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# ABSTRACT

Jeremy D.R. Hall: The Religious Quest of Patrick White

A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts, 1989

In this study I explore the emergence in Patrick White of a myth which embodies the primal concerns of human beings, as opposed to the artificial, merely habitual or conventional. I argue that in this process he returns us to religious imperatives.

I show how Australia is the setting for this myth and is charged with a special imaginative importance. White's quest is seen as an attempt to make new or revivify perceptions in an environment uncongenial to over-domestication and which relativizes artificial attempts at order and system.

This leads me to examine White's treatment of art and iconoclasm; and I look at the theme of sacrifice in his work, as that which strips away in order to reconstitute afresh.

I devote a chapter to the 'crucifixion' scene in White's novel Riders in the Chariot, trying to point to a redemptive stability underlying White's work and suggested by this novel.

In conclusion, I briefly place White's work within the context of a post-modern world.

# THE RELIGIOUS QUEST OF PATRICK WHITE

by

Jeremy David Rumney Hall

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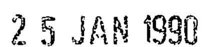
A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts

University of Durham
Department of Theology

1989



## CONTENTS


| | | Page |
|---|---|---|
| Introduction | | 1 |
| Chapter 1 | The Same Direction in a Different Way | 11 |
| | A Divided Inheritance | 15 |
| | A Religious Writer? | 21 |
| | Style | 26 |
| | Tradition | 29 |
| | Australia as Myth | 31 |
| Chapter 2 | Into the Wilderness | 38 |
| | Physical Necessity | 39 |
| | Freedom and Limits | 46 |
| | Exploring the Country of the Mind | 57 |
| Chapter 3 | The Eye of the Artist | 64 |
| | Looking and Seeing | 64 |
| | Judgement | 68 |
| | The Recovery of Immediacy | 72 |
| | Strangers and Pilgrims | 73 |
| | Art as Necessity | 75 |
| | The Journey of Art | 76 |
| | Judgement and Acceptance | 78 |
| | Antinomy | 79 |
| | Art and Truth | 80 |
| | Art and Sacrifice | 82 |
| Chapter 4 | Sacrifice | 91 |
| | The Search for 'Pureness of Being' | 93 |
| | Establishing Moral Integrity | 94 |
| | Love in 'homeopathic doses' | 98 |
| | The General and the Particular | 101 |
| | The Threat of Idolatry | 101 |
| | 'For the foolishness of God ...' | 104 |
| | The Old Testament | 105 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Victims and Scapegoats | 107 |
| | Voss | 109 |
| | Fear and Trembling | 111 |
| | The Cross | 116 |
| | The Crucified God | 117 |
| Chapter 5 | Crucifixion at Barranugli | 123 |
| | Reclaiming the Cross | 123 |
| | Surface and Deep Structure | 126 |
| | Irony and Parody | 129 |
| | Theodore Ziolkowski: Structural Analysis | 135 |
| | The Text | 137 |
| | Retrospect | 159 |
| Conclusion | | 165 |
| Bibliography | | |

All the page references to Patrick White's works are from the Penguin editions, except where otherwise stated.

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I confirm that no part of the material offered has previously been submitted by me for a degree in this or in any other University.

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# PREFACE

I am grateful for the help which I have received in preparing this study from the Durham and Cambridge University Libraries and Senate House, University of London. I am indebted to Durham Theology Department for its award of the De Bury Scholarship, and to the Mercers' Company Educational Trust and the Richard Newitt Fund for their generous support.

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Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my parents for their unfailing support.

## INTRODUCTION

## A REBIRTH OF IMAGES

'Habit supersedes thought, or extracts the sting from it.' (p.406, The Tree of Man)

I borrow the phrase 'a rebirth of images' from Austin Farrer's study of the Book of Revelation, A Rebirth of Images (1949). [1] For Farrer, there are two kinds of image: those which may be extrapolated, interpreted in terms of other images; and those which are primal and irreducible, can only be spoken of in terms of themselves, cannot be hermeneutically reduced. A similar notion is conveyed in White's fiction. He suggests that there are certain irreducible images and experiences which are primal, rediscovered in primal experiences, and under the necessity of which values are reassessed. In, for example, the novels Voss and A Fringe of Leaves, characters are introduced into situations the immediacy of which, and the images thereby produced, they cannot escape. Voss's final 'passion' experience in the desert is an experience such as this. The Cross is an irreducible image, there being ultimately no hermeneutic possibility beyond it. [2] Other irreducible images important in White's fiction are sacrifice, the final artistic moment when art is most truly itself, and the flood and fire of purgation. Such experiences are contrasted in Voss with images connected with the social scene of Sydney, which are ultimately dispensable, because contingent, symbolic of something else -

wealth, social status. To quote Farrer, 'The human imagination has always been controlled by certain basic images, in which man's own nature, his relation to his fellows, and his dependence on the divine power, find expression. The individual did not make them for himself. He absorbs them from the society in which he is born, partly through the suggestion of outward acts and the significance of words, partly, it would seem, by some more hidden means of appropriation'. [3] Farrer further states that when these images are externalized, taken for the reality of the divine, they become idolatry; and that the rejection of such idolatry means the liberation of the images. [4] White seeks precisely to liberate our primary images, by renegotiating them in unfamiliar contexts.

In Patrick White's fiction, Australia is the environment in which the basic issues touching man's existence are brought into sharp relief. Australia is the 'defamiliarizing' environment in which it may be possible to free images from the idolatrous accretions which have domesticated them and have had such a deadening effect. The term 'defamiliarize', which I adopt, is a technical term of Russian Formalism, now common in literary theory and criticism. Terence Hawkes writes of the Russian Formalist critic Victor Shklovsky,

> ... the essential function of poetic art is to counteract the process of habituation encouraged by the routine everyday modes of perception. We very quickly cease to 'see' the world we live in, and become anaesthetized to its distinctive features. The aim of poetry is to reverse that process, to 'defamiliarize' that with which we are overly familiar, to 'creatively deform' [5] the usual, the normal, and so inculcate a new,

> childlike, non-jaded vision in us ... The poet aims to disrupt 'stock responses' and to generate a heightened awareness: to restructure our ordinary perceptions of 'reality', so that we end up seeing the world instead of numbly recognizing it.[6]

If we do not appropriate our primary images and explore our traditions on a proper basis, we become self-made and fall into the kind of collective amnesia which White finds pervasive in Australian society. Carolyn Bliss states that White is condemning the failure '... of a modern, commercial culture to offer anything but its own refuse to fill the void at its centre'.[7] The virgin land of Australia, at once resistant to such domestication and rich with possibilities, is shown to call into question the established assumptions of the culture which attempts to mould it. As David Tacey, writing of White's fiction, states, in Australia 'The past cannot be relied upon to provide order and meaning, and so individuals have to undertake hazardous and epic journeys into the unconscious, to ground the culture in new depths and in new psychological soil'.[8] White's fiction reflects a young, unstable society which has yet to develop a right relation to its roots. He constantly shows how the new society is spurious and inauthentic and has yet to forge a creative link with the spirit of place.

What White tries repeatedly to show, is the way in which important insights are lost or distorted when they become encrusted with the lime of custom and familiarity, as they have been in the European traditions transposed to Australian soil.

He uses the image of the land of Australia to show how these insights may be realized anew when we are forced to a recognition of the bare facts of our existence, our vulnerability and creaturehood; and it is then that images may be reborn. As White shows, the Australian desert landscape is destructive to the over-civilized, British consciousness which arrived there (as opposed to the 'convict mentality' in Australia, now often studied). Religion ought to facilitate the connection between a people and a spirit of place, but in white Australian society the imported religion has not been able to develop this connection, precisely because the second-hand institutions have been transposed at the expense of the first-hand existential experiences, which, in any case, are not amenable to social containment. Those of us who are inheritors of established cultures and religions do well to be reminded in this way of the disturbing effects when human institutions and artifice are transposed to alien environments.

White's concerns are akin to the task of modern hermeneutics as described by Paul Ricoeur when he writes that '... modern hermeneutics entertains the project of a revivification of philosophy through contact with the fundamental symbols of consciousness'. [9] Perhaps, like Ricoeur, White calls for a 'second naïveté' in which immediacy and vision are recovered.

The concern to banish false securities, leads White, I argue, to a 'religious' approach to life. Because man is part of the whole structure of existence, subject to physical necessity and not 'master of his destiny', the powerful

religious perspective which is reborn in his work is a paradoxical, tragic and positive one. It is, then, a tragic vision very much at home in the Christian tradition, with its paradox of the suffering God. If one can rightly attribute to White a 'theology', it is a 'via negativa'. There is the repeated emphasis that only as we are brought to awareness of our human limits, when our perceptions are destabilized, may we see with new eyes and grow in vision. Thus, those who cling to civilized securities, who content themselves with the average or conventional, are presented in White's work in the most uncongenial ways.

As my study has progressed, it has become increasingly evident that the same themes arise repeatedly in different ways. They can be stated briefly as follows:
(i) Man's finitude and the contingent nature of his social and cultural environment; (ii) that growth in vision requires the sacrifice of the images which we necessarily project to make sense of our condition; these are always only contingent and partially true; (iii) that those who sense such instability and do not settle 'prima facie' for established assumptions, suffer as the 'fool' at the hands of their society; but it is the 'fool' in White's fiction who is often the bearer of truth; (iv) that images may be reborn, vision gained, as grace, at points of greatest need, when images are destroyed.

