

The Theme of Spiritual Progression in *Voss*

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"How important it is to understand the three stages. Of God into man. Man. And man returning into God. Do you find, Doctor, there are certain beliefs a clergyman may explain to one from childhood onward, without one's understanding, except in theory, until suddenly, almost in spite of reason, they are made clear."¹

Laura's doctrine of the Three Stages of man's spiritual progression, although somewhat cryptic, makes a statement of the central theme of *Voss*. The doctrine is highlighted by the intensity with which Laura utters it, and it is elevated to the status of visionary insight by the fact that it climaxes Laura's severe illness. Frequently in White, severe illness like Laura's, or some kind of "doffing" of the body, precedes spiritual illumination.² It is our aim in this article to clarify Laura's doctrine, and to show how central it is to the novel's theme of spiritual progression by indicating how it is led up to in several earlier scenes. Those scenes involve Laura's analysis of Voss in Mr. Bonner's garden (pp. 82-87), Voss's song as he rides into the Australian hinterland (p. 185), and Le Mesurier's poems (pp. 289-92). These scenes, and Laura's pronouncement from her sickbed (p. 380), are regularly spaced throughout the book and are linked with one another, indicating how steadily White had in mind the theme that Laura articulates and how concerned he was with stressing it.

Most simply, Laura's doctrine may be explained as follows:

The First Stage, "God into man," refers to the act of creation, whereby God breathes a spirit into man, and with it some of his own divinity. Further, it is a time of dependence, usually associated with childhood.

The Second Stage, "Man," describes the time when man rejects the notion of his dependence and feels strongest, in control of himself and the world around him. At the height of his pride, he assumes the role of God — an illusion he must renounce before he can achieve union with God.

The Third Stage, "Man returning into God," involves the renunciation of man's belief that he stands alone and in control. In this Third Stage, the attainment of humility is crucial before man can be drawn back into God. Humility is reached through the embracing of suffering and the experience of failure. In its extreme form, the attainment of humility means a dissolution of the self.

Laura's doctrine takes its inspiration from the life of Christ. She herself speaks of the Three Stages as "certain beliefs a clergyman may explain to one from childhood onward, without one's understanding, except in theory, until suddenly, almost in spite of reason, they are made clear." And, on the verge of illumination during her illness, she intimates that "human truths are also divine. This is the true meaning of Christ" (p. 366). In Christ above all, God came into man. As an adult, Christ lived as a man for whom human truths and divine truths were the same. His humble acceptance of suffering, "Nevertheless, not as I will but as Thou wilt," marks the beginning of his reunion with God. But while the doctrine of spiritual progression is based upon Christ's life, it is explored most fully within the novel with respect to Voss.

The first of the scenes that foreshadow the enunciation of the doctrine of the Three Stages is the garden scene in Chapter 4. In her analysis of Voss there, Laura describes him as caught up in pride. Voss's statement that he believes in a God who is above humility confirms Laura's analysis, for he maintains that people fashion God after their own image (pp. 84-85). His God is necessarily then a projection of himself, above humility: "Ah, the humility, the humility! This is what I find so particularly loathsome" (p. 85). Laura warns him, "To maintain such standards of pride, in the face of what you must experience on this journey, is truly alarming," for he may well break without attaining the humility that is essential for a

return to God. Laura in her dissection and Voss in his confession here point to his being set in what Laura is to describe as the Second Stage in man's spiritual progression.

The garden scene has more than one link with the scene of Laura's illness and illumination. In the first place the garden scene has in common with the later scene an intensely spiritual quality. Laura and Voss are transported out of their bodies, as it were, for the revelations in the garden, and when the revelations are over, "they realized they had returned into their bodies" (p. 86). And as Laura announces her revelations from her sickbed she is racked by fever and almost torn from her body; her revelations once made, the fever breaks and she returns to her body. The scenes in Mr. Bonner's garden and in Laura's sickroom are also linked by White through the reiterated notion of the difficulty of comprehending the simplicity of a great idea. In the garden scene we are told that "These simple ideas were surrounded with such difficulties, they would scarcely issue out of her inadequate mind" (p. 86). Likewise, as Laura strives to articulate her doctrine at the height of her illness, we are told that she was "struggling with the simplicity of a great idea" (p. 380).

