

# WHITE MYTHOLOGIES: ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY IN WHITE AND JOYCE—RIDERS IN THE CHARIOT AND ULYSSES

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THE following paper is a report on an aspect of the research I've been engaging in for my ARC research fellowship. My project, which I began last year, concerns identity and diversity in Australian cultural history. It hopes to challenge the view that multiculturalism is only a post World War Two phenomenon; rather, I speculate, postwar multiculturalism can be seen as a return to a pre-World War One situation, with a high percentage of overseas born, noticeable European and Chinese presences, and, particularly after the mid-nineteenth century goldrushes, a diversity of cultures. I also argue in my *The Nervous Nineties* (1991) that cultural history in Australia, especially before the internment of German-Australians during World War One and the relatively Anglo-conformist 1920s and 1930s, was saturated with ambivalent interest in various Others. In the Nineties cultural identities were energised and disturbed by varieties of exoticism, by Orientalism, Francophilia, Italophilia, Germanophilia, by visions of the 'primitive' sensuous Pacific-by, that is, alternative imaginaries to metropolitan imperial English culture.

Reading David Marr's recent biography of Patrick White, and recalling White's autobiographical writing, it is clear that White considered himself somehow unique in terms of Australian literary and cultural history, an absolute outsider, solitary, attempting to bring spirituality and depth to what he saw as the Great Australian Emptiness. It occurred to me, however, that White, given his well known interests in ethnicity, not least in his Grecophilia and Judeophilia, could clearly be seen as part of and contributing to prior cultural history in Australia. Australian cultural history and White's writings could be made to talk to each other.

While reading David Marr's biography I became intrigued by the relation of White's Grecophilia and Judeophilia to his feelings towards other nationalities, ethnicities, identities. I decided to go back to White's *Flaws in the Glass*, to try and relate White's autobiographical attitudes to the flourishing presence of desire for the other, of dilemmas of identity, in Australian cultural history. I've recently reported on this journey in *Southern Review* in an essay entitled 'Romanticism, Modernism, Exoticism: Patrick White in Biography and Autobiography'.

In relation to White's attitudes to ethnicity and identity I'd already registered disillusion and disappointment, not to say a rising feeling of dislike, when reading Marr's biography; *Flaws in the Glass* deepened such feelings of discouragement. What stood out for me in *Flaws* was the author's modernistmagisterialism, his authoritarianism, elitism, and longing to be cultural engineer, along with a relishing of a language of ethnic and racial insult, particularly towards those he sees threatening the true and essential character of Greece and Greek ethnos—Turks, Orientals generally, Slavs, and Germans. In *Flaws in the Glass*, I felt, White reveals himself to be a kind of dated structuralist, interested in discovering a core, a centre, an essence, in people, nations, ethnicities, races. In particular, White, as declared philhellene and Judeophile, decides on behalf of Greeks

and Jews their true being, the cultural traditions they must observe to be considered authentic and archetypal.

But *Flaws* is *Flaws*, an autobiography. I know I cannot presume any necessary connections between its attitudes and insistences, nor those constructed and revealed in Marr's biography, and White's novels. I decided to reread *Riders in the Chariot* because of its focus on constructions of ethnicity and identity in the figure of Himmelfarb, usually referred to in the novel as 'the Jew Himmelfarb'. Then it occurred to me, why not compare the portrait of Himmelfarb with the portrait of another famous Jewish character in twentieth-century modernist literature, Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*. I'm not sure I would have embarked on this mad project if I fully realised how much reading and rereading it involved. But, in any case, what I'll do now is test my dissatisfaction and unease with the White of biography and autobiography by attempting a classic, if very brief, compare and contrast job on *Ulysses* and *Riders*.

Each novel involves not only a major Jewish character but a crucifixion scene, leading to a possible perception of the Jewish hero as Christ, as Messiah, saviour, redeemer. In this comparing and contrasting, *Riders* appears as another writing of *Ulysses*, within a larger tale of the history of romanticism and modernism. And, Chaos Theory-like, as in the ever uncertain, unstable and unpredictable relationships of sun, earth, and moon, *Ulysses* and *Riders* relate to *The Odyssey*.