My strategy has been to focus on a series of motifs in the fiction and to try to show how the above themes are reflected in and through them. Thus, there is a good deal of overlap in

the content of the chapters, and they are more like a series of concentric circles than episodes in a narrative.

I begin in Chapter 1 by reflecting on White's own background as one who has been exposed to a variety of influences, has suffered a sense of dislocation and has dedicated himself to Australia and a writing career. It is clear that the peculiar nature of Australia, and himself in it as a part-European, is very much a part of his imagination and it enters his fiction repeatedly as a kind of image of dislocation. In his novels, we always sense that it is those who suffer such dislocation who hold the key to the rebirth of images. I consider White's religious position, which emerges as deeply-held but refuses ever to assume the form of a particular religious denomination. I consider White's very individual style, which seeks to test assumptions and reach out to the inexpressible, while intensely aware of the limits of the medium being used. I examine a number of influences on White and conclude that, if he stands within a tradition he also frustrates that tradition and strikes out on his own. Finally, I begin to explore the 'mythic' significance of Australia in White's fiction.

In Chapter 2, I focus on White's great motif of Australia, 'both as a geographical and social fact and as a state of mind'. [10] I reflect on his insistence on the givenness of the landscape as an uncompromising reminder of the physical necessity of which we are inescapably a part and which imposes itself upon us. Man's freedom is found and properly located when he recognizes his limits. It is shown to be necessary to

leave easy securities behind - 'discard the inessential and attempt the infinite' (Voss, p.35) - and explore the country of the mind, venturing out into the wilderness. In some of White's novels, as in a palimpsest, the land of Australia, with its unexplored terrain and dangerous beauty, is placed over the situation of man's spiritual quest. White is effectively breaking down conventional notions of the self in order to locate essential values elsewhere. Indeed, a constant theme is that the 'ordinary' may appear as demonic, since it represents a failure to explore one's situation. In this chapter, too, I give some consideration to the thought of Simone Weil and try to show how it may throw light on that of White.

In Chapter 3, I explore the role of the artist in the re-birth of images. For White, the artist has an essential role in the process I have been describing - he is iconoclastic, through his art breaking down, 'vivisecting' or judging established assumptions, subjecting people and situations to the demands of his art so that they are exposed in disturbing ways. The artist is one of White's 'fools' who sees with the naive realism of Wordsworth's child, which uncovers artifice and lays bare realities in an uncompromising way. Further, the vocation of the artist himself is seen in terms of quest. His capacities and artistic medium are never equal to the task he has before him, and he must continually destroy or sacrifice his own images in the pursuit of 'that razor-edge truth'.[11] So in White's novel devoted to the career of an artist, The

Vivisector, at the end the artist Hurtle Duffield, at his moment of greatest vision, is prevented from making his painting perfect by a stroke.

This leads me to Chapter 4 and closer consideration of the biblical theme of sacrifice. The necessity of the artist constantly to destroy images, which are always both true and false, in order to be true to his art, is the necessity of all human beings. It is idolatry to invest images with a stability that they do not by right have. As Farrer says, when images are externalized, taken for the reality of the divine, they become idolatry; and a rejection of such idolatry points towards a liberation of the images. This places White in an Old Testament tradition, which stands very firmly against such idolatry. In the Old Testament, images may speak of God but are not He - 'See God and die' is the great assertion. Following from this, White has a strong Old Testament sense that, because man is finite, the only way to break out of false securities is by sacrifice - sacrificing stable images of the self - and the result may be to revivify the situations in which we find ourselves to help us to respond to the challenges which face us. One example is in the novel Voss, in which an egotistic explorer intent on conquering his physical limits, is forced to acceptance of these limits and so gains a new and altered access to his experience.

Chapter 5 concentrates on the Crucifixion scene in Riders in the Chariot and focuses on White's use of parody and irony to embody a community of readers aware of the pressure of

redemptive suffering on the shallow and idolatrous securities of societies. I explore the effects of transposing an image or series of images, like the events of Calvary, associated with a particular historical context, into a new and unexpected context. The result, I suggest, is that the associations which the image arouses expand the implications of the literature in question and produce in commonplace events a more universal significance.

In conclusion, I try briefly to place White within the context of a post-modern world. I suggest that his perception of the inadequacy of our faculties of cognition, the elusiveness of meaning and truth, the dangers of institution and ideology, the necessity of for ever questioning categories, are also the concerns of the great post-modern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida.

## Notes

1. Austin Farrer, A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St. John's Apocalypse (London: Dacre Press, 1949)

2. See Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973)

3. Farrer, op. cit. p.13

4. Farrer, op. cit. p.14

5. 'Creatively deform': Not only is this often White's strategy, but it is the strategy used by the artists in his fiction (e.g. Hurtle Duffield in The Vivisector).

6. Terence Hawkes, Structuralism and Semiotics (London: Methuen, 1977), p.62

7. Carolyn Bliss, Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure (London: Macmillan, 1986), p.6

8. David Tacey, Patrick White: Fiction and the Unconscious (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.xv

9. Paul Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p.351

10. Veronica Brady, A Crucible of Prophets: Australians and the Question of God (Australian and New Zealand Studies in Theology and Religion, 1981), p.70

11. Patrick White, Flaws in the Glass (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p.155

# CHAPTER 1

## THE SAME DIRECTION IN A DIFFERENT WAY

Patrick White was born in England in 1912. He belongs to an old Australian family, his great-grandfather having emigrated from England in 1826, although his family continued to maintain links with the old country. And so, apart from the first six months of his life, his early impressionable years were spent in Australia, and it was not until he was thirteen, when he was sent to school at Cheltenham College, that he was introduced to England. He writes in his autobiography of his unhappy schooldays and his longing to return to Australia. He describes the circumstances of his life at school as a 'vacuum' and writes of his need for 'a world in which to live with the degree of intensity my temperament demanded'. [1] During school holidays, he spent time in France. After leaving school, he returned to Australia as a 'jackaroo' on sheep-stations, and his first attempts at writing a novel took place at this time. [2] In 1932 he left Australia again in order to read French and German at King's College, Cambridge. He continued to enjoy writing, and during the long vacations explored Germany.

One can see, then, an imagination being fed by a variety of cultures - Australian and West European - and during his time at Cambridge he obviously encountered a rich variety of literatures. In his article, 'The Prodigal Son' (1958), written in defence of his later decision to return to and settle in Australia, he writes of his need to break free of the

constraints which he felt his upbringing and formal education at Cheltenham and Cambridge had imposed on him:

> Brought up to believe in the maxim: Only the British could be right, I did accept this during the earlier part of my life. Ironed out at an English public school, and finished off at King's College, Cambridge, it was not until 1939, after wandering by myself through most of Western Europe, and finally most of the United States, that I began to grow up and think my own thoughts. The War did the rest.[3]

After Cambridge and for the next three years, he lived among artists and theatre people in Pimlico in London. Particularly influential during this period was the Australian painter Roy de Maistre, who, White says, became his 'intellectual and artistic mentor' :

> He taught me how to look at paintings, to listen to music. He persuaded me to walk in the present instead of lying curled and stationary in that over-upholstered cocoon of the past, refuge of so many Australians then and now.[4]

White continued to write poems, plays and novels, and some of the poems, which he would now rather repress, appeared before the English public. The fourth of his novels, and the first to be published, was <u>Happy Valley</u> (1939). His next novel, <u>The Living and the Dead</u>, was published in 1941. By this time, however, the War had intervened and for the next four years he served in the Royal Air Force, mostly as an intelligence officer in the Middle East and the Western Desert, culminating in a year in Greece. These years, he tells us, had a profound imaginative effect on him; the experience of the Middle East

and Greece certainly enters his fiction, especially the short stories, and he found in Greece 'not only the perfection of antiquity but that of nature, and the warmth of human relationships expressed in daily living'. [5] Throughout the war years he was haunted by memories of the Australian landscape - 'a longing to return to the scenes of childhood, which is, after all, the purest well from which the creative artist draws'. [6] London, when he was demobbed there, seemed to him 'an actual and spiritual graveyard', [7] and he realized that he would have to escape if he were to survive as a writer. Before leaving England, he wrote two plays, and he also began a novel, The Aunt's Story (1948). The Aunt's Story is set between Australia, Europe and the United States, as though he were trying to work out his own future in the image of the destructive past he had just witnessed. In 'The Prodigal Son', he discusses the significance of his return to Australia after the War, and sees it as part of his search for something of abiding value, in the wake of his wartime experiences and his sense of the sterility of post-War Europe. The Aunt's Story seems to dramatize this search. Its heroine, Theodora Goodman, is a 'Ulysses' figure seeking to return to the land of vision she knew as a child.

White returned to Australia in 1948 and has lived there since. He gave up writing for a while but found that nothing else granted meaning to his life. First, he settled at Castle Hill, outside Sydney, a rural countryside threatened by the growth of the neighbouring suburb, a setting which probably had

a great influence on The Tree of Man. In 1964 he moved to Centennial Park, an inner suburb of Sydney, and one can see this kind of setting very clearly in The Solid Mandala, The Vivisector and The Eye of the Storm.