The garden scene is important for its elucidation of Voss in the Second Stage of man's spiritual progression. But the song Voss sings as he rides into the interior, away from Jildra, succinctly outlines all Three Stages in a foreshadowing of Laura's later formulation of them. The song was composed by White himself,³ and intended to be closely integrated with the theme of Voss's spiritual development:

*'Eine blosse Seele ritt hinaus
Dem Blau' entgegen
Sein Rock flog frei.
Sein Schimmel mit den Wolken
Um die Ehre rann
Nur der edle Rock zu Schaden kam,
Die Fetzen fielen
Den Himmel entlang.'*

("A bare soul rode out into the blue His coat flew free. His white horse contested with the clouds for the honor of which was whiter Only the fine coat came to grief, the tatters fell along the sky.")

We are likely to overlook the significance of Voss's song at the time, largely because Voss follows it by the disclaimer that words have no significance ("*Wörter haben keine Bedeutung. Sinnlos!*"). Further, Voss is happy and confident here, so that the song seems little more than an expansive outburst. Ironically, Voss does not realize the relevance it will have for him.

The bare soul that rides out into the blue represents Voss's soul in the First Stage ("God into man"), having newly had life breathed into it by God — hence its bareness. The Second Stage follows quickly here: the soul becomes "Man," no longer bare but protected now, clothed in a coat that flies free without hindrance, with all the overtones of mastery and lordship that the coat image suggests.⁴ The progression into the Second Stage is marked by the use of the masculine possessive, "sein," which can only refer to "*ein Mann*" — man, in the Second Stage — and not to "*eine Seele*," which would have the feminine "ihr" as its possessive. At the height of his pride, the man's horse vies with the clouds in the purity of its whiteness, the whiteness being a manifestation of divine power. The song ends, however, with the picture of the fine coat of the rider having come to grief, its shreds falling along the sky. There is a warning to Voss in the song that life itself may force him to abandon his conviction that he is master of the universe. And so it points to the Third Stage, when man, humbled now, can approach God.

Frank Le Mesurier's prose poems, "Childhood" and "Conclusion," flesh out the notions in the Three Stages that are so spare in Laura's pronouncement. The scene in which Voss reads Le Mesurier's notebook is linked both with the scene in Mr. Bonner's garden earlier, and with the scene of Laura's illness later. The connection with the garden scene is clearest when Laura's analysis of Voss there is made "*as if she were reading from a notebook*, only this one was her head, in which her memorandum had been written, in invisible ink, that the night had breathed upon" (p. 83, our italics). The connection with Laura's illness is made chiefly through the oracular nature of both Laura's and Le Mesurier's revelations, attended by fever

that has racked the body but passed its crisis (Although Le Mesurier's poems were written before his illness, they are directly associated with his fever, so that they seem to proceed from this fevered intensity.). There is much about Laura and Le Mesurier at times that suggests the role of a medium, through whom the revelation is made. When Laura in the garden bends her head and knows that "some kind of revelation must eventually take place, terrible though the prospect was" (p. 80), it is as if she is consenting to act as the instrument of a power beyond her control. Laura's name in fact (beyond recalling Petrarch's Laura⁵), suggests the word laurel and so associates her with Apollo, revealer of truth, whose symbol was the laurel. Both her residences, Mr. Bonner's house (pp. 22, 48, 152) and the school where she later teaches (pp. 393, 395), are surrounded by laurels. She possesses, we have seen, many of the qualities of a pythoness. And Le Mesurier's name means "the measurer" (Fr. *le mesureur*, Ger. *der Messer*), appropriate to his role as one who gauges what is taking place within Voss's soul.⁶ Le Mesurier proves to be startlingly accurate in his poems in gauging what has taken place within Voss's soul in the First and Second Stages, and in foreseeing Voss's advance into and through the Third Stage.

