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### Abstract

Early in *The Transit of Venus*, Caro(line) Bell, a young Australian registers her response to an English summer. There is about it, she feels, 'an abundance that overwhelmed'. By contrast, '«Australian summer is a scorching, without a leaf to spare, Out there, the force is in the lack, in the scarcity and distance.»'<sup>1</sup> They are opposites, each has its 'force' but it is not, in Caro's mind, a question of inferiority. In the same scene, because of Caro's influence, Ted Tice, a young Englishman in love with her, records a change in his way of looking at his place, '«

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Early in *The Transit of Venus*, Caro(line) Bell, a young Australian registers her response to an English summer. There is about it, she feels, 'an abundance that overwhelmed'. By contrast, «Australian summer is a scorching, without a leaf to spare. Out there, the force is in the lack, in the scarcity and distance.»<sup>1</sup> They are opposites, each has its 'force' but it is not, in Caro's mind, a question of inferiority. In the same scene, because of Caro's influence, Ted Tice, a young Englishman in love with her, records a change in his way of looking at his place. «It used to be, in England, that you were never far from the countryside. Now you are always near a town.» Tice 'had begun to look', we are told, 'with anti-podean eyes' (p.26).

Sefton Thrale, an old, eminent English scientist, at whose home Tice and Caro are guests, can make no such accommodations. To him, any deviation from an ideal English model 'required apologies': 'Australia required apologies, and was almost a subject for ribaldry' (p.11). He is representative of what Shirley Hazzard, elsewhere, calls the 'other, authoritative world'.<sup>2</sup> Whereas the sisters Caro and Grace Bell, growing up in Australia in the 1930s and '40s, are faced with the proposition that to be Australian was to be on the 'losing side': it was 'unnatural' of the Australian poet Kendall, whose poetry was fit for Elocution Class but not English poetry, to sing of spring in September. 'What was natural was hedgerows, hawthorn, skylarks, the chaffinch on the orchard bough. You had never seen these but believe in them with perfect faith ... Literature had not simply made these things true. It has placed Australia in perpetual, flagrant violation of reality' (p.31). Beside events like the Coronation, which was all 'of a piece with the Black Prince and the Wars of the Roses' (p.32), Australian history was a 'shrivelled chronicle ... swiftly passed over by teachers impatient to return to the service at the

Abbey' (p.32). The upshot of the education and upbringing exacted on Caro and Grace in Australia is that reality, the true and adult life, was to be associated with the metropolitan centre.

There was nothing mythic at Sydney: momentous objects, beings, and events all occurred abroad or in the elsewhere of books. Sydney could never take for granted, as did the very meanest town in Europe, that a poet might be born there or a great painter walk beneath its windows. The likelihood did not arise, they did not feel they had deserved it. (p.37)

In terms of the controlling European ethos, to be antipodean is to be inferior; it is to know that you are unimportant. But this is also Caro's knowledge as a woman and Tice's as a 'poor boy'. In her relationship with Paul Ivory, given the assumptions of privilege and masculinity upon which he operates, Caro is expected to know that she 'would be instructed, not questioned; ... Paul, not Caro, would interpret the meaning in their respective lots' (p.133). As a linguist with a government department, one of the first women to sit for (and pass) the entrance examination, she would, Christian confidently announces, with no hint of irony and a good deal of relish, be exploited. It was 'assumed' that, as a part of her duties, 'she would, from a housewifely instinct in fact minimal in her, set the room to rights' (p.183). It was, similarly, taken for granted that the men in the office would 'do nothing that lowers their self-esteem' (p.192), while the women would make tea, serve lunches, and generally tidy up dishes and egos. She felt herself outside or in opposition to the dominant ethos which was English, hierarchically ordered and male.

This, also, catches something of Tice's sense of reality. Having been conducted around the Thrales' stately home by Mrs Thrale, he wonders if, eventually, 'he would learn this too — to speak confidently and leave a room'. He felt, in this place, like an 'upper servant. He was young and poor and had the highest references — like a governess in an old story, who marries into a noble family' (p.6). But society, too, places him. After Paul Ivory has 'murdered' Victor Locker it is Tice, who saw what happened, whom the Police suspect, not Paul. Paul explains how '«the police fixed on the wrong chap ... their eyes lit on the one that looked and spoke the part, and had nothing but his innocence to back him»' (p.309).