The Tree of Man (1956) is in many ways a 'mythic' attempt to understand the experience of Australia - a hard land and an empty people [8] - and trace its possibilities. He writes,

> In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes, in which human teeth fall like autumn leaves, the buttocks of cars grow hourly glassier, food means cake and steak, muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves.
>
> It was the exaltation of the 'average' that made me panic most, and in this frame of mind, I began to conceive another novel. Because the void I had to fill was so immense, I wanted to try to suggest in this book every possible aspect of life, through the lives of an ordinary man and woman. But at the same time I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people, and incidentally, my own life since my return. [9]

A succession of prodigious novels followed: Voss (1957), Riders in the Chariot (1961), The Solid Mandala (1966), The Vivisector (1970), The Eye of the Storm (1973), A Fringe of Leaves (1976), The Twyborn Affair (1979) and Memoirs of Many in One (1986). He has also published three collections of short stories, The Burnt Ones (1964), The Cockatoos (1974) and Three Uneasy Pieces

(1988); and Four Plays. In 1986 he published an autobiography, Flaws in the Glass.

## A Divided Inheritance

The sense of the dislocating environment of Australia, both European and non-European - struggling with its identity as a nation - is White's from birth. All Australians are part of a unique environment and tradition and also a common European heritage of civilization. The constant to-ing and fro-ing, Australia to Europe, which characterized his early life, plainly much affected him. In an article entitled 'Religion and Imagination', John Coulson quotes Henry James, 'that the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, that it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature, that it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion'. [10] It is such a complex social machinery which has set White in motion - a sense of disorientation, of struggling with conflicting social and cultural currents during his early life in Australia, Europe, the United states and the Middle East. It is often when the contradictions of one's situation assume the greatest force that we may see the truth beneath appearances and inspiration is strongest - on a 'knife-edge', as it were - and it is at these points, too, as White shows throughout his work, that 'truth' may genuinely illuminate one's condition. So it is with the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose great 'Terrible Sonnets' are written when the inner conflict between his religious commitment and his poetry is at its fiercest.

It is this kind of sense which forced in White, after the War, personal decisions as to what was to count as valuable in his life, and accentuated his search for identity. His return to Australia in 1948 is so significant because it represents a commitment to Australia and all its ambiguity. 'The Prodigal Son' suggests that he feels the pull of the cultures of Europe and Greece; but he determines to live in Australia, in many ways as an alien, and it is the environment he believes to be most productive for him artistically. Peter Beatson suggests that the process of deciding to return to Australia and establish an organic bond with the country, resulted in 'the latent religious content of the early works' (Happy Valley up to and including The Aunt's Story) coming to the surface, and infusing into The Tree of Man and the succeeding novels a spiritual certainty that was lacking before. 'The return to Australia and the intensification of the religious factor greatly decrease the sense of existential uncertainty, and give new confidence in the strength of the core of being.' [11] His life witnesses to the hope of renewal, the rebirth of images, which belongs to those people whose sense of their destiny instills in them a sense of alienation, a sense of being destabilized by the flux of existence. This is the message which echoes throughout his fiction. It is those who protect themselves from such disorientation and who exalt the average, who fail to achieve vision. This is why the mediocre can, in White's work, appear as nothing less than demonic. He cannot accept the thin soil in which European-Australian roots seem so

often to have been sunk.

The image of a divided inheritance can be seen throughout White's fiction - a metaphor of dislocation. In his novels, White tends to set up a network of relationships between Australia, Europe, Greece, and we repeatedly see characters alienated from their country or home. Many of his characters have experienced exile as part of their inheritance, for example, as children of an English misalliance. Life is seen as a never-ending search for identity - for example, the 'Ulysses' figure Theodora Goodman in The Aunt's Story and the transvestite Eddie/Eadith Twyborn in The Twyborn Affair. It is because such people have been destabilized by their situation that they may achieve their vision. As Beatson writes of such dividedness,

> In such a dilemma, the soul cannot sink into a cosy stereotype. Beneath surface conformity there lies a psychic confusion which lays the soul open to the analytical eye, whose knife may operate more bluntly on the pure conformist. The conflict in the mind of the declassé aristocrat, the new-rich merchant, the immigrant or the apostate reveals the fundamental principles of personality better than does the assurance of their less troubled neighbours.[12]

Such people, moreover, highlight the emotional and spiritual malaise which may underlie the façade of convention and normality. What White favours is a coming to terms with one's situation, and all one's dividedness, being rooted in one's situation, not fleeing from it. Where one loses sight of one's roots, as people are constantly shown to be doing in White,

usually in the interests of shallow social assimilation, the results are always sinister. This is one reason why, for example, White has such a respect for aboriginal culture, because of its rootedness. Thus White's work is full of unavoidable tensions, between the old country and the new, between civilization and primitivism, between the mystical and the practical, and it is within these tensions that man is seen to approach his true freedom.

The American fiction-writer Flannery O'Connor, in describing the direction she believes great novelists will now take, writes in her occasional prose, Mystery and Manners (1972), as follows:

> ... the kind of novels that interest the novelist ... are those that put the greatest demands on him, that require him to operate at the maximum of his intelligence and his talents, and to be true to the particularities of his vocation. The direction of many of us will be more toward poetry than toward the traditional novel ... he <the novelist> will have to descend far enough into himself to reach those underground springs that give life to his work. This descent into himself will, at the same time, be a descent into his region. It will be a descent through the darkness of the familiar into a world where, like the blind man cured in the gospels, he sees men as if they were trees, but walking. This is the beginning of vision.[13]

This passage provides a useful framework for our discussion of White. White shows us that vision may be gained when the familiar is transfigured. His heartsearching on returning to Australia in 1948 and his coming to terms with Australia,

represent just the 'descent into himself' which Flannery O'Connor suggests. Certainly, White has opted for the kind of novels which 'put the greatest demands on him' (above quotation) - massive, questing novels, reaching out to the particularities of the very ordinary circumstances of his characters' development. It is because he is constantly trying to express the extraordinary in the ordinary, to 'defamiliarize', destroy our perceptions in order to rebuild them, that he has evolved a massive, poetic style. It is a process which involves the constant attempt of the artist to realize the particularity of his own situation, make new his own perceptions - 'a descent into his region', 'through the darkness of the familiar'. To move to a fascinating quotation from White himself, he tells us that in order for his art to flourish he, and the creative thinker in general, must constantly try to reach the disturbing particularity of his situation, an attempt which can never be entirely successful. This may mean the destruction of the civilized securities which clutter one's life:

> Possibly all art flowers more readily in silence. Certainly the state of simplicity and humility is the only desirable one for artist or for man. While to reach it may be impossible, to attempt to do so is imperative. Stripped of almost everything that I had considered desirable and necessary, I began to try. Writing, which had meant the practice of an art by a polished mind in civilized surroundings, became a struggle to create completely fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words. I began to see things for the first time. Even the boredom and frustration presented avenues for endless exploration; even the ugliness, the bags and iron of Australian life, acquired a meaning.[14]

This passage tells us a great deal about White's sense of the artist's vocation. It shows him coming to terms with his early life, dedicating himself to a writing career, and what this means for him. I will briefly discuss some of the issues reflected in the above quotation which will be the concern of the rest of this study. Once again, our senses, dulled by familiarity, are revivified in the attempt to achieve 'silence', 'simplicity'. It is when this 'struggle' is attempted and we throw off settled assumptions, that we may begin to 'see things for the first time'. A novel like The Aunt's Story shows us that the spiritual quest may seem to involve abandoning 'the excess baggage of selfhood', [15] but this is no form of escapism, nor is the process negative in direction - the whole self will have to be reclaimed, no matter how grotesque and shameful. It is a matter of embracing the particularity of one's situation by losing one's settled assumptions - finding one's life by losing it. It is like Stan Parker in The Tree of Man, vomiting up the God he had received as a child, but later, as his situation is transfigured, swallowing Him down again with fresh awareness. Or as Laura Trevelyan says, in Voss, '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 onwards, without one's understanding, except in theory, until suddenly, almost in spite of reason, they are made clear ...' (p.386).

I want to focus in the remainder of this chapter more particularly on four aspects of White's work; (i) in what sense are we right to see him as a 'religious' writer?; (ii) the role and importance of his distinctive style; (iii) the question of literary influences, and how far he belongs to a genre or tradition; and (iv) the 'mythic' significance of Australia.

### A Religious Writer?

From the foregoing discussion, various factors have been emerging. White remarks:

> I belong to no church, but I have a religious faith; it's an attempt to express that, among other things, that I try to do ... In my books I have lifted bits from various religions ... Now, as the world becomes more pagan, one has to lead people in the same direction in a different way...[16]

This is rather similar to W.B. Yeats' contention that traditional myths and symbols cannot simply be repeated, since merely to 'enumerate old themes' is to discover that they are but 'circus animals', whose desertion is inevitable.[17] Eclecticism is characteristic of many of the modernist poets, and White shares this with the modernists. Poets like Yeats, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound draw on a whole eclectic range of religious images, and there is a strong sense of fragmentation leading to reorientation. White's is essentially an exploratory metaphysic. At the end of The Tree of Man, an evangelist visits Stan Parker to try to convert him. The evangelist's faith is here criticized as held too easily, untried by hard experience.

The aged Stan Parker reflects, 'If you can understand, at your age, what I have been struggling with all my life, then it is a miracle' (p.475).