The first poem, "Childhood," provides some explanation of what leads up to the Second Stage. It enables us to see that Stage, when man feels he is in control of the world around, as a defense against his feeling of vulnerability that dominates the First Stage. The kind of childhood that the poem describes is meant to have a validity for childhoods beyond Le Mesurier's own, and for Voss's in particular. Voss's reaction to the poem forcefully establishes its relevance for him: he "was at once standing in the terrible arena of childhood, deafened by the clapper of his own heart" (p. 289). The poem, indeed, "turned upon the reader, and he was biting his nails to find himself accused" (p. 290).⁷ Shortly before his death, Voss comes to an awareness that his illusions of indestructibility cover a deep sense of vulnerability: "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" (p. 384).

Childhood is portrayed in the poem as a time of vulnerability and reliance on others, who hurt rather than help. The child is pictured as an onlooker, troubled, insecure. The phrase "a white tablecloth is spread to celebrate the feast of children" encourages us to regard the children as devoured rather than entertained, for "the feast of children" is mentioned in a context of their vivisection: "when they had opened us with knives, they took out our hearts." Children, we are told, "are not expected to think, but are allowed to suffer, and rehearse the future." They are beset by a sense of their limitations ("I was the prisoner of stone"), of their dependence upon their parents ("they break off their tears and put them in the parents' hands"), of impermanence ("We have not arranged our things, who will not be staying long in this house"), and of vulnerability ("Prayer is, indeed, stronger, but what is strong?"). Only the old see and understand that the child suffers and that he will go on to the illusions of his parents in the Second Stage, of strength and independence and destructive power.

In the process of their vivisection, children themselves learn to vivisect: "Children soon forget from whom they have learnt to use the knife." In consequence they become alienated from mankind and their own humanity. And so they learn to stand alone with their dreams and illusions: "We run, and flap, and crow, and rise — one foot? Everyone applauds, and pretends, and disperses, unaware that we have flown above the pointed trees. We enjoy the immense freedom of dreams." Thus the soul is drawn into the Second Stage of man's spiritual journey, "Man."

It is at the height of the Second Stage that Le Mesurier's poem "Conclusion" begins:

Man is King. They hung a robe upon him, of blue sky
 He rode across his kingdom of dust, which paid
 homage to him for a season, with jasmine, and lilies, and
 visions of water Fevers turned him from Man
 into God.

The poem is made up of four verse-paragraphs. Broadly, paragraphs I and II portray man in the Second Stage in the fullness of his illusions. Paragraph III portrays the transition from the Second to the Third Stage. Paragraph IV repeats and intensifies that transition, and makes explicit the achievement of final union with God.

Le Mesurier's poem, like Laura's doctrine of the Three Stages, concerns Voss more particularly than mankind in general. The poem states more clearly than Laura's cryptic pronouncement later that the Second Stage, "Man," does not merely mean that man stands alone but that he regards himself as God, with the earth as his domain and other men as his subjects. Within a few pages after Voss reads this poem,⁸ he is shown regarding the desert as his kingdom and the blacks as his subjects. When the party encounters a group of blacks, Voss rides towards them "sustained by a belief that he must communicate intuitively with these black subjects, and finally rule them with a sympathy that was above words" (p. 329). Their running away, foretold in Le Mesurier's poem ("afraid of his presence, they had run away"), makes him a "rejected sovereign."