What these groups share — the post-colonial, women, the poor — is the knowledge that nothing in their past or present lives allows them to make comfortable assumptions about existence. Their knowledge is that they have no power and that they can have no expectations about it.

They find themselves in opposition to the institutionalized structures of western society — family, school, bureaucracy, government — which are built on particular notions of power, authority and progress, implicit in which is a reading of history, and which are directed towards maintaining the status quo of an economic and cultural élite. Such a recognition may, on the one hand, be debilitating, leading to various forms of victimization. In the novel we see such responses as Dora's disavowal of her self and her place; the moral bankruptcy of the Lockers; the subservience of Grace or Tice's mother; or, Mr Tice's anger. On the other hand, it may have in it a potential for strength. Tice breaks the circle of exploitation, as Caro does, with his intellectual, passionate and moral life. This is a refusal to be a victim, despite the knowledge, 'that those who do not see themselves as victims accept the greater stress' (p.38). They are, the novel says, 'antipodean'; each understands that, ultimately, 'every lie must be redeemed'.

Literally, an Antipodean is on the opposite side of the world; is an Australasian. But, in the logic of the novel, it is to hold opposite views to the prevailing views, it is to be the opposite of a person or thing, where 'European' provides the norm. It is to be outside the established repositories of power and authority: it is, then, not the geography which is important, but the ideas an individual holds. The 'antipodean', it is suggested, knows, as Tice knows, that he is different to the 'ruling classes' (p.27); it is to work, as Adam Vail does, outside government and on 'behalf of others' (p.182); it is to dare to be human in a 'mass society'.

The 'antipodean' is, in the sense in which the terms are used by Europeans, historyless and placeless. As a woman and as an Australian Caro knows this. The history that she knows of is English, masculine and full of grand heroic gestures but it doesn't fit in with her experience. Instead of a history enshrined in cenotaphs and 'monuments to wars sweetest symbols — the soldier, bronze rifle rested, supporting his decorously felled comrade, the marshal cleanly victorious on his flawless mare' (p.36), she knows another and opposite version. In her experience, there is an 'Unofficial' history; to be found on street corners. Here 'History' was enshrined in the legless, the blind, the gassed remnants of war; living monuments — a century's private collection to unnerve a gloss of History — whose 'excruciating songs', absurd and meaningless, echo through the novel providing a subtext to notions of success and progress through war. For Caro, the greatest heroism is in living, refusing 'the safe side of the line' if the commitment to life calls for the extreme.

The Antipodean is also placeless, beyond nation, if by that is meant a narrow nationalism. Speaking of the modern age, Shirley Hazzard draws

attention to 'an unprecedented loss of geographic and, to some extent, national and even social, sense of belonging', and in the novel this is figured, to mention just two instances, by Sefton Thrale's feelings of disorientation, and Dora's incessant wandering around the globe, but the 'antipodeans' do not need the certain certainties of physical place. Unlike Dora, who seeks out English enclaves wherever she goes — in the Algarve she stayed at 'the Chisholm and might have been at Hammersmith' (p.161) — Caro carries December in her nostrils 'for a lifetime' (p.37). She devotes herself to living, wherever she is. This is no simple matter, but from the outset Caro was prepared to take her own soundings on reality: she is prepared to go 'inland', wonders 'about the inside and the back' of ordinary life. Paul sees in her 'some other, reckless nationality'. She is 'exotic', different.