White is often scorchingly critical of institutionalized religion, where assumptions are settled and fixed. He comes of a kind of 'social Anglicanism', which he found re-enforced at his public school, and against which he reacts strongly. He brings the full force of his satire to expose forms of institutional religion:

> Now Maman, in her crusade against cruelty and her own shortcomings, became more determined in her churchgoing. She had a visiting-card in a slot at the end of the pew, her own personal card, because Father joined them only at Christmas and Easter. (The Vivisector, p.142)

In Riders in the Chariot, Mrs. Godbold sees formal religion as only a coat which people are told to put on at birth, a superficial covering over a deeper reality, something worn for a time and discarded at death: '"Only at the end, when everything is taken from them, it seems there was never any need ... That is how it strikes me, sir. Perhaps you will remember, on thinking it over, that is how Our Lord Himself wished us to see it"' (p.445). Yet he is extremely sensitive to what he sees as the need for people to recognize their 'unprofessed' religious factor, [18] and he brings a whole range of religious symbolism and ideas to bear on this mission. He feels no compulsion to reproduce religious imagery in a familiar or strictly 'orthodox' manner; rather, familiar images

often appear in unfamiliar contexts. The paradox is that in the process they re-assert themselves all the more powerfully.

White recognizes that it is in human tragedy, as perceived in images of sacrifice and the Cross, that the secularized imagination encounters, once again, the roots of religion. As Flannery O'Connor writes, 'The novelist ... writes about people in a world where something is obviously lacking, where there is the general mystery of incompleteness and the particular tragedy of our own times to be demonstrated'. [19]

In many respects, in his emphasis on the primal experiences of human beings, the sense of wrestling with a divine power which never becomes palpable, White's thought represents a return to the stuff of the Old Testament. He makes use of Old Testament myths - for example, the myth of Eden and the Flood, and especially the desert or wilderness symbolism - and a novel like _The Tree of Man_ begins in Eden, the Eden of Australia, and shows how this is spoiled by the encroaching values of suburbia. There is also the repeated imagery of a spiritual journey of purgation in the wilderness, which characters such as Stan Parker (_The Tree of Man_) and Voss (_Voss_) experience. As Veronica Brady reminds us, [20] the awareness of the sheer power of nature, of the range and multiplicity of existence, is characteristic of Australian literature in general. For example, a novel like Marcus Clarke's _For the Terms of His Natural Life_ (1874), echoes the psalms and the prophets of the Old Testament. White also is rather like a prophetic figure, goading the recalcitrant Israelites out of their complacencies.

Veronica Brady describes his work as 'a kind of wisdom literature'.[21] His work seeks to force decision; and in, for example, his use of irony, he presents the alternatives in a bold and striking way. The merely conventional or pragmatic become an impossible option. It is a kind of prophecy of wrath: we are asked to define ourselves in response to the threat of Godlessness and an urgency is recovered.

White continually uses and explores central images and motifs of the Christian tradition and uses them as a very central part of his imaginative explorations, sometimes finding them in very alien environments. At the end of Chapter 21 of The Tree of Man, there is a superb passage in which we see an institutionalized Christianity operating in the incongruous environment of a settlement recently claimed from the bush. The simple Stan Parker and his nouveau riche daughter Thelma attend early morning communion at the local church; the church 'smelling of cold wood'; the parson, who had 'scrubbed the face of religion' and 'wrestled with the evidence of indifference'. Thelma 'enjoyed the rich purples of religion. Then her soul responded in like purple. Or in discussions of personal faith with respectful clergymen, she sometimes rose to great heights, but failed to remain there, because there was no-body to hold her up, except God, and she quailed before a sustained intimacy on that scale'. There is condemnation here, as always in White, of a culturally superior approach to Christianity. (In A Fringe of Leaves, too, there is this sense of 'the Lord God of hosts' who is 'on the winning side', of a Christianity which is

comfortable and socially re-enforcing.) There is also a certain pity for those trying to maintain the externals of religion when the life has gone out of them. There are sympathetic descriptions of suppressed humanity in the church - people heaving in their hard seats, repressing wayward thoughts.

White writes in Flaws in the Glass, that 'Poetry resists academic pretension, just as the mystery of religious faith evaporates on contact with dogma' (p.193). In the episode in The Tree of Man, it is with Stan Parker that religious integrity seems to rest, for whom the images the occasion is throwing up seem to have been shattered:

> Standing there, he was in fact empty of all thought, which can be a state of failure, or else of dedication. I cannot pray, he said, not trying, as he knew the hopelessness of it. So he stood, or knelt, a prisoner in his own ribs. (p.413)
>
> ... Peace is desirable in itself, he said, and so in the absence of evidence that he would receive more, he accepted this with humility and gratitude. (p.416)

As J. Neville Ward writes in his book The Use of Praying (1967), prayer may involve failure, the sacrifice of the will - '... to pray may well be literally to sacrifice - to give up that part of one's desiring ego for which there cannot be found room in the Kingdom of God'. [22] As the congregation drifts out of the church, Stan Parker 'was considering, and fingering, he was contemplating his inadequacy, which can also be, in a sense, a prize'. (p.417)

This is a constant theme in White - that when one recognizes

the necessity of failure, and waits in the silence, bereft of consolation, significance may achieve a kind of rebirth. As Carolyn Bliss writes, 'Worship for White is the simultaneous awareness of insurmountable difference and ineffable oneness'. [23] White's description of his own embracing of religion is very interesting from this point of view:

> During what seemed like months of rain I was carrying a trayload of food to a wormy litter of pups down at the kennels, when I slipped and fell on my back, dog dishes shooting in all directions. I lay where I had fallen, half-blinded by rain, under a pale sky, cursing through watery lips a God in whom I did not believe. I began laughing finally, at my own helplessness and hopelessness, in the mud and the stench from my filthy oilskin. It was the turning point. My disbelief appeared as farcical as my fall. At that moment I was truly humbled. [24]

Where one tries to assert one's will in the pursuit of religious vision, one is doomed to failure; whereas the sense of failure and inadequacy may strike one as a grace. So where religious imagery is institutionalized into tidy systems, the result is to drain it of its power. White's response is to place the great religious images of tradition into altogether surprising contexts, and the result may be to break temporarily our state of self-enclosed torpor.

## Style

White's style of writing represents a reaching out to the ultimate mystery of life, pursuing the truth which lies in and beyond the obvious routines and encounters of everyday

existence. It is a questing style, seeking to achieve 'the textures of music, the sensuousness of paint'.[25] As I have suggested, his affinity is with those who have tried in one way or another to extend the frontiers of the novel in the direction of poetry. Virginia Woolf, in her essay 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', wrote that the future of the novel lay in a compromise between prose fiction and poetry - the taking on by fiction of 'something of the exaltation of poetry but much of the ordinariness of prose'.[26] The poet Ted Hughes has written of Voss, 'In this prose Patrick White is the most exciting poet Australia has yet produced'.[27] White himself, writing of Voss, states, 'Above all I was determined to prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism'.[28] White subverts the conventions of realism in order explore his vision, destroying the purely pragmatic and finding the strange in the ordinary. It is a constant attempt to show the merely conventional and fictive nature of the 'real world' as it is constructed by 'common-sense' ideology. Geoffrey Dutton points out that White's approach could not stray further from the demands of realistic fiction as laid down by Arnold Bennett in an introduction to The Old Wives' Tale:

> ... It is an absolute rule that the principal character of a novel must not be unsympathetic, and the whole modern tendency of realistic fiction is against oddness in a prominent figure. I knew that I must choose the sort of a woman who would pass unnoticed in a crowd.[29]

This could not be more different from White, with his Dickensian assortment of 'odd' characters - the crazed Mary Hare in Riders in the Chariot, or Theodora Goodman in The Aunt's Story, whose quest ends on the other side of sanity. It is White's rejection of the 'average', who take their situation for granted, who cluster, metaphorically, on the fringes of their continent, which is at stake here. White, with Flannery O'Connor, tries to '<make> alive some experience that we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life'. [30] In the final analysis, 'the realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality'. [31]

It is because White has such a multi-dimensional perception of reality, and such a horror of 'the average', that he employs such a biting satire. As the artist Paul Klee reminds us, 'Satire is not an excess of ill-humour, but ill-humour resulting from a vision of something higher. Ridiculous man - divine God. Hatred of anything stagnant out of respect for pure humanity'. [32] White's pressure on language shows a concern to destroy our present sense of what is humane or 'normal' as a result of a longing for 'something higher'. Once again, it is White's ability to surprise, 'defamiliarize', to destroy in order to make new.

It is important, finally, to note White's strong sense of the inadequacy of his enterprise - words may sometimes 'bite', but they do so when they are most tentative, and it is always 'a wrestling match with something higher, whose limbs never

become palpable'. [33]

Tradition

I begin with a quotation from Harold Bloom: 'Critics, in their secret hearts, love continuities, but he who lives with continuity alone cannot be a poet'. [34]

As I have said, White draws on an eclectic range of traditions and ideas, using them to his own ends. He describes his mind as being 'like a calico bag hanging from the sewing-room door-knob, stuffed with snippets of material of contrasting textures and clashing colours, which might at some future date be put to some practical, aesthetic or even poetic use'. [35] Obviously, most important is White's creation, rather than the individual sources of ideas which must be elusive. A number of critics point to interesting points of contact between White and other writers. During his formative years, he must have been influenced by French and German writers, as he read French and German and spent considerable time on the Continent. William Walsh, in common with most critics, connects him with the European tradition of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev and Lermentov, Dickens and Lawrence, and in the United States Cowper and Melville. [36] Carolyn Bliss states that the Russian works, particularly those of Dostoyevsky, 'showed him states of mind and modes of perception beyond the reach of strictly realistic treatment'. [37] It is pointed out that his first novels were produced in an atmosphere conditioned by the achievements of Joyce, Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, and that

they bear evidence of this. Geoffrey Dutton states that White has taken from Joyce and Lawrence 'the living ingredients from which, with enormous labour and a good deal of early incidental disaster, he has created his own mature style and method'. [38]

Most important, however, is that all art both stands within tradition and must constantly seek to destroy tradition - it is only in this way that perceptions are renewed. As Manley Johnson writes, 'White deliberately emulates his predecessors, as witness his epigraphs. But he goes beyond that safe limit of conscious imitation to accept the free contributions of the mind, always unique in its time and constitution, to the aesthetic process'. [39] Once again, the familiar must continually be reshaped in order that the particularity of one's subject matter is realized afresh. As Patricia Morley states, 'Art is anamnesis, a re-presenting before God of something from the past so that it is alive and effective again in the present'. [40] For example, White makes striking use of Old Testament allusions, but he uses them in an environment much affected by two thousand years' reflection on the revelation of the New Testament - as a result, a fresh effect is achieved; the Old Testament effectively 'defamiliarizes' the New Testament and may help to generate a deeper understanding of the Christian tradition. So, when the Cross-event is realized in an unexpected context such that our unexamined interpretations of it are relativized, the result is startling. To use Carolyn Bliss's words, 'White fails to write works which fit into pre-established genres. In his failure, he approaches

doing justice to his sense of being in the world'. [41] It is the paradox of continuity in discontinuity.