What struck me in reading and rereading *Ulysses* this time – disgracefully, I'd never been able to finish it before – was just how ethnicised and racialised is its language throughout. In the Cyclops episode, around 5pm on the 16 June, not long after Blazes Boylan has visited Molly Bloom at 7 Eccles Street, Leopold Bloom, of Hungarian Jewish ancestry, his grandfather's name Virag, Hungarian for flower, visits Barney Kiernan's pub, where some of the good men of Dublin are drinking, including a loudly self-proclaimed Irish nationalist, the Citizen. The nameless narrator, some kind of debt collector, casts a coarse, jaundiced eye over various happenings and proceedings, with scathing references to Jews throughout, including a reference to Bloom's darkness of cast (430). A question hangs over the conversations in the pub: is Leopold Bloom a true Irishman? Bloom clearly appears as an outsider to the men in the bar. Initially he doesn't wish to enter, since he's come to meet Martin Cunningham about insurance for Dignam (405), whose funeral had been held that morning. But his staying outside annoys the Citizen, who makes a snarling reference to Bloom as a 'bloody freemason' (387). When he does enter the bar he annoys its denizens by his caution and prudence, refusing a drink and saying he'll content himself with a cigar. The Citizen also suspects Bloom is not properly masculine, is a womanly man, 'a half and half', a 'fellow that's neither fish nor flesh' (416). While Bloom talks to others, the Citizen casts increasingly hostile scowls and comments in his direction, growling, 'We want no more strangers in our house' (420). Bloom finds himself in an argument with the Citizen about the British colonisers, with the Citizen loudly proclaiming that the Irish should pit 'force against force', with Bloom trying to demur (427).

A discussion about the meaning of national identity is launched. Another good citizen, John Wyse, asks Bloom if he knows what a nation means, Bloom replying, yes, that a 'nation is the same people living in the same place' (430), a definition the others find laughably inadequate. The Citizen asks Bloom what *is* his nationality, and spits when Bloom replies that it is Ireland, for he was born there (430). A little later, Bloom becomes angry, pointing out that he belongs to a 'race' that is 'hated and persecuted': 'This very moment. This very instant'. Bloom then famously declares his utopian pacifism, that history, with its recourse to 'force', its 'insult and hatred', is of 'no use', that it is the very

reverse of what is really life, which is love, the 'opposite of hatred' (432). More than a little unsettled, Bloom decides to look outside the bar again for Martin Cunningham, but the citizens in the bar think his leaving is a ruse, that Bloom has had a bet on a horse, Throwaway, without sharing the tip around, and has gone to collect. The men darkly refer to Bloom's darkness; the Citizen calls him a 'whiteyed kaffir' (435). They offer various calumnies against Bloom and his father as a fraudulent old bagman (436). Bloom's associate Martin Cunningham comes into the bar, and immediately agrees that Bloom is a 'perverted jew . . . from a place in Hungary'. They deride Bloom for not being a true man, for once having been seen shopping for baby food before the birth of his son Rudy, for his sexual inadequacy, for having male monthlies, for not sharing his racing tip, for not shouting drinks, and for not being obvious in his religious identity, not clearly Jew or gentile or Roman or Protestant (438-39).

The narrator declares that it would be an act of God to throw someone like that into the sea. The Citizen declares that we shouldn't allow 'things' like Bloom to 'contaminate' Irish shores (439). When Bloom returns, the mood is ugly. Martin Cunningham hurries Bloom out to a waiting carriage, with the Citizen bawling Judeophobic curses after him. Bloom, also enraged, reminds the Citizen of great Jews of the past like Karl Marx and Spinoza, and that in any case Christ was a Jew: 'Your God', he notes. The Citizen froths: 'By Jesus . . . I'll brain that bloody jewman for using the holy name. By Jesus, I'll crucify him so I will. Give us that biscuit box here' (444-45).

The scene in Barney Kiernan's pub and environs ends in farce. The Citizen, amidst much laughter from the narrator and bystanders, hurls the biscuit box after Bloom's retreating carriage, recalling and parodying the violence of the Cyclops in *The Odyssey*, the one-eyed monster who hurls a rock at Odysseus's boat as it flees across the wine-dark sea. Bloom meanwhile is indeed transfigured into the Messiah and prophets of old, the narrator perceiving a great brightness surrounding the carriage, now become a chariot, a voice from heaven calling out Elijah! Elijah! Bloom ascends at an angle of forty-five degrees over Donohoe's in Little Green Street like a shot off a shovel (449).