Professor Thrale, for 'politics and gain' — a superficial nationalism — fabricates data in order to ensure a telescope is sited in England. Tice knows that the better sites are in the south of Europe and opposes his colleague and countryman, aware that the English press will accuse him of disloyalty. His commitment, however, is to truth. Similarly, Adam Vail, while, on the one hand, prepared to denounce 'the connivance and covert support of the United States Government' (p.261) in Latin America, is, on the other hand, profoundly afraid that his nation 'may turn out to be a phenomenon, rather than a civilization' (p.205). His 'fear' drives his criticism; he wants reform. Hansi, the diplomat, also recognizes the need for reform, but his intention, like 'our modern altruists, ... is to wrest as much money from [his] employers as possible, turn up [his] hi-fi, indulge [his] appetites and tastes, and sleep long and sound each night'. This may be 'shit', as Josie remarks, but it has its logic. As Adam says, '«Those who continually criticise the achievement of others must achieve something of their own or become ridiculous»' (p.212). One of the lines of contact of this exchange is with Paul's condemnation of England: he loathes its '«censoriousness, the reluctance to try anything else. The going through to the bitter end with all the wrong things.»' '«A lot of people in England pass their time collecting negative evidence on almost any theme. Old Thrale is archetypal»' (p.91). But Paul, too, is prepared to 'become ridiculous'. He has neither the 'concentration' nor the 'endurance' of 'Antipodeans', whose devotion is to the world, and who are at home in justice, truth.

The tension between 'antipodean' and 'authoritative' ways of seeing is present from the opening pages of the novel, from that moment when Tice meets Caro and Grace at the Thrales' dinner table, of which the

Professor was so clearly the head. But two incidents at the table differentiate perspectives and subvert Thrale's authority. The first of these occurs after he has proclaimed his godson's bravery in marrying into the aristocracy: «It's a brave man these days who'll marry the daughter of a lord. With all you radicals around.» The remark is directed at Tice and Caro since, in Thrale's mind, 'Grace's way of quietly stacking plates exonerated her'. Yet, it is Grace who looks up and suggests that '«Perhaps he loves her»'. To which Thrale replies, '«Perfectly right. Young people should follow their fancy. Why not?»' (p.15). Grace's 'love' is Thrale's 'fancy', a whim, and, although both are proved wide of the mark, it is the responses that we are drawn to: the one ideal, naïve, open; the other reductive, condescending, cynical.

Following this exchange, Tice, 'honouring the faith, not the failure' (p.16) tells the 'noble' story of the French astronomer Guillaume Legentil who, having been delayed in his attempt to observe the transit of Venus in 1761, waited in the East for the 1769 transit, only to be thwarted by bad weather. To Sefton Thrale, however, the expedition was a 'failure' (p.16). This signals a fundamental difference: Thrale wants tangible evidence of success, whereas Tice draws attention to the human endeavour, 'the faith'.

It is for similar reasons that Thrale cannot take 'Tice's future ascendancy ... on faith'; he must know 'whether he would win or fail' (p.12). He is, reflects the Professor, 'a poor boy from a grimy town, a clever boy who got himself — the phrase implying contrivance... — to a great university and made his impression there'. With a north-country accent, a deformed eye, a preference for old-fashioned cable-stitch cardigans and a name like Ted Tice, he could offer Thrale no picture of certainty (p.12).<sup>5</sup> Paul Ivory, however, was a presence to be gambled on; he 'had grown into a tall young [man] by attending the right schools, singing the right hymns and making the right turns'. He would be a 'star' in any firmament. He was 'modern'<sup>4</sup> but he was also someone to be certain about, he offered a sense of continuity with the past.

Sefton Thrale's inclination is to define existence, but the subtext of the novel is that there can be no adequate definitions — 'calculations about Venus', for example, are invariably wrong (p.15) — and that the urge to define stems from a need to conquer, to control or possess, the ultimate end of which is to simplify, to smooth, the contours of existence.<sup>5</sup> The one mind wanting to reduce, to classify and compose into identifiable and manageable forms, the other mind accepting complexity, seeking to make sense of existence, not achieve mastery over it.

An element in the Professor's devotion to Paul is due to the fact that his own existence has become problematic: not only has his assistant defied the gravity of academic preferment, but also his daughter is to marry an Australian. To Sefton, whose 'best self ... like his best work' (p.13), derived from before the First World War, the future was merely 'something to talk about, one foot safely on the fender'. It was something to theorise about, leaving the living to others.

'Your generation will be the one to feel it. Some form of social structure existed until now. Say what you like about it. Now we're at the end of all that. You'll be the ones to bear the brunt.'

With rapid satisfaction he pointed out, to Ted and the girls, their almost culpable bad luck. In the same way, arrivals at a rainy resort will be told. 'We've had fine weather until today.'

