleys.

Like the true artist that he is, Johnston invests the main burden of his meaning in brilliantly marshalled descriptions of the houses themselves. And here one must state that his ability to evoke atmosphere with a seemingly random profusion of in fact brilliantly selected detail attains at

times Dickensian height. Here is the approach to the "huge old dilapidated Turley mansion":

We arrived there in the appropriateness of a late after-glow, and went through great creaky wooden gates hung from square stone pillars and into a dusky jungle of a garden with black thickets of azalaeas and the biggest rhododendrons I ever saw in my life until years later when I looked across at the crimson forests buttressing Tibet from the Katmandu side, and there was a weird tangle of gigantic creepers and those huge leafy things that we always called elephants' ears and fat cacti standing on enormous thick hairy prickly stems like mammoths' legs. Curving through this dense wilderness of darkness and damp, decaying smells there was a crunchy gravelled carriage-drive scattered with fallen leaves, leaves that were long and stiff and curled-up and cardboardy, which had dropped from two tremendous Moreton Bay fig-trees that blocked out all the gloomy sky above us, and the leaves in the evening breeze were moving around with a dry, scaly, scurrying sound. (pp. 264-65)

The temptation to quote at such length is overwhelming, so natural, easy and economical is the prose. What is interesting is the way David immediately compares the overgrown surrounds and the dilapidated house itself with Helen's house, to which a superb passage had earlier been devoted. Her house, too, was overgrown, choked with an abandoned life that somehow seems nostalgically desirable in a flat, functional world. But the brokenness of Helen's house is subtly different from what confronts them at the Turleys': there is a sad pettiness about it:

She lived in the old section of Brighton in part of a big, gloomy, decaying weatherboard house that seemed to be breaking apart at every joint: it was a gaunt, two-storied place with a slate roof covered in coloured lichens and hung with old swallows' nests, and it was remarkable for the things about it that were broken (p. 222)

The catalogue of broken things should be enough to establish Johnston's talent to the most sceptical reader:

it had a broken tower with a broken clock-face and a broken staircase and a broken weather-vane and a broken dovecot and broken spouting hanging from the eaves and a broken summerhouse and broken swings in a rank, overgrown garden which at some time or another seemed to have included a tennis-court and a croquet green. (p. 222)

This may seem at first happily random, and in a way it is, unless one reflects on the insignificance of each of the broken things listed, and how well they stand for aspects and phases of a way of life itself now overrun and forgotten. The clock, the stair, the weather-vane, the eaves, the summerhouse — finally to the tennis and croquet — how marvellously Johnston leads us along his association trail so that we descend from the most general (time, the weather) to the more detailed, as though by the most natural process. It is a whole society that he has evoked. And with all the sadness that such a concitation stimulates, Johnston does not repress the suspicion of the pretentiousness, itself no less poignant, that the tennis-court and the croquet-green suggest. Surely this weather-board house in Brighton shouldn't run to tennis and croquet? And it is from this background that Helen Midgeley has come; it is this slightly pretentious yet not altogether contemptible seediness (civilisation itself, after all, is made up of a series of more or less pretentious strivings) which explains her need to set herself up unshakeably in Beverley Grove.

All the more telling, therefore, is the impact of the Colonial grandeur of Bangalore, the Turley house:

It was quite a walk up to the massive old entrance with the name of the house, *Bangalore*, chiselled in stone above a heavy panelled door which had massive lion-knockers and big brass bell-pulls which, coming after the tangled garden, sharply reminded me of the old house where Helen had lived. (p. 265)

It at once reminds David of Helen's house (as it had the reader) but he immediately registers the difference with the acumen of the novelist:

This one, although in much the same condition of disintegration and neglect, was a stone house that had once been very grand and so it had more solidity and dignity, of course, and even a sense of some continuing splendour in its decay. (p. 265)

What David is articulately conscious of, strikes Helen inchoately:

Helen must have been struck by much the same feeling, and perhaps felt an uneasiness about it, because this was one of the few occasions I remember when her cool poise seemed to be shaken by a disturbing breath of something, like superstition or an almost atavistic fear. (p. 265)