> What the precursors did has thrown the ephebe into the outward and downward motion of repetition, a repetition that the ephebe soon understands must be undone and dialectically affirmed, and these simultaneously. 42

## Australia as Myth

Theodore Roszak, in his book The Making of a Counterculture (1970), defines myth as a 'collectively creative thing which crystalises the essential values of a culture'. [43] In other words, as White is concerned to demonstrate, people tend to live at an empirical level of immediacy. A myth, on the other hand, revivifies the notion of our great central values - myth therefore represents that which is most profoundly true. In Flaws in the Glass, White speaks of Australians as 'a pragmatic nation' who 'tend to confuse reality with surfaces'. (p.130) In an interview, he says, 'I have the same idea with all my books; an attempt to come close to the core of reality, the structure of reality as opposed to the merely superficial'. [44] This contrast between reality and surfaces is rather like, in literary critical terms, the difference between surface and deep structure.

As Northrop Frye states, a myth is charged with a special seriousness or importance. The same mythic concerns emerge from age to age, taking on a different form. [45] However, White's point is that our great central values have been overlaid by

the superficiality of their practice. Australia becomes the environment for a myth which recovers these central values, a myth concerned with man's struggle for freedom and salvation, in the widest sense of those terms.

In his particular way, White re-enacts age-old dramas based on archetypal themes. Just as for James Joyce Ireland is the mythic setting of the new Ulysses, so for White Australia is the mythic setting for exploring the quest for permanence and true knowledge, revealing the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and poetry of daily life. For example, there is the recurring sense that in Australia there is, here and now, a paradise, or Eden, but that the paradisal has been lost through loss of contact with the primal myth and the creation of idolatries.

For example, The Tree of Man is a story about a man and woman who forge a place for themselves in the untamed bush, which slowly becomes an established settlement and finally moves into the culture of the twentieth century. It begins with a strong sense of 'the beginning', of Eden, and the language is generic, the sentence structure primitive. The narrative episodes serve as archetypal images of man's basic experiences in all ages. In The Tree of Man, White records the initial silence and lack of tradition at the root of a new commnity. Slowly he builds up the accretions of social change as the lives of the Parkers grow and intertwine. The significant point is that, though the silence is filled, there is no necessary sense of direction. So in The Tree of Man, Australia is the

setting for a myth establishing priorities. For example, the big city nearby is presented as a parody of true community.

There is no doubt that White is much concerned with the destiny of his own country; yet his treatment of Australia is part of a much wider concern with the nature and destiny of man. F.W. Dillistone points interestingly to White's concern with the destiny of Australia - the tree of man has been planted in Australia; how will it grow? [46] Discussing Riders in the Chariot, Dillistone shows the comprehensive way in which it embraces the problem of Australia's future. The four 'riders' represent, the established families of early settlers (Miss Hare); the various Anglo-Saxon immigrants who came to the new continent (Mrs. Godbold); the primitive races of the interior (Dubbo); and the new immigrants, often refugees, who, from many nations, have sought new life in Australia since the Second World War (Himmelfarb). It is a rich variety of races, classes and cultures and the question is, 'What kind of new culture will they be able to produce?' On a more universal scale, however, the diverse peoples which make up Australian society are mirrored to some extent in all societies, and precisely the same questions obtain.

Peter Beatson writes,

> Beneath the often drab, banal or even ugly surface of Australian society an age-old spiritual drama is being enacted of which the chief protagonist is the human soul. This drama is being played out in the midst of a predominantly secular world where most people are unaware of the issues involved. White has seized these issues, placed them at the centre of his work and bent all his powers of description,

dialogue, psychological insight, satire and symbolism to their expression in his art.[47]

## Notes

1. White, Flaws in the Glass (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p.46

2. Ibid., p.36

3. White, 'The Prodigal Son', Australian Letters, 1, no.3 (April, 1958), pp.37-40; reprinted in The Vital Decade, Ten years of Australian Art and Letters, ed. Geoffrey Dutton and Max Harris (South Melbourne: Sun Books, 1968), pp.156-8

4. White, Flaws in the Glass, p.60

5. White, 'The Prodigal Son'

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. John Coulson, 'Religion and Imagination'; in D. Jasper (ed.), Images of Belief in Literature (London: Macmillan, 1984), p.15

11. Peter Beatson, The Eye in the Mandala: Patrick White: A Vision of Man and God (London: Paul Elek, 1976), p.102

12. Ibid., p.125

13. Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), pp.49-50

14. White, 'The Prodigal Son'.

15. Carolyn Bliss, Patrick White's Fiction (London: Macmillan, 1986), p.10

16. C. McGregor (ed.), In the Making (Melbourne: Nelson, 1969),

p.218

17. W.B. Yeats, 'The Circus Animals' Desertion'

18. See Beatson, op. cit., p.167

19. Flannery O'Connor, op. cit., p.167

20. See Veronica Brady, A Crucible of Prophets: Australians and the Question of God (Australian and New Zealand Studies in Theology and Religion, Sydney, 1981)

21. Veronica Brady, 'The Novelist and the Reign of Necessity: Patrick White and Simone Weil'; in R. Shepherd and K. Singh (eds.), Patrick White: A Critical Symposium (Adelaide: Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978), p.109

22. J. Neville Ward, The Use of Praying (London: Epworth Press, 1967), p.14

23. Carolyn Bliss, op. cit., p.206

24. White, Flaws in the Glass, p.144

25. White, 'The Prodigal Son'

26. See Virginia Woolf, 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', in Granite and Rainbow (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958)

27. See F.W. Dillistone, Riders in the Chariot: An Introduction and Commentary, Religious Dimensions in Literature, gen. ed. L.A. Belford (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), p.11

28. White, 'The Prodigal Son'

29. Quoted in Geoffrey Dutton, Patrick White (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.12

30. Flannery O'Connor, op. cit., p.40

31. Ibid.

32. Quoted in D. Cooper, Paul Klee (Harmondsworth: Penguin,

1949), p.5

33. White, *Flaws in the Glass*, p.70

34. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.78

35. White, op. cit., p.38

36. William Walsh, *Patrick White's Fiction* (Sydney, London: Allen and Unwin, 1977), p.127

37. Carolyn Bliss, op. cit., pp.200-201

38. Geoffrey Dutton, *Patrick White* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.7

39. Manley Johnson, 'Patrick White: A Fringe of Leaves'; in R. Shepherd and K. Singh (eds.), op. cit., p.88

40. Patricia Morley, *The Mystery of Unity: Themes and Technique in the Novels of Patrick White* (Toronto: McGill - Queen's University Press, 1972), p.245

41. Carolyn Bliss, op. cit., p.207

42. Harold Bloom, op. cit., p.83

43. Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p.214

44. See C. McGregor (ed.), op. cit., p.219

45. See Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London, Melbourne and Henley: R.K.P., 1982)

46. F.W. Dillistone, op. cit., p.20

47. Peter Beatson, op. cit., p.167

# CHAPTER 2

## INTO THE WILDERNESS

In the last chapter I began to explore the 'mythic' significance of Australia in White's fiction. I continue this theme in this chapter, first discussing Australia as a physical fact defining human limits, an image of physical necessity, and moving towards its significance as a metaphor for spiritual exploration. I try to show, too, how the thought of Simone Weil may illuminate some of the ideas emerging in White's fiction. Veronica Brady, scholar and friend of White, tells us that Simone Weil has been a considerable influence on him [1] and, though, as she says, the game of hunt-the-influence can be rather a tedious exercise, it is interesting to explore how the thought of a religious thinker like Simone Weil throws light on that of a fiction writer. In such an enormous corpus as White's fiction, a challenging body of ideas is built up; and it can be instructive to place these within a larger community of thought.

The image of the Australian landscape is a clear preoccupation of White and is presented in a very evocative way in his work. He shows how its sheer physical power forces itself upon people and frustrates attempts at domestication. As an image it is extremely potent - communities huddling together around the coast, leaving the great Interior, significantly shaped like a heart, also the 'abyss', to stand as a reminder of human exigency. It is a startling image of the

tension between physical necessity and human striving, and a wonderful 'defamiliarizing' context in which to renegotiate principles. As with early American writers, an image of spiritual and mental exploration may be translated into the real terms of physical fact because of the vast areas of largely unpopulated land.