'There has been global order of a kind. Say what you like.'

That of course they could not do. (p.10)

This is the old academic indulging a theory, teaching the younger generation a lesson while, at the same time, separating himself from accountability: «You'll be the ones to bear the brunt.» But, we notice, also, a simplifying tendency in his language. The social fragmentation becomes analogous to a change in the weather. The future is 'their almost culpable bad luck'. Like Hansi the diplomat, whose only mental exertion is spent on deciphering word puzzles, Thrale has abdicated his right to make sense. The same forces are at work in Paul Ivory. Speaking of their meeting, Caro says it was 'destiny', whereas Paul calls it 'luck'. Luck, destiny: this is more than a semantic difference; it has to do with the way one perceives and responds to existence. To see it as ruled by luck, is to assume that meaning is illusory; it removes any obligation to be accountable for existence. Such a view of existence colours Paul's writing. In contrast to his father, who took no account of literary fashion,<sup>6</sup> Paul sought to give the public what he thought they wanted (p.77). Making sense is something he resorts to when 'other methods flagged' (p.90): he is fascinated by words but not by meaning.

The eloquence with which Caro, Tice and, later, Grace converse does not extend to Thrale, Christian, Dora, or, wholly, to Paul,<sup>7</sup> all of whom, in the fabric of the novel, are associated by linguistic echoes in what amounts to a complicity to defraud language, to obstruct sense and humane reason, and to devalue culture and existence. Behind the whole, however, the very fluid in which it floats, is the superb eloquence of the narrative giving the novel its tone and, as Shirley Hazzard says of style, providing the novel with its context, endorsing fact and value. It is the

Thrales, the Hansis and their various manifestations among a 'petrified' intelligentsia (p.206) and an impotent bureaucracy, the text insistently reminds us, who have talked civilization into two world wars and to the verge of nuclear war.<sup>8</sup> Existence is meaningless for them. Their life is a continual disavowal of their humanity. Thrale, for example,

exonerated completely the inventors of deadly weapons: 'We merely interpret the choices of mankind.' And when Caro objected — 'Aren't scientists also men, then? At the very least, responsible as their fellows?' — he had closed the discussion with his scarcely patient smile, as if to assure a child that it would understand, or not care, when it was older. (p.57)

Sefton Thrale 'had long since become the views he had never contested' (p.85).

In the text, Thrale's comments on scientific responsibility are contiguous with Tice's recollections of his response to the devastation of Hiroshima. In the face of what he saw

the events he already called his life were growing inconsiderable before he had practised making them important. This derived from a sense not of proportion but of profound chaos, a welter in which his own lucky little order appeared miraculous but inconsequential; and from a revelation, nearly religious, that the colossal scale of evil could only be matched or countered by some solitary flicker of intense and private humanity. (p.53)

He began to see things differently: it was from this time that Tice's 'fate became equivocal, and he ceased to make quite clear if he would win or fail'. This was the end, for Tice, almost before they had begun, of any certain certainties. To his guide, the 'incinerat[ion]' of Hiroshima was a victory and a deterrent, making war 'unthinkable': 'In that way it has been salutary.' The background to the novel, a collage of wars, battles and violent disruptions, refutes Girling's complacency. A footnote to the text might be Robert Jay Lifton's *Death in Life. The Survivors of Hiroshima*:

After Hiroshima we can envisage no war-linked chivalry, certainly no glory. Indeed, we can see no relationship — not even a distinction — between victimizer and victim — only the sharing in species annihilation...<sup>9</sup>

Stunned by what he sees, Tice's feelings of mercy are seen by Girling as a 'disadvantage'; he is as disconcerting to his Captain as he is to be disturbing to Thrale (p.54). He is warned not to 'make a goat' of himself. 'Goat signifying anything unmanly, or humane,' says the narrator, carefully.