With the acumen of a novelist? Of a snob, too, surely; and the point is important. Every good novelist is a good deal of a snob (though the relation doesn't unfortunately hold in reverse), for the obvious reason that his stock-in-trade is the face and form of a society whose very life is the friction and tension of snobbish discriminations. Jane Austen, Dickens, Henry James, Scott Fitzgerald — these writers were all expert snobs, as well as great-minded critics of snobbishness. It is in this that George Johnston once more shows himself to have been the pick of the mid-century Australian novelists. The scene of the Turleys is a masterpiece of the novelist's art, revelling in that peculiar relish the snob has in degrading himself by enjoying the details of a culture he envies yet congratulates himself on being able to recognise. The joke is supposed to be on poor Helen, of course: this decaying grandeur completely confuses the Beverley Gardens values; she is "at a loss," and knows herself to be out of her depth. But David (or shall we say frankly, Johnston?) is much more impressed than she is put out: his, really, is the snob's performance. How acutely aware he is of the tiny facts which make up this indisputably superior thing, of the weight of the crockery and cutlery, of the distinguished simplicity of the dinner (so free of petty bourgeois nuances and strains), of the casual lavishness within the general disorder; above all, supremely, of the un-self-consciousness with which it is all accepted, worn as effortlessly as a baronet wears his beautiful but slightly faded clothes. With the zest of the true, deep snob, David snaps up every single detail:

They both came to meet us at the door, and Peggy took the coats away while Gavin showed us into the main room, and this was just about the most extraordinary mix and clutter and congested mess of a room I had ever seen. (p. 266)

Johnston's love of "clutter and congested mess" is thoroughly Dickensian, and the attentive reader will have greeted that sentence with a smack of the lips. Sure enough, Johnston obliges with a brilliantly marshalled description of the confusion that appears all artless haphazardness, but is the true artist's order within disorder, creating a perfect illusion of anarchy which is itself superlatively organized:

It had once been stately, and probably had been used for receptions, because the moulded ceiling was superb and there were marble pilasters on either side of the fireplace and above the ornate carved mantel a huge and magnificent French Renaissance looking-glass in bad repair which gave back a mysterious muddy reflection such as one might get from a stagnant pond, and from the ceiling-boss still hung the heavy gilded chains which must once have supported a chandelier. The immensely tall windows were hidden behind tarnished velvet curtains hanging from sagging pelmets, and there were damp mildewy stains down one wall, where the plaster moulding was broken away, and alarming cracks in all four walls, and the carpets on the floor were very thin and faded out, like old flowers found pressed between the leaves of a book, and tattered at the edges. (p. 266)

One must, in passing, pay homage to the work done by the metaphors here, in particular the image of the pond and of the carpets like old flowers "found pressed between the leaves of a book." Such parallelisms are more than added graces in *My Brother Jack*, they are genuinely exploratory attempts to deepen and extend the understanding of the brilliantly observed social facts. Here the figures richly evoke a fine though dying way of life: the mirror is like a pond, because the pond has collected generations of dead leaves etc.; it is static, yet natural and very beautiful. The carpets are like pressed flowers not only because their colours and dyes and textures are worn thin, with time, but because they too testify to an ordered, ritualised way of life, just as the carefully, lovingly pressed flowers do.

It should not need saying by now that this "snobbishness" of the novelist's (what Johnston shares with Dickens and Scott Fitzgerald) is only a capacity for heightened perception, for seeing in depth the signs and symbols of human

life in society; above all, for *admiring and putting in their rightful place* those aspects of a superior order of which he recognizes the absence in himself. For there are snobs and snobs: Helen and David both react more or less snobbishly to the Turleys. But what an ocean separates these reactions. How predictably awful (callow, stupid, vulgar) is Helen's drive-home verdict:

"And there was I thinking the Turleys would probably have a butler! David, how *can* people like Gavin and Peggy live in such a shambles! In that *midden*! Goodness! wouldn't you just love to put a vacuum-cleaner through it?" (p. 275)

Or a team of bull-dozers through the streets of Florence!