### Physical Necessity

The Australian landscape has long haunted Australian literary consciousness. In his preface to the collected poems of Adam Lindsey Gordon, the writer Marcus Clarke speaks of the 'weird melancholy' of the landscape which questions the 'trim utilitarian civilisation' of the Enlightenment and makes Australians people born to a 'desert inheritance', like the people of Israel. [2] For Australians, the outback is a 'given', affecting self-understanding. The Australian philosopher Richard Campbell states that Australians 'stand out into emptiness' as a condition of being against which they define themselves. He writes the following:

> This deep, inarticulate sense of a limit is the correlative of the recognition of the contingency of our being-in-the-world. Practically, it means that we are driven back into our situation, to grapple with the recalcitrant nature of what is given - <a condition which produces> our so-called materialism and pragmatism. Theologically, it means that the absence of God is not nothing; it is the particular mode of his presence ... <Perhaps> a more positive articulation of how we know ourselves to be contingent beings 'thrown' into a reality which transcends us and defies our efforts at domestication might yet provide a basis for an authentic religious consciousness in this

country.[3]

This is the daunting task which I believe White sets himself. It is a task which begins with the constant determination to disturb our existential security and destroy artificial images of the self - it is only through such destruction, he shows, that rebirth might be possible. Repeatedly in his fiction, man is shown to be subject to, and part of, the physicality of the world. Pre-eminently in Voss, there is contrast between the Australian outback and 'civilization', the necessity of the land over against the ephemeral things of culture and society. Images of the superficial concerns of colonial Sydney are juxtaposed with, and so brought to judgement by, images of the progress of the expedition into the Interior. In The Tree of Man, a series of natural disasters - storm, flood, fire - undercuts the securities of those claiming homes from the bush; the wilderness tends to smash the culture which encroaches on it. A house like Xanadu in Riders in the Chariot is somehow menaced, almost from the moment of completion, by the encroaching scrub. In Voss, at Rose Portion's funeral, Laura Trevelyan realizes that 'the clouds were loading lead to aim at men ... that terrestrial safety is not assured, and that solid earth does eventually swirl beneath the feet' (p.235). In the scene in Voss when a crowd gathers to see the expedition off, the respectable gathering is telescoped, shown as tiny figures engulfed in an animate landscape. In White's early novel, Happy Valley, there is the following passage:

> ... the country slept, inwardly intent on some secret war of passion or trying to separate the threads of old passions spent. This made the town seem very ephemeral. In the summer when the slopes were scurfy yellow and the body of the earth was very hot, lying there stretched out, the town, with its cottages of red and brown weatherboard, reminded one of an ugly scab somewhere on the body of the earth. It was so ephemeral. One day it would drop off, leaving a pink clean place underneath. (p.28)

There are innumerable such passages running through White's writing. He stresses that when civilization is invested with too great a sense of security, impermanence disguised as permanence, the results may be extremely unpleasant: suppressed realities will eventually assert themselves in the face of 'the elegant contrivances against sordid life' (The Twyborn Affair, p.373). As Peter Beatson writes,

> The 'led life' in houses, the habitual patterns of family and social behaviour and the structuring of identity around the ego give form and security at the expense of illumination. [4]

Most people attempt to escape from their feelings by taking refuge in social activities, a conventional occupation, or in trivialities of one kind or another. But, rather like Coleridge, there is a sense in White that 'Better to do nothing than nothings'. [5] His satire is venomous against, for example, Australian society people, the fabric of whose lives is woven from material concerns and the concerns of convention. White seeks to destabilize such artificial securities. He seeks in a

novel like The Tree of Man, in many ways a pioneering novel, to turn away from life in its more 'civilized' forms and seek essential values elsewhere. He is searching to re-establish the fundamental concerns and understandings of his culture, which are overlaid by all kinds of artifice. Voss is partly an expression of White's pondering on the history and significance of his country and the pervading sense of the 'exaltation of the average'. [6] It is because White has a vision of 'something higher' that the 'average' are treated in his work with such distaste, as often nothing less than demonic; and it is this, too, which has often distressed his critics, who describe him as bitter and unable to come to terms with ordinary Australian people. [7] However, though there may be some substance to this, it seems to miss the point. White is concerned with what is most truly valuable, with human potential; and the other side of this is that he stimulates awareness as to what is merely arbitrary or conventional.

Flannery O'Connor writes in Mystery and Manners (1972) of her frustrations at the limiting expectations of many readers of fiction. 'I have found that if one's young hero can't be identified with the average American boy, or even with the average American delinquent, then his perpetrator will have a good deal of explaining to do.' [8] She bemoans the assumption that novels are entirely concerned with social, economic or psychological realities. She sees these, rather, as means to a deeper end. As she says, since the eighteenth century a common unexplored assumption has been 'that the ills and mysteries of

life will eventually fall before the scientific advances of man, a belief that is still going strong even though this is the first generation to face total extinction because of these advances'.[9] Flannery O'Connor asserts that many of today's readers have lost sight of the unpleasant aspects of human nature. They cling to a misguided confidence in human rationality. This is why she makes such use in her fiction of the 'grotesque'. She seeks to disturb our securities by reminding us that we share in the state of the 'freak'. 'The freak in modern fiction is usually disturbing to us because he keeps us from forgetting that we share in his state.'[10] So it is that with White, too, the outcasts, the aliens in society's terms, are the bearers of vision. Human physical ugliness, while not in itself a virtue, does not allow those who possess it to take refuge on the 'surface' - they must seek truth at deeper levels. From that truth a new and more significant type of beauty will be radiated, which supersedes the usual categories of beauty and ugliness - the beauty of grace, not form. This is so, for example, of Laura Trevelyan in Voss. Again, Beatson writes,

> The destiny of man in the fallen world is its imperfection, and it is only by embracing the flesh in its more imperfect forms that one can truly love the destiny that God has prescribed. Like success, beauty is an end in itself; ugliness, like failure, points to a higher end. By the difficult act of accepting the connection between the self and the repulsive, as Laura Trevelyan does with Rose Portion and Himmelfarb does with Mary Hare, one achieves a higher and therefore more rewarding mode of love.[11]

Flannery O'Connor, like White, believes that the basic experience of everyone is the experience of human limitation, and she is concerned to re-awaken her readers to it, as well as to life at its more mysterious.

'Civilization' is, for White, all too often an attempt to conceal the way things are. As Simone Weil recognized, it is fatal for people to forget their roots and paint over their true selves. The spiritual and cultural roots of people are a prerequisite for a proper appreciation of who and what they are. In Riders in the Chariot, the character Rosetree puts aside his native Judaism in favour of an assumed Christianity which will allow his social assimilation, and the result is disastrous.

White is a prophetic figure, a Jeremiah goading the recalcitrant Israelites out of their complacencies. He is concerned with the physical weakness of human beings and the force of physical necessity in order to humiliate human pride and try to persuade people that essential values may be located elsewhere - that our basic need is for a spiritual dimension. His so-called 'excremental vision' - his seeming preoccupation with human bodily functions - is, as Veronica Brady states, 'the tactic of the prophet determined to challenge the "pride of life", the trust in the body and in material possessions and power which are characteristic of our culture'. [12] It is essentially, then, a kind of Old Testament prophecy of wrath. It is also the strategy of the psalmist; for example,

> Yea, he shall see that even the wise die,
> the fool and the stupid alike must perish
> and leave their wealth to others.
> Their graves are their homes for ever,
> their dwelling places to all generations,
> though they named lands their own.
> Man cannot abide in his pomp,
> he is like the beasts that perish.[13]

We are wrong to think of the natural world as merely outside ourselves, and ourselves as 'users'/exploiters. As T.S. Eliot wrote in The Idea of a Christian Society (1939),

> ... a wrong attitude towards nature implies, somewhere, a wrong attitude towards God, and the consequence is an inevitable doom ...[14]

Enlightenment thinking tended to alienate man from his environment, by a utopian sense of increasing power over the natural world. At the present time, there is growing sensitivity to the world as an organic whole; but nevertheless the same kind of over-confidence in man's self-sufficiency and in the powers of reason often obtains. White repeatedly shows such self-confidence to be misguided. In The Solid Mandala, Waldo Brown, as he walks down the street, feels threatened by evidence that man is not as rational as he would like to believe:

> In any case, there were the shops, there were the houses of the street you knew, providing signs that man is a rational animal. Waldo liked to look into the houses he passed, obliquely though, for on some of those occasions when he had stared full in he had been faced with displays of perversity to damage temporarily his faith in reason. From a reasonable angle the houses remained the labelled boxes which contain, not passions, but furniture

... (p.58)

White continually reminds us (in a way reminiscent of the Greek or Eastern sacramental tradition) that we live in a whole universe, not a hierarchical, fragmented universe in which man is the measure of all things. A writer like Dostoyevsky recognized the earth as a primary reality out of which we are created, by which we live and to which we return. He recognized the vital force of the earth and the bond between matter and life. A novel like A Fringe of Leaves suggests that one must have a broadly 'religious' connection with the universe, which, when disrupted, produces 'disorder in man's psyche and disharmony in his surroundings'.[15]

### Freedom and Limits

Where, then, does man's true freedom lie? Paul Fiddes, in his article 'Patrick White and the Vision of God',[16] discusses White's novels in terms of a kind of dialectic between freedom and limits. Man, he says, is embedded in and detached from physical necessity. For example, in Voss, it is said of Palfreyman, '... that the two banks of his life were reconciled, despite many an incongruous geographical feature, and it was seldom noticed that a strong current flowed between them' (p.46). Freedom is a matter of accepting contradiction. In The Aunt's Story, Holstius tells Theodora Goodman, '... it is because you cannot reconcile joy and sorrow ... or flesh and marble, or illusion and reality, or life and death, you must

accept' (p.293). What concerns White very deeply is that the worst way to come to terms with the tension between freedom and limits is to content oneself with the mediocre. He seems to suggest that we may grow towards freedom when we try to recover life's essential values and concerns.