This is one of those moments in the novel when the background is brought into the foreground and a crucial event in the century's chaos is laid out, when fiction meets fact<sup>10</sup> and the reader, in a sense simultaneously with Tice, grapples again with the implications of Hiroshima. For we contemplate both its human consequences and its significance as an historic event: in the logic of the novel it is to be seen in the context of the deprivations of the First World War; as the result of certain human choices; and as a measure of technological progress, to be absurdly linked to the 'calculated uselessness' of the trinkets with which the Americans re-colonised Australia in the 1940s — nibless pens, celluloid pencil sharpeners, pencils with lights (p.47) — and to lunar space flights (p.245).<sup>11</sup> It may seem futile to try to oppose action which seems to be sanctioned by those in power and yet both the rise of Hitler and the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam depended, at every stage, upon human support, upon choices.

At twenty, then, Tice begins to understand that he is different but, in his difference, he is linked to others who are prepared, out of principle, or a sense of destiny, to live according to an 'intense and private humanity' (p.53). It is '«the uncommon man who gets everyone's goat»' (p.142), warns Valda, and Ramon Tregéar further characterises the type as one '«who stands alone»' (p.249). This, then, is the Antipodean; someone capable of a 'conscious act of independent humanity'.

Tertia Drage and Christian are disconcerted by the quality of purpose they discern in Caro; her 'fine solemnity' (p.144). When he first sees Caro and Grace together, Christian marvels at their composure: 'They seemed scarcely conscious of being Australians in a furnished flat' (p.21), while Tertia would have liked to bring 'their disadvantage ... home to them' (p.66). And yet Christian, in a thought as instructive about himself as Caro, notices that she 'moved with consequence as if existence were not trivial'.<sup>12</sup> In reply to his question about their presence in London, '«do you then ... mean to try out life here, and return — was it — to Sydney?»' — a kind of aimless dabbling in life — Caro replies laughing: '«Life doesn't work that way»' (p.22). For Caro, everything had 'the threat and promise of meaning' (p.17), which is to be compared with Dora's incessant travel and bickering; with Christian, whose 'chances in life seemed bound up with the colour of girls' dresses, the streaks of curtain at windows' and other omens which he interpreted as good or bad luck (p.23); or with Paul Ivory, the opportunist, whose whole manner 'suggested technique' (p.71).

The girls are strange, different. The narrator underlines Christian's bemused response to them. He is so disoriented that he wonders, in a

usage which subverts the traditional conception of the colonial as 'cast-away', if he is 'not the one in need of rescue' (p.22).

These women provided something new to Christian — a clear perception unmingled with suspiciousness. Their distinction was not only their beauty and their way with one another, their crying need of a rescue for which they made no appeal whatever; but a high humorous candour for which — he could frame it no other way — they would be willing to sacrifice. (p.23)

There was nothing in Christian's background to have prepared him for these women so that, when Caro 'proved too much for him' (like some contemplated expensive acquisition, she was 'beyond his means'), 'he almost disliked her' (p.24). This, of course, no less than Sefton's rejection of Tice for Paul, in the face of the disorientation he feels, is an attempt to stabilize his world: Caro's difference becomes abhorrent. 'Grace's beauty', on the other hand, her 'tame and tractable' nature (p.195), 'was a vindication' (p.20) of his judgement, his status and his masculine dominion: it was a return to the known. To Christian, women were either to be charmed, if they were sweet, fragile and submissive; or, if they did not conform to this stereotype, they were to be loathed or disregarded. In this way he could clearly define — could 'classify' — his relationship with them.<sup>13</sup>

Paul Ivory draws from a similar well in his dealings with women. One of his tactics was to 'creat[e] an exchange' in which he made women 'talk in such a way, in such a voice, with the double meanings that diminished meaning, stretching the tension-wire between man and woman to a taut, purposeless antagonism' (p.89). As the metaphor of conflict suggests, Paul's seduction of Caro is a conquest. He will 'punish' her for 'being remarkable'; wants to 'wound' her, to 'violate [her] pride or her integrity' (p.96); and, having got the 'upper hand', he will 'await her submission' (p.135). With an 'instinct for the fluctuations of resistance' (p.134), he waits his opportunity; knows it will come, like a fall in the stockmarket or a cross-bat shot in cricket.