The visit to the Turley's is decisive in crystallizing David's own disgust with the life he and Helen have set up, or rather which he has allowed her to set up. For the long conversation David had with Gavin at the Turley house was no less influential than the revelation of the whole experience of his and Helen's incompatibility. He returns from the visit as disgusted with himself as with his wife. This conversation is certainly one of the turning points in the novel's course. In it, Gavin Turley (*il miglior fabbro*, David might have said) reveals David to himself as he knows he really is — superficial, brilliant, blessed with success:

"Your brilliance, I think — and you have brilliance don't make any mistake about that! — lies in the fact that you possess what I consider to be certain remarkable flairs. You have facility, adroitness, and almost unbridled imagination, a quite fantastic celerity in getting your stuff written." (p. 272)

But:

"let us take those pond-creatures — insects, are they, or beetles or bugs or what? — the tiny collywobble things that go skittering around on the surface of ponds Well you know, David, I think you're a bit like those collywobbles. You rely on surface-tension. If the surface-tension broke you'd drown!" (p. 272).

But it won't break! And in a very strange way, David gradually emerges from Gavin's analysis a much more in-

teresting creature than he was earlier. It is an extraordinarily interesting scene. Why does Gavin choose to do this to David? It is quite deliberate, quite considered; he takes him aside and then takes him apart. We can discount envy and malice; Turley is too fine for that. Is it "for his own good"? That's a tired formula usually invoked to mask vindictiveness. Yet somehow, Turley is doing what has to be done, and is not quite sure why he is doing it himself. He is not even sure *what* he is doing. For, strangely, he himself starts to find out in mid-analysis that he isn't sure what sort of creature David is: a creature on the deep, his botanical image would suggest. Yet also a creature of the deep:

"In a way, David, you are like some queer, strange savage who has journeyed a long way from his own tangled wilderness, and you look down on the palisades of the little settlement, and you wonder how you will pillage it and what trophies you will find. You can be sure of nothing, of course, because you carry with you no guarantees." (pp. 274-75)

This is a tribute, of course, the sort paid by mediocrity to genius. And what Turley is doing throughout the scene in effect is establishing David's own creative identity to himself (We note in passing the skilfully touched-in symbol of the mirror: David's self-awareness is effected here in the mirror of Turley's description.). Not that Turley is quite sure about the ultimate values himself: his tone towards David, though consistently generous and affectionate, is totally ambivalent. He just does not know what to make of this strange creature who defies the laws of social gravity, is so unscrupulous, so flashy, yet so clearly blessed with a talent denied himself. In a way, the situation that exists between the two writers is like that which Pushkin portrays in *Mozart i Salieri*: like Salieri, Turley admires the "Golden Boy," yet deeply distrusts what seems to him his frivolity.

Now the speech put in Turley's mouth was of course devised by George Johnston: it is a piece of self-articulation. Very beautifully, Johnston transcends Turley's dog-

ged, fine-toned uprightness by making him judge David in a way which is contradicted by what he later reveals of his own feelings for him:

"But are you a writer?" he asked earnestly. "A *real* writer?" He rubbed quite vigorously at his teeth. "I honestly think — no," he said at last. (p. 273)

This is not malice, it is not self-deception. But it is the strategic honesty of someone also caught up in the biological warfare of society: it is Turley's quite honest, open-minded attempt to vindicate himself in the face of a superior rival. And it is his own, as it were, involuntary revelation of his deeper valuation of David that places his own mediocrity. How many times in the history of culture has this plea been voiced? "I am better than he — more serious, more dedicated — he's just facile." Yes, genius is facile, among other things. Turley's real grudge against David (and it is a grudge, honest, frank and un-malicious as he is) is summoned up in a sentence which also expresses his own sense of mediocrity:

"David," he said, "shall I sum it all up for you in one crisp sentence? I am safe, and you are not." (p. 274)

Mediocrity knows that it needs safety, and is painfully aware that genius doesn't. Towards the end of the scene, Turley has changed his tone, or perhaps his tack. His own honesty and intelligence, in fact, carry him through what has seemed to be his conviction that David is unstable and even dishonest (he is both) to a new conception of the man:

"That's why I sometimes think," he went on in a tone which was deliberately more matter-of-fact, "it would really pay you to set yourself to this business of becoming a writer. In depth, I mean. A *real* writer." (p. 275)