The Cyclops episode is a kind of negative epiphany, of crisis, confrontation, and unpleasantness mixed with comedy and burlesque. The men in the bar are not presented as ideal, and the narrator has throughout hardly been fully admiring of the Citizen, commenting that the fellow had once grabbed the holding of an evicted tenant (426). Their suspicions of Bloom over the horse are groundless. Yet they and the narrator come close to uniting behind the Citizen in his nationalist insistence on a single true identity, a national type, a presumed ethnic essence, as against Bloom's pluralist - we might say multicultural - stance that a nation includes everyone living in that nation. The men in the bar loudly declare their contempt for their colonisers, that the Irish are persecuted, yet they assume the coloniser's rule of a single identity, share in the coloniser's violence and threats of violence, and feel no sympathy or empathy for their fellow persecuted and dispersed around the globe.

Bloom, by contrast, appears as a redeemer for the Irish, though like all saviours and Messiahs is met with incomprehension, contempt, and violence. In the later Eumaeus episode, at the cabman's shelter, Stephen Dedalus refers to Bloom as *Christus* (745) (also 821). Bloom tells Stephen he resents 'violence or intolerance in any shape or form', and that it's a 'patent absurdity on the face of it to hate people because they live round the corner and speak another vernacular, so to speak' (745). Stephen, we know, has rejected his own father and all the patriarchal fathers of Ireland (718), actual and literary, meeting Bloom by day's end as his possible symbolic parent. By contrast to the exclusivist nationalism of the Irish patriarchs in the pub, insisting on a singleness and purity of

ethnicity and culture, Bloom figures Enlightenment values of reason, debate, and science, of cosmopolitanism and internationalism; such values underly his intense curiosity about the world and everything in it. In contrast to their masculine culture, Bloom embodies a feminine sympathy and empathy. He feels that the men of Dublin, always swilling beer in company, are afraid to be alone, and should spend more time at home laughing at themselves (496).

Bloom's clash in Barney Kiernan's pub with the nationalist Citizen and the good men of Dublin sharpens yet also disturbs Bloom's own sense of identity. In the next episode, Nausikaa, where a lonely Bloom masturbates while watching Gerty MacDowell, he forgives the Citizen in his own mind: 'Perhaps not to hurt he meant' (496). He feels that he is as good an Irishman as the 'rude' citizen (746), and he is pleased that as a Jew he was not passive, that he successfully answered the Citizen back (496). In arguing with the Citizen, Bloom had also identified the Jewish tradition he admires, that of emancipated Enlightenment Jewry, of Marx and Spinoza. Yet he knows that such an identification marks him off as a particular kind of modern Jew, a non-Jewish Jew, atheistic and sceptical. In the Eumaeus episode Bloom tells Stephen that 'in reality' he's not a Jew (745). In the hallucinatory scenes of Circe his dead father Rudolph appears to accuse Bloom of leaving the house and the god of his fathers (569).

Throughout *Ulysses* we learn of Bloom's vagaries, that he goes to the pork butcher for breakfast, that he likes bacon (350, 566, 836), that he has variously been baptised a Protestant and a Catholic (797-98), that he might be a Freemason, that he believes in various schemes of social reform (843), that he's androgynous, that he and Molly sleep head to toe, that he fetishises his wife's buttocks, that he hasn't fully made love to Molly since the death of their baby Rudy over a decade before (869), that he might be bringing Stephen home to 7 Eccles Street in the Ithaca episode as an offering to Molly in order to dislodge her liking for Blazes Boylan, that he's attracted to Molly because she is dark, Spanish, Moorish, just as she is attracted to him as dark, a foreigner, and womanly (932), that he might be incestuously attracted to his daughter Milly (perhaps another reason why he masturbates while observing Gerty MacDowell), and that he has intense masochistic and inversionary fantasies, as we see in the brothel scene involving Bella Cohen the madam.