In paragraph I, the coat of Voss's song ("der edle Rock") has become a royal robe, made of the blue sky ("das Blaue"), covering Voss as he rides into his kingdom. But even as this paragraph portrays man's kingship it simultaneously undercuts that kingship as an illusion. The kingdom is finally one of dust, paying homage to the Man-King only for a season. Whereas paragraph I shows man regarding the earth as his kingdom, paragraph II shows him so far subordinating nature as to regard it as an extension of himself: "I am looking at the map of my hand, on which the rivers rise to the northeast. I am looking at my heart, which is the centre." The death of this Man-King has the power to "water the earth and make it green," when "trees will spring up, to celebrate the god-head with their blue leaves."

In paragraph III the illusions begin to fail, and man confesses his inability to subordinate the universe to himself. The kingdom of dust that had for a season paid homage to the Man-King has returned now to dust. The importance of the quest for humility is acknowledged; but humility is like brigalow scrub, difficult and painful to find one's way through (see p. 206), and offering only "a thin shade in which to sit." The quest for humility resembles the striving for spiritual progress generally. When Palfreyman, for instance, realized "he had failed that day to pray to God," and so must forfeit "what progress he had made on the road where progress is perhaps illusory" (p. 124), he too found that humility was his brigalow. The chief growth in spiritual awareness in this verse-paragraph is that "As I grow weaker, so I shall become strong;"⁹ it is an awareness that corroborates Laura's doctrine that as man abandons his illusions of power he can return to God. As his understanding of ultimate values grows he finds other values become increasingly superficial and transient. To Le Mesurier, his life as a member of an aristocratic society seems now hardly credible — a life of courting rituals, of formal dinners, of elegant displays of wealth: "As I shrivel, I shall recall with amazement the visions of love, of trampling horses, of drowning candles, of hungry emeralds." Dissolution becomes a sought-after state¹⁰ as the completest expression of humility: "Now that I am nothing, I am, and love is the simplest of all tongues." It is this ability to experience love, for Harry and for mankind, that Voss attains shortly before his death: "he loved this boy, and with him all men, even those he had hated, which is the most difficult act of love to accomplish, because of one's own fault" (pp. 376-77). As man returns into God, he necessarily loses his sense of alienation from other men.

Paragraph IV begins with the acknowledgement that man's powers are limited, and depend on a God above him: "Then I am not God, but Man." He must suffer in order to attain humility, and must accept that suffering.¹¹ Le

Mesurier has a brief outburst of despair that may recall Christ's own: his "O my God, my God, if suffering is measured on the soul, then I am damned forever" suggests Christ's "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" But his despair is shortlived, and he prays in acceptance, "O God, my God, let them make from [my flesh] a vessel that endures." When man is most humbled, when he is reduced to the bare bones,¹² he is closest to God: "I am God with a spear in his side." The man Christ has become one with God when his side was opened with a spear. In this fourth verse-paragraph, the similarity between Christ's life and the course of man's spiritual development ordained by God and announced by Laura is made clearest.

In referring to God with a spear in his side, Le Mesurier also appears to foresee the approaching death of Palfreyman, speared by an aboriginal. As Palfreyman advances to his death, all the members of the expedition remember "the face of Christ that they had seen at some point in their lives, either in churches or in visions, before retreating from what they had not understood, the paradox of man in Christ, and Christ in man" (p. 336). Like Voss immediately before his death, Palfreyman is said to love all men (p. 337), an indication to us that he has attained the humility that is necessary for reunion with God. Judd's account at the end of the novel of Voss with a spear hanging from his side is wrong in fact, but his identification of Voss with Palfreyman has a rightness about it, for both die in humility after having expressed a love for all men. Laura herself is unconcerned whether Judd is speaking fact or not, for she is convinced of a greater truth, that "Voss had in him a little of Christ, like other men" (p. 438).

In paragraph IV Le Mesurier sees suffering as inevitable, as part of the human condition: "Flesh is for hacking."¹³ But suffering does serve a positive function, providing a certain nourishment: Le Mesurier's spirit will fill "the

empty waterholes," just as his "blood will water the earth and make it green." The suffering of one man is regarded as beneficial to many as well as bringing union with God for that man. The pre-eminent example of that notion is Christ, whose life forms a pattern for Voss's. When Voss's blood runs out upon the dry earth (p. 388), we are meant to believe that the earth responds to this watering. The last pages of the book can suggest that Voss's sacrifice provides a certain guarantee of the future of Australia, as well as of his own salvation.