He was calm, with controlled desire and with the curiosity that is itself an act of desire. As yet he and she had merely guessed at each other's essence, and her show of self-sufficiency had given her some small degree of power over him — power that could only be reversed by an act of possession. (p.98)

This has nothing to do with patience; it is sordid with technique and ego.<sup>14</sup>

This passage sets the tone of the encounter. To Caro the moment was 'a crisis' in which, 'if he chose, [Paul] might feel her change forever'; to

Paul it was a cheap thrill. The one 'confiding [her] strength', the other taking possession: the difference between a view of existence as capable of meaning and nihilism, which denies meaning.<sup>15</sup> On entering the pub to which he takes Caro, and which until recently he had frequented with his homosexual lover, he reads a notice to Caro: '«The Management is not responsible for loss of valuables.»' We take the meaning. 'She will not be so very different in the event, he supposed — with a mental shrug or swagger...'<sup>16</sup>

Love, says Caro, has become her 'greatest or sole distinction' (p.152). It was, to borrow some lines from another of Shirley Hazzard's women, 'the only state in which one could consider oneself normal: which engaged all one's capacities, rather than those developed by necessity — or shipwreck'. Paul, however, discards Caro when he feels his love for her upsetting the stability of his world and giving her 'stature: she was either unique or an inaugurator. Paul resented the historic position she had established for herself in the momentum of his life, and because of it would have liked to see her broken' (p.155).<sup>17</sup> He could bear some 'preliminary uncertainty ... if the outcome was assured' (p.98) but Caro left him with 'the everlasting, irritating, and alluring impression that she addressed herself to an objective beyond the small egoistic drama of their own desires'. It is just this mysterious strength which Adam Vail values: 'He thought most men would hardly dare to touch her, or only with anger, because she would not pretend anything was casual' (p.186). And Tice's attachment to Caro was an

intensification of his strongest qualities, if not of his strengths: not a youthful adventure, fresh and tentative, but a gauge of all effort, joy, and suffering ... The possibility that he might never, in a lifetime, arouse her love in return was a discovery touching all existence. (p.57)

Paul's marriage to Tertia, by contrast, was merely an '«interesting collusion»' based on a mutual agreement to deceive '«one another ... [and] a larger public»' (p.133).<sup>18</sup> While Christian, witless and arrogant, wonders — in the manner in which someone with heartburn may contemplate a second helping of a rich dessert — why 'one could not have a little true love without lifelong consequences' (p.240).

Tice, Caro and Adam refuse to trivialize existence in this way. For, if Caro has learnt that, in the scheme of things, human existence is inconsequential she knows also that existence achieves its meaning (or lack of meaning) from human choices and actions. Such a sense of purpose is implicit in the title and is endorsed by the narrator in the telling. For Shirley Hazzard's omniscience is inseparable from the matter

of the novel, tracing carefully Caro's progress towards inner vision, endorsing those who affirm the essential worth of human beings, and consolidating this notion of complex design in existence.

There are others in the novel like Paul, for whom existence is a game or a felony to be got away with: you won or you lost. '«If you can reach fifty without a catastrophe, you've won. You've got away with it. Perhaps even now I've had more good life than they can take from me»' (p.100). When Cordelia refuses to accept her 'unbearable and commendable prerogative' as a woman which was to bring 'matters to a head' (p.238) — that romantic role designated by books and films — Christian blames 'the world' for having 'once more proved unworthy of [him]' (p.241).<sup>19</sup> 'Life', or the undefined 'they' who are in league with it, is to be beaten, blamed, or tricked. This is to dehumanize and trivialize existence; it is to turn it into a battle for supremacy or a game. In the world of the novel these positions are taken by those who subscribe to an 'authoritative' version of existence that is constructed on structures of power behind which the individual can hide but which, the novel exposes, no less than war, take a heavy toll of humanity.

At the end of his life, bearing the lie of his existence, Paul, the elegant 'modern', looks like 'a suspect or fugitive' (p.321).

He had reached fifty, but had not got away with it. She said, 'There is the terrible ignorance, looking back. Not knowing this was in store.'