The key phrase here is the one that notes Turley's adjustment of his tone. This is characteristic of the handling of the whole scene, in point of fact; it is a masterpiece of controlled tone, point and direction. What necessitated the adjustment was the depth Turley had earlier found himself in: following his own thought-train about David (ini-

tially so critical, so very much the well-meaning talking-to), Turley arrives, unexpectedly, at an intensity of *feeling*, which surprises him. He starts "squirming," and finally flashes a "quick, slightly embarrassed glance." Why? Because he is a connoisseur of things, people, life itself, and he has just arrived at a true appreciation of an exquisite piece; he sees that this "queer strange savage" has got what he knows he himself lacks. And how sad, in the context is his fishing out his old book *D. H. Lawrence in Australia*, and his mooted plans for a new book on Henry Handel Richardson. How very abject is this painfully normal academicism, impressive though it is to David (Salieri might compose a work on Bach's counterpoint: Mozart wouldn't know where to begin.).

Mozart? Dickens? Scott Fitzgerald? Isn't all this a little too grand for George Johnston? Perhaps. Perhaps not. It's difficult at this stage to know just how good this book is. It seems among the better novels written in English since the death of D. H. Lawrence. And the secret of this excellence lies in the peculiar *mélange* of qualities that went to make up the man and his style. For the instability, the meretriciousness even, of the hero's character (the peculiar unscrupulousness) is echoed in the style, alternately tawdry and brilliant, invisible and painfully laid on, incisive and banal. It is, in a word, the style of a journalist, and Johnston allows a possible limiting criticism of his own novel in permitting Mr. Brewster to defend his hero from his enraged detractors:

"He's superficial . . . he's always skating on thin ice!" Condon stormed. "You simply cannot trust his facts, he just dabs thing in to make the picture *seem* complete! He's never reliable!"

"Whether he is reliable or not, Mr. Condon, he happens to be the best descriptive writer you have on your staff," Mr. Brewster retorted. "The *only* evocative writer you have, Mr. Condon. He can make you see a thing. You read his piece and you are *there*, Mr. Condon. He has this trick of making you *see* what is happening, or what has happened. You *feel* it. You *smell* it. Sometimes you can *touch* it, Mr. Condon. You're not suggesting, surely,

that this extraordinary knack he has for evoking the very essence of a thing is valueless?" (p. 213)

This strikes me as being one of the most generous, intelligent and heart-warming tributes a writer could wish to have paid to himself. I take it as more or less accurately remembered by Johnston, and as applicable to his own work. It is included, of course, for sheer gratification, as much as for any artistic reason. At any rate, Condon's sour rejoinder gets as intoxicating a prophecy in reply as any Dickens himself might have dreamed:

"I'm suggesting that one of these days he'll go too far," said Condon coldly.

"Indeed yes, he may go a great deal farther than either you or I can imagine." (p. 213)

What in fact the novel celebrates is the intoxication of sheer success. Like the other success stories with which I compared *My Brother Jack* at the beginning of this article, Johnston's novel is compact of a knowledge of failure within itself; even our successes are failures, and no one could show himself more aware of his own weaknesses than David Meredith here. Nevertheless, there is, as Scott Fitzgerald knew, something deeply mysterious, ineluctantly fascinating about worldly success, and a thirst for this pattern of experience explains the persistence into the middle twentieth century of novels of this kind. Every time Gavin Turley calls David "Golden Boy" there is a tremor of anticipation, a fore-echo of the impossible. And sure enough, from the first success of the *Stunsail* articles, David relentlessly overhauls his competitors and rivals, eventually to reach a realm in which anything must have seemed possible. For this reason, the criticisms made by Condon and Turley (who epitomize severally the excellence of the mediocre or the mediocrity of the merely excellent) are absorbed as themselves part of the dream's realisation, as strangely necessary to that realisation.