Identities in *Ulysses* are overall notoriously fluid, uncertain, unstable, changing, dissolving, elusive, opaque, decentred, fantastical, parodied, self-parodying. In the funeral scenes of the Hades episode Bloom at one point thinks: 'If we were all suddenly somebody else' (139). In Ithaca we can ponder the following:

What, reduced to their simplest reciprocal form, were Bloom's thoughts about Stephen's thoughts about Bloom and Bloom's thoughts about Stephen's thoughts about Bloom's thoughts about Stephen?

He thought that he thought he was a Jew whereas as he knew that he knew that he knew that he was not. (797)

Further, Bloom in *Ulysses* is referred to not only as Odyssean wanderer, as a figure from European literature of antiquity, but also as similar to figures in popular Arabian literature, to Haroun al Raschid and Sinbad the Sailor of *The Arabian Nights* (59, 685, 871).

In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus and his protector the goddess Pallas Athene create a world of disguise, transformation, and metamorphosis, so that identity in the ancient Mediterranean world is also fluid and uncertain, is rarely what it seems, is always masking and

concealing so that protagonists continuously doubt what they see. Yet there are key differences between Bloom and Odysseus. Odysseus is often described as clever, wily, resourceful, a trickster; but he is also frequently evoked in repetitive recognition phrases as a sacker of cities. Indeed, Odysseus refers himself to raiding and plundering with his comrades, slaughtering the enemy men, and capturing animals and women for slavery; at the same time, he will frequently lament for the men of his party he has lost in such raids. Odysseus, too, clearly demarcates those he considers fellow Greeks, and those he considers barbarians and savages. Bloom neither shares such ethnic exclusivism nor Odysseus's desire for revenge, as in the hideous violence Odysseus and Telemachus inflict on the suitors at the end of the tale.

What of identity in *Riders in the Chariot*? How Odyssean, how Bloomean, is Mordecai Himmelfarb, he who passively submits to a crucifixion in Harry Rosetree's suburban bicycle lamp factory? Himmelfarb is assaulted by a group of drunken factory hands who had been celebrating a lottery win; they're egged eagerly on by the women who work there as well, but the crucifixion party's leader, Blue, is being controlled by his mother, Mrs Flack, and her friend Mrs Jolley, and Mrs Jolley, we recall, had, as housekeeper for the ageing Miss Hare, tried to destroy Xanadu's resident visionary. Miss Hare is a friend of Himmelfarb, as is the earth mother, the Gea Tellus, Mrs Godbold, and Alf Dubbo, the Aboriginal artist who recognises and paints this elite of soul and spirit in their chariot of ascension.

The elite, led by Himmelfarb, share a communion of silence, since words are the instrument of repressive reason; they strive for a unity with nature, and each enjoys a secret core, an essence, of true being. In the novel's binary structuring, characters like Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack belong, on the other hand, to an external, practical, utilitarian world of superficial instrumental reason, a world that also includes Harry Rosetree, who'd warned Himmelfarb not to turn up that day. The day before, also in a moment of negative epiphany – and hysterical anti-urbanism – Himmelfarb had crossed Sydney Harbour by train and entered the house of Harry and Shirl Rosetree, Jews disguising themselves, and bringing their children up, as Catholics. In the factory Himmelfarb had already addressed Harry Rosetree as Rosenbaum; Rosetree felt disturbed by Himmelfarb's 'archetypal face' (377), reminding the factory owner of Jewish religious tradition and history, of the 'wisdom of Torah and the teaching of the Talmud' (377). Now, in the Rosetrees' suburban home, where they try to assimilate to a life of 'ruthless materialism', of 'plastic ladies' and watering the lawn, of brick homes and washing-machines, the archetypal Jew Himmelfarb suddenly appears (402-3). As it turns out, Rosetree, torn between his superficial social identity and his lost authentic Jewish identity, hangs himself.