Paul said, 'The rage — at fate, at God. Not merely being helpless, but in someone's — something's — power ... I've always detested any sense of power over me.' (p.298)

The passage echoes Paul's earlier plan for beating life (p.100) in which, in his arrogance, he believed his opportunism would carry him through. It is Tice, however, who knows that life doesn't 'have to be credible or fair' (p.102); who knows that it is one's duty, in faith and humility, to make sense of existence, not to strip it of meaning. In the end Caro sees that Paul could so 'reduce' their relationship that it became 'the play within the play', a device as a writer for which he 'had a taste', just as Christian's affair with Cordelia, 'in the synopsis of remembrance', becomes a long story to be cut short. It is only at the fag-end of his life that Paul recognizes that 'God's sense of humour might extend to [him] too' (p.309). He had always believed in God but he had reduced God to a kind of benevolent croupier who made sure he always had a supply of chips. Caro, too, was 'a believer in her own way', we are told, 'which was not his' (p.76). Being born outside the traditional repositories of power, she knows, as Tice knows, that she can make no assumptions about the

benign or malign influence of God: Tice calls witnesses on occasions but the prerogative is to make sense of the given. Tice's 'sovereign power', to pick up one of the motif phrases of the novel, lies in his 'self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control'; those lines extracted from their context in Tennyson's 'Oenone' and used as a punishment in school, to be written 'one hundred times' (p.31).<sup>20</sup> By turning them into a punishment, Pallas' wisdom — 'because right is right, to follow right/ Were wisdom in the scorn of consequence' — is transformed into a bludgeon for social Law, not a plea for personal action in the light of eternal law. Just as Pallas' judgement is meant to hold for 'Oenone', so it is for *The Transit of Venus*. But, in both works, there are conflicting versions of 'sovereign power'.<sup>21</sup> For, if Dora stands for a different moral choice to Tice — her 'sovereign power' lay 'in her power to accuse, to judge, to cause pain' (p.38) — Rex Ivory is his moral equal. Characterised by his 'lode of authenticity' (p.94), Rex is honoured by the text for his 'old-fashioned virtues': self-sacrifice, self-effacement, charity, civility. He is prepared to be different and to stand alone; and, because he has a faith in the possibility of significant human action, he refuses to accept that existence is fortuitous, based on luck.

He is an 'antipodean' and has a view of existence based on truth and the will for truth, in contrast to those who refuse to care, refuse to take responsibility for their actions and who cheapen and demean their existence.

What distinguishes the 'antipodeans' in the novel is that they accept responsibility for their existence. Tice explains this in a letter to Caro: 'What an atrocious, sustained effort is required, I find, to learn or do anything thoroughly — especially if it's what you love ... To do is difficult enough. To be, more difficult still' (p.116). To do and to be; this is to summon 'real courage for a heavy risk' (p.92): 'What we are being, not what we are to be' (p.327), intones the wise voice behind the text. But, in the Thrale men, Tertia, Paul, Gartledge and the bureaucrats the 'unfashionable ideals' by which the 'antipodeans' are linked have gone to seed. Their selfishness, impassivity and insensitivity leads, with a sense of inevitability, to murder, public lies, humiliation and sycophancy. They figure a society in decay. With a terrible complacency — a kind of willing impotence — Paul Ivory speaks of a universal '«lack of surprise»' that began, he surmises, with '«the First World War. Why should you or I, for instance, be surprised by anything by now»' (p.151).

There is a different perspective which sees the human as neither victim nor victimizer, but as the survivor of various shipwrecks, personal, national, and universal, small and monumental; which sees us all in the

sea of existence together. Such a view does not deny that society has suffered a terrible convulsion but it denies the nihilism which seems for many the automatic response to the condition. Tice acknowledges the centrality of 'hope' to his life, Caro holds the 'crude belief — that there could be heroism, excellence' (p.10) and there is, about several of the characters in the novel, a «dated nobility», which, as Paul says, he had '«forgotten ... was supposed to exist»' (p.314). He is speaking of his father who shares with a minority of characters the knowledge that an 'absence of self-delusion ... is liberty' (p.219). In the optics of the novel, he sees with 'antipodean eyes' and is free to act.