So too is the worthiness of Jack. And here I become aware of having neglected the "central character" of the

novel, the bonzer Aussie hero whose myth the book labours to articulate:

I was intrigued, and impressed, at the change in him [David writes late in the story, when Jack is in the Army.]. He was so darkly sunburnt that his hair seemed almost white, and he looked tough, hard, and very fit. I could not decide whether he looked older or younger, but certainly he looked different. (p. 305)

This reads a little like idealisation, like hero-worship, in fact. And in a way it is. Jack is the "hero," and David sees him now, stripped for action, refined down to the "essential Jack," a "proper man," as he significantly observes later on. Jack Meredith is, in fact, the Australian hero: fighting, loving, generous, open, frank, etc. Johnston doesn't try to shatter this myth; on the contrary, he is careful to avoid the easy iconoclasm that is so much part of our world. Yet even in this scene, when Jack is at his best, David senses something amiss, "I felt good for him, and yet it disturbed me strangely . . ." (p. 305). A premonition, surely, of the long, humiliating anti-climax that is Jack's "war." Ironically, it is David, the "sawny little sonk," the talented unscrupulous intellectual to whom there is no guarantee, who "has" the war; Jack, the dinkum Aussie hero, just flounders at home, destroyed more by his own bitter disappointment than by the inactivity. The truth is that David simply *sees* more than Jack; he understands too much not to feel embarrassed for his brother, with his pitiful "string-pullin," and his naive delusion that David can't wait to get stuck in with the lads, in the Mob, etc.

And so the story comes round to something near full circle. The Golden Boy gets the girl (Estella turns out to be bourgeois and inadequate, so Pip gets a second chance), and the war, and the money. And then what? To answer this question is to explain the novel's peculiar magic, or would be, since it cannot really *be* explained in other than its own words. Anyway, the narrator's peculiar sense of disappointment at finding himself unwillingly the hero of his own Romance (Beowulf-Jack having fizzled out) melts

into the sheer excitement of *getting there* (where? Valhalla? Beverly Grove?) to produce one of the most touching conclusions in modern fiction. While David walks arm-in-arm with his princess into the gilded, chandeliered, fitted-carpet heaven of modern affluence, Jack is convincing his mates in some gloomy, cheerless, third-rate naafi that David will turn up, as he (only half-) promised, to confer a little light on their really rather dismal world:

“Oh, give him another ten minutes or so, you lot of bloody whingers! He’s a pretty important character, you got to realise that, and he told you this was his last night. He just got caught up in something. And it’s not all *that* late, anyway. He’ll be along. Here, let’s have another go at that mouth-organ. After all, he knows we’re waiting here for him, doesn’t he? My brother Davy’s not the sort of bloke who ever let anyone down, you know” (p. 384)

So, *My Brother Jack* becomes *His Brother Davy*, and the most bitter irony in a work crowded with them is just this knowledge of being believed in.

The final emotion created by the novel is complex: as David’s star rises to that dimension which marks the fabulous off from the merely successful, so his own scepticism grows with it. Precisely because he has the rarest sort of talent — talent that surpassed the worthy without ever equalling it. David knows that it is all based upon illusion. He knows what Jack will never know, that what appears miraculous to the onlooker is to the actor mere sham. To some extent this sham is an inevitable element of every artist’s experience; the artist’s skill and flair which is to him mere life and breath, the most ordinary and familiar things are made the subject of cult and the more successful he is the deeper this awareness of sham must be. So it is, I think, that the great studies of illusion in the modern novel (I think especially of Dickens and Fitzgerald) have been produced by spectacularly successful men. Perhaps the biggest mistake that can be inflicted on Johnston’s beautiful book is bound to become the critical orthodoxy, assuming that is, that the critical establishment learns to

respect the novel in the first place: it will be seen as a "satire" on David's frailty of character, his success will be failure and Jack's human obscurity some kind of success. But no, that is to distort the whole book: we must feel the dullness of Jack's career in order to appreciate the intoxication of David's success. Success is beautiful, and if we do not half-fear the gloom of Jack's ordinariness we have missed much of the point. For the basic bourgeois myth enacted in Johnston's book derives its force from a half-atavistic dread of poverty. If we have not drained the draught along with David Meredith, we shall be in no position to see into the mechanics of things — the illusion that of which even our reality is comprised.

NOTES

¹Adrian Mitchell, "Patrick White: in pursuit of the doubtful onion," *Issue* (November 1973), n.p.

²Mitchell, n.p.

³Mitchell, n.p.

⁴Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (London: Mercury, 1964), pp. 205-22.

⁵Trilling, p. 212.

⁶D. H. Lawrence, "Herman Melville," *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Viking, 1964).

⁷George Johnston, *My Brother Jack* (London and Sydney: Collins, 1964), p. 261. Further page references to *My Brother Jack* will be made parenthetically.