After persecution and humiliation comes public honor, which is only an externalization of the exalted state of the soul: "They chase this kangaroo, and when they have cut off his pride, and gnawed his charred bones, they honour him in ochre on a wall." That is true not only of Old Man Kangaroo among the aboriginals, but of Christ among the Christians, and of Voss among the people of Sydney at the Domain ceremony. The spirit of Old Man Kangaroo, of Christ, and of Voss "has gone out, it has gone away, it is everywhere," in a dissolution that is also supreme fulfillment.¹⁴ In the prayer with which *Le Mesurier* concludes his poem, the sentiments are those of the soul in the Third Stage, returned into God: "Oh God, my God, I pray that you will take my spirit out of this my body's remains, and after you have scattered it, grant that it shall be everywhere, and in the rocks, and in the empty waterholes, and in true love of all men, and in you, O God, at last." This prayer is essentially a prophecy that is fulfilled in the death of Voss. When Jackie cuts off Voss's head, White tells us "His dreams fled into the air, his blood ran out upon the dry earth, which drank it up immediately" (p. 388). He goes on to observe "Whether dreams breed, or the earth responds to a pint of blood, the instant of death does not tell." But dreams do breed and the earth does respond to a watering with blood, in time so that Laura can announce, again in her role as seer, "Voss did not die . . . He is there still, it is said, in the

country, and always will be" (p. 442).

There are circumstances surrounding Laura's enunciation of her doctrine of the Three Stages that compel us to consider her spiritual state as well as Voss's. The arrogance with which she makes her pronouncements indicates that she is locked in the Second Stage. She speaks from a position apart from mankind, close to that of the God-head. The most startling of her utterances is her judgment of man as a shabby creature:

"man is so shoddy, so contemptible, greedy, jealous, stubborn, ignorant. Who will love him when I am gone? I only pray that God will." (pp. 380-81)

Clearly here she does not include herself in the human race. And when she says "Who will love him when I am gone? I only pray that God will" she is first of all talking not merely of Voss but of man generally and then making slighter claims for God's love than for her own. Likewise she had declared herself earlier in her illness "willing to give up so much to prove that human truths are also divine" (p. 366), thereby assigning herself a great power beyond that of ordinary human beings. There she was speaking of giving up Mercy, which to her represents a great sacrifice — not because she loves Mercy, one feels, but because she regards the child as an abiding symbol of her Virgin Motherhood. In spite of her statement, Laura proves unwilling to relinquish that role and associate herself with the human race. That is why she will not look at the comet (pp. 369-70), that travels towards the Southern Cross (p. 384). When Voss fears "some final torment of the spirit" that he might not be able to endure (p. 385), he also does not dare for a time to raise his eyes towards the comet, but when he regains the courage to accept his final ordeal he does look up, to see "the nails of the Cross." Laura cannot renounce her pride and embrace, like Voss, the humility that is necessary for her to return into God.¹⁵

Because her arrogance is more directly expressed at the height of her illness, it makes clearer the special position

in which Laura has long held herself: apart from and above mankind. The least position that she has ever accepted or will ever accept is that of equality with Voss. The acceptance letter that she wrote to Voss (pp. 180-81) is especially characterized by the sense of a contest in which she is determined to best him and remain equal with the Godhead.¹⁶ Even her telepathic message to Voss at the beginning of her illness suggests a contest in which she will not be less than him: "*Even if there are times when you wish me to, I shall not fail you*" (pp. 353, 358; our italics). Such an interpretation is strengthened by the occurrence of the italicized phrase just before the onset of her illness, in a context of competitiveness. Tom Radclyffe, dancing with Laura at the Pringles' ball, reminds her that the fact that she has been hurt does not mean that others will be, "*Even though you may wish it*" (p. 319); and he is right, we think, that Laura is concerned with maintaining her ascendancy.¹⁷