#### NOTES

1. Shirley Hazzard, *The Transit of Venus* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1981), p.26. Hereafter all references to the novel will be included in brackets in the text.
2. 'Woollahra Road', *Australian Writing Today*, ed. Charles Higham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p.247.
3. Here, as in the reflection on Tice's education, Thrale tries to reduce Tice's achievement. He is trying to remove the threat he feels in Tice: 'Sefton Thrale recalled a paper, like a twinge of his illness, on which Ted Tice's precocious achievement was set out against all odds' (p.10). By contrast, Tice's magnanimity is reflected, even at this early stage in the novel, in his thoughts on Legentil.
4. Paul Ivory 'was the first Englishman they knew to dress, as everyone dressed later, in a dark-blue jersey like a fisherman's, and to wear light cotton trousers and canvas shoes' (p.68).
5. See p.11, and a later conversation between Paul and Caro in a cemetery: Caro says, '«The dead in cemeteries give the impression of having all died normally and peacefully.»' She knows life (or death) is not that neat. '«Do you think that's why they excluded suicides from consecrated ground, to maintain the fiction?»' (p.76).
6. See pp. 92, 321.
7. Grace realizes that her 'exchanges' with Angus Dance were her 'first conversations. With Christian there was the office, there were the three boys, there were the patterns and crises of domestic days' (p.270). Christian's speech is pompous, belligerent, besotted with jargon, and, like his father and Dora, he uses language as a weapon to get his own way. Sefton draws on 'all the benign and practised public tricks' of using language.
8. See, Ms Hazzard's comments on the United Nations in *Defeat of an Ideal*, and in newspaper articles in *TLS* (4 May 1973), p.501, and *New Republic* (19 January 1980), pp.17-20. The only real consternation felt by the English government officials, to whom the delegation from South America pleaded the case for eight of their countrymen who were to be executed, occurs when the luncheon arrangements become confused.

9. Cited by A. Alvarez, *The Savage God. A Study of Suicide* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p.264.
10. See, also, e.g. discussion of the transits of Venus, siting the telescope, and the journalists discussing Vietnam.
11. See, also, Alvarez, *The Savage God*: as Alvarez says, the Bomb is 'a kind of lunatic spin-off of the technological advances of the century which, in the process of creating the wherewithal to make life easier than before, has perfected ... instruments to destroy life completely' (p.265).
12. Tertia, about whom nothing seemed 'to have been humanly touched', senses in 'Caro's most commonplace movements rehearsals for life and death'.
13. See, p.24.
14. Dora's every action was 'sordid with self'; it was a 'darkness' from which Caro had to emerge (p.60).
15. Paul is a more emotionally benumbed Clem from Shirley Hazzard's story 'The Picnic', who, after an eight-year affair, considers it a displacement, not just of his habits — though that, too — but of his intelligence.
16. In a similar situation with Cordelia Ware, Christian muses: 'It would be unusual if she turned out to be — girls these days were not. At least, not by the time one met up with them' (p.234).
17. He had taken up with her, he later explains, out of 'revenge' on Tice.
18. Tertia's world is organized around the same principles of thought and action as the patriarchal world which emerges through Paul, Christian, and the bureaucrats. She is identified with the great house which carries with it both the traditional symbology of male protection and privilege and the changed symbolism effected in the Gothic novel in which it is 'an image of male power in its sinister aspect, threatening and oppressive'. (Eva Figs, *Sex and Subterfuge. Women Novelists to 1850* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p.74. I am grateful to Ms Dorothy Jones for directing me to this reference.) Tertia, we are told, 'handled objects or pushed doors with primitive abruptness, seeing no reason to indulge an uncompliant world'.
19. See, p.40: 'Dora can always die, so she said. I CAN ALWAYS DIE ... Or, she could disappear.' Adam's concern was that, like her mother, Josie would also 'take up death as her lethal instrument'. Even when young she had 'the inanition that announces self-engrossment. She was already setting up an apparatus of blame...' (p.208). Caro felt her inculcating a 'moral obligation to find the world abominable' (p.167).
20. A. Dwight Culler refers to this passage as one 'which generations of schoolboys will have to memorize'. *The Poetry of Tennyson* (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 1977), p.78.
21. As Tice says in another context but picking up the novel's concern with ways of seeing: '«Even through a telescope, some people see what they choose to see. Just as they do with the unassisted eye»' (p.293).