Human beings, perhaps, are only truly effective when set against the powers of adversity. Recognition of the threatening sense of hopelessness in the face of the reign of physical necessity may bring with it awareness of a new freedom. Blue, in 'The Age of the Wart' [17] is one who has healed others while accepting the hardship of being a human being. This is freedom for White. As one of the epigrams to A Fringe of Leaves says, 'Love is your last chance. There is really nothing else on earth to keep you there'. It is the kind of 'sorrowful love', in a world of suffering and hardness of heart, which concerns Simone Weil. It is crucial for White that one should come to terms with one's situation, and all one's dividedness and finitude; to erect false securities, to countenance the average, is effectively to abnegate human responsibility. When we recognize our human limits, we begin to sense possibilities of real freedom. Writing of Simone Weil's thought, R. Rees puts it as follows: 'When the 'I' is humiliated and degraded we know we are more than that. A beautiful woman seeing herself in a mirror may all too easily think that she is what she sees and forget the shame and degradation of reducing herself to so little. But an ugly woman knows that she is not what she sees'. [18]

For White, then, by accepting finitude but rejoicing in one's situation, one may be 'increased' and discover oneself as part of a larger mystery. In The Aunt's Story, this is precisely the experience of Theodora Goodman in the landscape of Meroe. White's illuminati, accepting human limitations but with a renewed spirit, discover another world lying within this one, 'wholly within'. [19] Similarly, a building like the old mansion Xanadu in Riders in the Chariot somehow grows in integrity as it merges with its physical surroundings, as does its occupier. At the end of Voss, Laura Trevelyan asserts that the way to escape from 'our inherent mediocrity as a people' is to intensify our senses through art:

> I am confident that <this> mediocrity ... is not a final and irrevocable state; rather it is a creative source of endless variety and subtlety. The blowfly on its bed of offal is but a variation of the rainbow. Common forms are continually breaking into brilliant shapes. If we will explore them. (p.447)

This is why what is most worth knowing is often 'embodied in the less communicative forms of matter, such as rock, wood, metal and water'. (p.446, Voss)

It is, then, by exploring our situation with the wide-eyed intensity of the Wordsworthian child, [20] the simpleton, or the artist - those whose senses have not been dulled by familiarity or the reductionism of the intellect - that we may achieve distinction. As we shall see, for White the artist is important for this reason.

For White, body and soul are inextricably one, and the way to grow in freedom is not to deny the body or the world, to try to rationalize it or tame it, but to accept it and its limitations and infirmities. One must take possession of one's situation and pursue significance within it. The difficulties of White's style - the seeming wrestling with the mediums of the world - and the celebration of the material and the bodily, make this clear. In the last scene of A Fringe of Leaves, Miss Scrimshaw says that she would love 'to soar! ... To reach the heights! To breathe! Perch on the crags and look down on everything that lies beneath one! Elevated, and at last free!' Ellen Roxburgh, in reply, says, 'Oh no, the crags are not for me! ... A woman, as I see, is more like moss or lichen that takes to some tree or rock as she takes to her husband' (p.363).

All of White's visionaries enjoy the physical. Those who achieve vision tend not to be those who live lives of abstenance, who deliberately try to follow a path of perfection, but those who have immersed themselves in the sheer physicality of the world. The scene in Riders in the Chariot, when Miss Hare and Himmelfarb meet and talk under the flowering plum tree, is a beautiful celebration of the natural world. The story of Voss, the explorer who sets out into the wilderness in order to conquer the elements and defy his basic human needs, shows that the way to realize one's possibilities is not to deny the body and the world but to accept it, recognize one's creaturehood and dependence. To deny the body

and the world can be the worst form of self-assertion. Voss's initial will to overcome physical obstacles represents a demonic parody of the will to redemption. The aphorism 'There are none so blind as those who will not see' is important. As Bruce Wilson says, it is will, 'fiery human will, which causes the threat of nucleur war, racism, divorce and all the other forms of human brokenness. The central cause of our separation from God is our desire for self-aggrandisement, to do away with the Father'. [21] It is when one recognizes one's part in a world of physical necessity, and, like Voss, is forced through circumstances to a kind of self-sacrifice, that one is brought to awareness of the special particularity of one's situation. This is precisely the case with Ellen Roxburgh in A Fringe of Leaves. She undergoes a kind of journey of purgation in the wilderness when she and her husband are ship-wrecked and captured by aboriginal tribes; she suffers all kinds of physical humiliation and loses everything external which contributes to her sense of identity. She re-enters 'civilization' 'almost as naked as a newborn child' (p.297). The result is, to use Veronica Brady's words, that 'she gains a sense of being there, afloat in existence'. [22] Towards the end of A Fringe of Leaves, Ellen Roxburgh wanders into a primitive chapel, sits down and reflects on her experiences 'in the wilderness':

> At last she must have cried herself out: she could not have seen more clearly, down to the cracks in the wooden bench, the bird-droppings on the rudimentary altar. She did not attempt to interpret a peace of mind which had descended on her (she

> would not have been able to attribute it to prayer or reason) but let the silence enclose her like a beatitude ... (p.353)

It is at such moments of self-containment, when we are most truly ourselves - an awareness which, rather like Wordsworthian 'spots of time', must be fleeting, because, as Simone Weil recognized, finite man is always under the pressure of 'gravity' which draws us from God ('the imagination is continually at work filling up all the fissures through which grace might pass' [23]) that we may experience grace. It is then that the ordinary and everyday may seem to partake of the holy and may be injected with fresh significance. So it is that White has a sense of incarnation. It is possible for man to be expressive of the divine, but this is only when he gives up 'civilized', socially conditioned, essentially arbitrary notions of the self, and is brought to a sense of the particularity of the moment and of the primary experiences sustaining him. In other words, when man is most human, he is most Godlike. In *Voss*, Laura Trevelyan says that we must be 'willing to give up so much to prove that human truths are also divine. This is the true meaning of Christ' (p.371). So also, in *The Solid Mandala*, Mrs. Poulter's crucifix, domesticated into her furnishings, is brought crashing down and the spotlight turned to the simpleton Arthur Brown, suffering for the sins of his brother.

The imagery of sacrament in White's fiction should also be seen in this light. It is at points of greatest need, when we

become aware of the particularity of our situation and our essential dependence, that the physical world may seem to be communicative of grace. A particularly memorable example is in A Fringe of Leaves. Ellen Roxburgh stumbles upon a piece of cannibal flesh:

> Renewed disgust prepared her to kick the bone out of sight. Then, instead, she found herself stooping to pick it up. There were one or two shreds of half-cooked flesh and gobbets of burnt fat still adhering to this monstrous object. Her stiffened body and almost audibly twangling nerves were warning her against what she was about to do, what she was, in fact, already doing. She had raised the bone, and was tearing at it with her teeth, spasmodically chewing, swallowing by great gulps which her throat threatened to return. But did not. She flung the bone away only after it was cleaned, and followed slowly in the wake of her cannibal mentors. She was less disgusted in retrospect by what she had done, than awed by the fact that she had been moved to do it. The exquisite innocence of this forest morning, its quiet broken by a single flute-note endlessly repeated, tempted her to believe that she had partaken of a sacrament. (p.244)

White's novels affirm the essential goodness of matter and the fusion of nature and grace. When, like Ellen Roxburgh, one is most defeated or disorientated, unable to fill the void by interpreting one's experience - for the act of interpretation always removes one from the immediacy of experience and makes it second-hand - , grace may transfigure reality. Like Stan Parker, Ellen Roxburgh recognizes that failure and the horror may be a grace. (p.244, The Tree of Man)

A constant theme in White is that, waiting in the silence, when images fail, in a state of acceptance, one may be blessed

with grace. Central to *The Eye of the Storm* is what William Walsh calls 'creative tranquility in the midst of turbulence'. [24] In *Riders in the Chariot*, the Jew Himmelfarb is subjected to a mock crucifixion by fellow factory workers. He gives up praying for a sign. '... he raised his head. And was conscious of a stillness and clarity, which was the stillness and clarity of pure water, at the centre of which his God was reflected.' (p.413) In *The Vivisector*, Hurtle Duffield, at the end of his life, as he approaches his greatest artistic moment, is rewarded with a sense of '... clearest light and indelible sensations. An immensity of space had given him his visual freedom, or more: he was being painted with, and through, and on ... Watching these daringly loose strokes of paint, which might have looked haphazard if they hadn't been compelled, he experienced a curious sense of grace' (p.614). Affinities here with the thought of Simone Weil are interesting. [25] Simone Weil, like White, asserts the fact of physical necessity. She questions the Cartesian premise that mind is the dominant factor in the individual and in the universe as a whole. Like Wittgenstein, she sees the world as impersonal, the physical and material world governed by rules. White, with Simone Weil, asserts the need to '<become> master of myself and <know> that I am not God' [26] - to become aware of oneself as 'alone and powerless and subject to the determinisms at work in an unfeeling universe'. [27] In Simone Weil, too, corresponding to this sense of exigency, 'at the centre of the human heart, <there> is a longing for an absolute good', and that absolute

good is God. Yet the longing for Him 'can never be satisfied by any object in this world'.[28] Hence, many of White's characters achieve a profound sense of vision, usually in the midst of spiritual suffering or when their lives are in some way destabilized. So, for example, the four main characters in Riders in the Chariot, all of whom are exiles, and aliens in the terms of the societies in which they live, achieve a vision of the chariot (the symbol for the transcendence of the human personality over its boundaries) and it is a vision mediated to them through their particular physical experience.