In spite of these instances that compel us to an awareness of Laura's lack of humility, White is in general highly protective towards Laura.¹⁸ Usually he removes her from judgment by the principles that she enunciates. Even in the scene of her illness, at the same time that he indicates she lacks the humility necessary to proceed to the Third Stage, he also elevates her by associating her with Christ. Her suffering is linked with Christ's ("Dear Christ, now at last I understand your suffering," p. 380), and her Crown of Leeches recalls Christ's Crown of Thorns. Elsewhere White discourages us from relating the pythoness to the truths that she reveals.

There is a marked discrepancy in White's attitude towards his two main characters. Although both Voss and Laura are presented as beings apart from the rest of mankind,¹⁹ between God and man, Voss is brought closer and closer to humanity and Laura is removed further and further from it as the novel proceeds. White reminds us that Voss is finally man, but he leaves us somewhat in awe

of Laura. A phrase used of Voss near his death, "the man who was not god" (p. 374), is not paralleled by any similar phrase used of Laura, and would in fact be inappropriate.

White does not allow anyone in the book to diminish Laura, to induce humility in her. Tom Radclyffe and Colonel Hebden confront her with certain truths, but White plays down the justness of their accusations.

At the Pringles' ball Tom accuses Laura — after considerable provocation — of living off her imagination, and goes on to ask her what she expects of Voss (pp. 319-20). White makes snide jabs at Tom, concerning his insecurity and shaky masculinity and malice, and invites sympathy for Laura's great distress (her "face was shrunk to the extent that it resembled a yellow skull," p. 320); he does not endorse Tom's indirect accusation that Laura has not come to successful terms with the ordinary world.²⁰ Yet we see Laura, after confessing that Voss is lost, proceed to bear out the truth of Tom's accusation by writing a letter that she knows cannot possibly be sent to Voss. In the letter, too, written essentially to herself ("If you, my dear [Johann Ulrich], cannot hope to benefit, it is most necessary for me"), Laura comes close to admitting the inadequacy of her adjustment to the realities of life: "How strong one was, how weak one always is!" (p. 324).

In his two scenes with Laura, at Mrs. de Courcy's and at the Domain ceremony, Colonel Hebden presses the literal truth about Voss on Laura, and once accuses her of no longer respecting the truth (p. 438); and again White plays down the justness of the accusation. Again White makes snide jabs at Laura's challenger, concerning Hebden's snobbery and superficiality and calculatedness, and again he invites sympathy for Laura's distress (she is filled with "a dry, burning misery" on the one occasion, and feels as if her lifeblood might gush from her mouth on the other). White does not endorse Hebden's accusation, which is ultimately the same as Tom's, that she lives off her imagination. He implies rather that Hebden's desire to know the

facts betrays an inferior kind of understanding of Voss and his expedition, when set against Laura's. While it is true that facts never do tell the whole story, it is not true that "The air will tell us" what the story signifies, as Laura claims at the end of the novel. But Laura is allowed the last word, not only at the close of the novel, but against her assailants generally.

Laura is a dominating character, threatening to dominate the novel, especially since she figures importantly in the fifty pages after Voss's death. Nevertheless, she does not succeed in shifting the focus of attention away from Voss to herself. In the section that follows Voss's death, we are concerned still with the nature of the man Voss and the effect of his expedition on the people who inhabit Australia. The question of Voss's spiritual progression is never lost sight of for long. That progression, expressed in general but cogent terms in Laura's doctrine of the Three Stages, is the central theme of the novel.

¹Patrick White, *Voss* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), p. 380. Further page references to *Voss* will be made parenthetically.