Reading *Riders in the Chariot* this time, it struck me as a rather odious text. In the comparison, it emerges as a kind of essentialising riposte to *Ulysses*. Unlike *Ulysses*, where narration is multiple and mysterious, *Riders* offers the perspectives of a single narrator, a kind of all-seeing superior modernist whose knowledge of every character is exhaustive and complete, and whose language is one of endless judgement; if the narrator doesn't like a character, those who fall on the wrong side of the binary divide, he will pursue them until revenge is enacted, unable in particular to resist physical disparagement: A.D. Hope's notorious judgement on White's writing as sludge has, I feel, considerable continuing merit. The narrator throughout bludgeons and harasses. *Riders* is also a riposte to *Ulysses* in terms of identity, for where Joyce's novel teases and revels in identities as multiple, plural, uncertain, slippery and opaque, *Riders* creates identity as unitary and finalised. Himmelfarb, having chosen not to go the way of Enlightenment

Jewry – the intellect, he pronounces, has failed – emerges as unified in his being, authentic, coherent, and certain of Jewish identity as religious, mystical, and traditional, organised around ‘certain inherited truths’ (387), truths that are originary and should be telos for all Jews. In *Riders* Jewish tradition is innocently idealised, in a fundamentalist way; there is no hint of other histories, of intellectual repression, as in Bloom’s reference in *Ulysses* to Spinoza, who had been excommunicated by the official Dutch Jewish community in the mid-seventeenth century. Himmelfarb submits passively to the crucifixion in the factory, but he violently refuses to Harry Rosetree the dignity of choice, that Rosetree or anyone else’s identity could be multi-layered, could be palimpsestial. In the world of *Riders*, Leopold Bloom, like Harry Rosetree, refusing Jewish religious tradition, would also presumably have to suicide for the narrator’s revengeful pleasure.

*Riders* throughout is organised in a monologic way on a structuralist notion of surface and depth, phenomenon and noumenon, appearance and essence, surface and core, inauthenticity and truth, and blessed are those who enjoy the one and not the other. Yet there is, in the final narrative segment of *Riders in the Chariot*, not just a permanent opposition of two kinds of being, clearly inferior and superior. There is also a kind of utopianism, an optimism about Australian society as capable of change, where Himmelfarb has indeed proved a saviour, Messiah, and redeemer, for gentiles as well as Jews, a Jew-Christ. In this utopia, Mrs Godbold’s earth-mother loving kindness lives on in her daughter Elsie and Elsie’s husband Bob Tanner. New ideal Australians are emerging, with Elsie as another golden mother, and Bob, an ordinary young Australian male, infused with a female spirit of loving kindness, the loving kindness that is insistently associated with women in the novel, from Himmelfarb’s mother to Reha his wife (seen as similar to his mother) to Miss Hare to Mrs Godbold and now her daughter. In *Riders*, unlike in many American Jewish novels, the Jewish mother is, rather astonishingly, innocently idealised.

Yet, what a philistine utopia this promises to be. It will be anti-intellectual, since Enlightenment values of reason have apparently failed absolutely. People can have only one, single-centred identity. And those touched with light can, like Miss Hare and the other illuminates, strive for a oneness with the antipodean natural world, a unity of whites with Aboriginal nature fortunately sanctioned by the Aboriginal artist Alf Dubbo: a utopia grounded indeed in a white mythology.

In conclusion, it has always struck me as curious that White’s writing has been so admired for so long by critics in Australia. Textuality like that of *Riders in the Chariot* is embraced by the literary intelligentsia and given centrality in the institution of literary criticism. Yet *Riders*, with its insistent romantic refusal of the Enlightenment, denies the value of intellectual life, of reason, of the life of the mind, of those values which make intellectual life possible.

And, in this regard, *Riders in the Chariot* is almost entirely characteristic of White’s writing. Only *The Twyborn Affair*, I feel, seems to be different. Criticism in Australia tends to construct literary history as a narrative of progress, with White as a pinnacle. But I cannot see White as a hero of Australian literary development. In terms of essentialising conceptions of ethnicity and identity, I cannot see any vast difference between White’s writing and A.G. Stephens in the Nineties, and beyond Stephens, Matthew Arnold and a host of English and European critics in the nineteenth century guided in their writing by a delusive obsession with relating culture to presumed ethnic essences. In terms of multicultural and ‘post colonial’ perspectives, and poststructuralist and postmodernist interest in fluidity, fragmentation, and contradictoriness, I think literary criticism in Australia should subject White’s writings to sharp critique, not continuous celebration.

Except perhaps for *The Twyborn Affair*, I see White's texts as revealing a brutal binary aesthetic, and I can't see it as a matter of surprise that criticism in Britain and North America has apparently lost interest in a figure who increasingly looks embedded in a complacent romanticism.

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