²The term "doffing the body" is taken from *Riders in the Chariot*: to the dying Himmelfarb it seems that special illumination is attained only "by those of extreme simplicity of soul, or else by one who was about to doff the outworn garment of the body."

³Suspecting that the song was in fact his own, I asked Patrick White if that was so. He replied that he had composed it himself, and had the German checked by Curt Prerauer. I have normalized the appearance of the song here; White writes it to indicate how Voss sang it [J.B.].

⁴The song is borne out literally in the person of the aboriginal Dugald, whose fine coat does fall to shreds, along with the illusory "conscience he had worn in the days of the whites" (p. 214). When he renounces this false identity, however, he is able to return to his own people and their gods. But if Dugald literally bears out the song, its chief relevance is still to Voss.

⁵White early shows Laura associating herself with the laurel when he tells how she would recall Jack Slipper (who fascinates and frightens her with his sexuality) "and again see him spit a shiny stream into the molten laurels" (p. 48). Her association is one of intercourse with Jack Slipper.

⁶It is also worth mentioning in relation to Le Mesurier's name that German "Messer," with only a change of gender (from

der to das), means "knife" — which would be appropriate to the frequent references to knives and cutting in Le Mesurier's poems, and to the vivisectioning effect of those poems on Voss (pp. 290, 292).

- ⁷The experiences of childhood recorded here are also remarkably similar to those of Theodora Goodman earlier in White's work and of Hurtle Duffield later.
- ⁸Chapter 11, dealing with Laura in Sydney, intervenes between Voss's reading of Le Mesurier's poems and his encounter with the blacks.
- ⁹As the ship is being loaded in Sydney Voss looks at Palfreyman and realizes Palfreyman is weak. White quickly corrects that view by commenting that "It was only really through humility that [Palfreyman's] strength was restored to him" (p. 92).
- ¹⁰Theodora Goodman is the most fully developed illustration of this doctrine in White's writings.
- ¹¹cf. White's epigraph to *Happy Valley*, from Mahatma Gandhi: It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering, which is the one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone . . . the purer the suffering, the greater is the progress.
- ¹²In *The Aunt's Story*, Theodora and Moraitis are established as fellow visionaries when Theodora tells him "I too come from a country of bones." In a country of bones, he agrees — a country stripped down to essential values — it is easier to see.
- ¹³Harry Roberts, too, had learned that "man's first duty is to suffer" (p. 91).
- ¹⁴Near the end of *The Vivisector*, Hurtle Duffield cannot stop himself "attempting to reach higher . . . towards total achievement or extinction," fulfillment and dissolution being equated here.
- ¹⁵Peter Beatson sees Laura's concern for Voss during her illness as "the unearthly love of a saint for an erring soul" ("The Three Stages: Mysticism in Patrick White's *Voss*," *Southerly*, XXX (No. 2, 1970, 111-21). Beatson's article is interesting, but the three stages he discusses do not strictly correlate with the stages that Laura describes.
- ¹⁶See John B. Beston, "Voss's Proposal and Laura's Acceptance Letter: The Struggle for Dominance in *Voss*," *Quadrant*, XVI (July-August, 1972), 24-30.
- ¹⁷An earlier occurrence of the phrase, in a letter that Voss writes Laura, also strongly suggests the contest between them: "I cannot kill myself quite off, *even though you would wish it, my dearest Laura*" (p. 212, our italics).
- ¹⁸White is defensive towards all his visionaries, guarding them from criticism. With Laura, and with Theodora and Stan earlier, he elevates their visionary qualities and plays down their alienation or hostility.
- ¹⁹In the garden scene, Voss comments to Laura that they were unwise "to flounder into each other's private beings" (p. 86).

Laura smiles with pleasure at the word "beings," probably because their encounter has been more like one of Supreme Beings than mere humans.

²⁰When White alludes to "The Truth that [Tom] had let loose," he is referring to the truth that Tom draws out of Laura, that Voss is lost, not to Tom's remark about her living off her imagination.