For White, it is this 'longing for an absolute good' which informs his conception of what real human freedom means, of what is truly worthwhile. He subverts widespread contemporary conceptions of what is most 'real'. All White's main characters live by intuition, instinct and imagination, not primarily by the rational intellect. He shows that such non-rational processes may be most conducive to true clarity of vision. Such perception gives his 'illuminati' the ability to 'see'. As has been said, it is the kind of wide-eyed openness to possibility, often associated in literature with the childlike, which is celebrated - the ability to see things for the first time. This is contrasted in White's fiction with those trapped within the rational intellect and common-sense notions of reality. It is part of his suspicion of human artifice, aspects of culture, painting over one's spiritual roots. So it is that in White's work there are galleries of shallow materialists, often expatriots, who bear the brunt of his satirical wit -

merchants, graziers, society women. They are all presented as handicapped, and desperately avoiding the various points of crisis in their lives, when their protective edifice crumbles. The novels are full of throw-away comments like '"Mrs. Brown died of something incurable," she said, looking out the window at the solid homes'.[29] We are told of the rationalist Waldo Brown, in The Solid Mandala, that 'His twin brother dragged him back repeatedly behind the line where knowledge didn't protect' (p.46). White effectively turns a common-sense materialistic and rationalistic attitude upside down, and shows it to be only a part of reality and not the most important part - where it is in the ascendancy, it is exposed as spiritually stultifying and moronic. White dramatizes the deep-seated nature of man's spiritual yearnings. The Solid Mandala shows that there must be balance between the conscious rational intellect and intuitive modes of cognition. Also, in Voss, Laura is a kind of 'anima' figure for Voss. White encourages his readers to take seriously the full panorama of experience, so he presents drunkenness, dreams, delirium as positive experiences involving perceptions of value.

Simone Weil's sense that the longing for an absolute good, which corresponds to one's sense of precariousness and 'can never be satisfied by any object in this world', is easily seen in White. He tends to present vision as something of a curse, because it is an energy which can never be satisfied, tending to make his characters uncomfortable in this world and goading them into spiritual quest as nothing here and now can satisfy

them. As in Francis Thompson's poem 'The Hound of Heaven', truth is an energy which pursues the possessed pilgrim irresistably. It gives White's characters a kind of 'epic' stature, as Brady puts it, 'seeking to reconstitute human existence on a new level'. [30]

White's illuminati are sometimes rewarded with glimpses of an all-embracing transcendental reality, but such vision is a grace not a possession, and truth represents an energy or a quest. Iconoclasm follows enlightenment. This is so in White for the artist, who is afflicted with the necessity of his art, the longing for God which corresponds to his sense of unease in the world. The career of the artist Hurtle Duffield in The Vivisector, progresses by way of a series of ever-enlarging circles. In the quest of his art, he suffers a series of deaths and rebirths - when he feels he has been true to his art, immediately his sense of security is destroyed and he must begin again. Because one cannot fully grasp or possess vision, as soon as one approaches, it falls from reach. So in order to grow in vision, White's fiction seems to suggest that one must constantly 'sacrifice' false self-images, recognize the contingency of self-interpretations which, in a 'fallen' world, must always cloud our self-understanding. The moment of greatest vision or freedom is in the silence, when all images are shattered - to use Simone Weil's terms, waiting on God. So, as we shall see, for the critic Harold Bloom, the greatest moment of vision for the artist is the moment of dereliction,

the 'purity' of the artistic moment, when one is most truly oneself, interpretation impossible and kenosis self-fulfilling.

## Exploring the Country of the Mind

> Knowledge was never a matter of geography. Quite the reverse, it overflows all maps that exist. Perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind. (Voss, p.446 )

> The religious man is the one who believes that life is about making some kind of journey; the non-religious man is the one who believes there is no journey to take. (Monica Furlong, Travelling In) [31]

In this section, I want to discuss a little further the motif of exploration and its metaphorical structure in some of the novels, particularly Voss. The theme of spiritual and mental exploration, given striking metaphorical form as the psychology of the explorer in Voss, is at the heart of the concerns I have been describing. William Walsh points out that, for White, just as the explorer lives at extremes and is constantly pushing back the frontiers of suffering, so it is with spiritual exploration. [32] White sees an individual's life as an unexplored wilderness, rich with possibilities, exploration of which is exciting and vital, if dangerous. To use Paul Tillich's terms, what is required is 'the courage to be'. Or, with Kierkegaard, it is necessary to take a leap into the unknown. White has a vital and hopeful conception of human potential - the simplest person is capable of the heights of spiritual perception. Because life is seen in terms of quest rather than possession, life can be exciting and challenging.

The lives of many of White's main characters are presented in terms of quest - a quest for understanding and significance; a quest for that which is most profoundly true. For example, in The Aunt's Story, Theodora Goodman has a strong sense of the selfishness and uncreativeness of the world she moves in, so she embarks on an Odyssey-like journey of self-discovery. Miss Hare in Riders in the Chariot, is drawn 'in search of those depths which her instinct told her could exist' (p.22). She is prepared to let her inheritance crumble and decay if that is the way to those depths. Basil Hunter (The Eye of the Storm) longs to discover the as yet 'unplayed I' (p.310). The story of Eddie/Eadith Twyborn, in The Twyborn Affair, represents a search for self-discovery. The artistic vocation of Hurtle Duffield in The Vivisector is seen in terms of exploration. At the end of the novel, as he approaches the challenge of his last set of 'God paintings', it presents itself as a vast desert:

> As he approached, loitering, this fresh emptiness promised to be the vastest desert he had ever set out to cross: not the faintest mirage to offer illusory solace; and to share the inevitable agonies, the limping army into which Christina McBeath had conscripted him. (p.613)

To explore the country of the mind involves a preparedness to confront everything one might find - to be willing to live through disorientating experiences with the hope of reorientation. Voss is concerned with those few stubborn ones who will 'blunder on, painfully, out of the luxuriant world of

their pretensions into the desert of mortification and reward' (p.74). Such exploration will not, as someone like the artist Hurtle Duffield discovers, follow a tidy narrative, with growth a steady process; its progress cannot be gainsaid and it may be more like a series of deaths and rebirths. However, those who avoid such self-discovery, and content themselves with the average, are the objects of White's attack because they are failing in the task of their humanity.

Let us look, then, at parts of the metaphorical structure of Voss. In Chapter 4, when Laura and Voss are in the Bonners' garden together at night, the garden mirrors their feelings and aspects of the natural setting seem to change places with them. The effect of this is to establish a link between them and the natural world which is related to their respect for Australia and their courage in physical and mental exploration. The fact that the physical world moves, is unreliable and dangerous, intensifies our sense of the danger of the internal world, the country of the mind. This empathy between characters and their setting is a constant feature of White's novels. It is important to realize, too, that Laura undergoes a 'journey', though she remains in Sydney. Voss is 'her desert' (p.88). Her journey seems as dangerous and as physically and mentally challenging as his.

All the novels contrast those few who live by what might be called the values of the spirit with the majority who worship the powers of the world - comfort, security and possessions. People like Mr. Bonner in Voss look to material prosperity,

business interests, and social advancement, while those like Voss and Laura are drawn to explore the mystery of the interior (in two senses, Australia/the mind), which is shown to be the only kind of knowledge that matters. White's 'heroic' characters are called to explore the extremes of life in a way which contradicts the commonplace - to venture in search of more fertile, if more dangerous realities. This is essential to the artistic vocation, as we shall see in the next chapter. The artist, like White's other visionaries, has a wider range of consciousness than most, which allows him to explore the world in ways unknown to those who see the world only in terms of utility, having or doing. Such exploration - turning aside from easy securities - is a kind of foolishness; yet for those in the vision it is a necessary foolishness, perhaps the foolishness of God.

> What else should our lives be but a series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become.[33]

## Notes

1. Veronica Brady, 'The Novelist and the Reign of Necessity: Patrick White and Simone Weil'; in R. Shepherd and K. Singh (eds.), Patrick White: A Critical Symposium (Adelaide: Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978), p.108 Also, Veronica Brady, 'The Artist and the Savage God: Patrick White's "The Vivisector"', Meanjin, 33, 1974, 139

2. Quoted in Veronica Brady, A Crucible of Prophets (Australian and New Zealand Studies in Theology and Religion, Sydney, 1981) , p.83

3. Richard Campbell, 'The Character of Australian Religion' (Meanjin, 36, 1977, 187-8); quoted in Carolyn Bliss, Patrick White's Fiction (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 3-4

4. Peter Beatson, The Eye in the Mandala: Patrick White: A Vision of Man and God (London: Paul Elek, 1976), p.59

5. Quoted in S.T. Coleridge, Selected Poems, ed. J. Reeves (London: Heinemann, 1959), p.xxxiv

6. 'The Prodigal Son', Australian Letters, 1, no.3 (April, 1958), pp.37-40; reprinted in The Vital Decade, Ten Years of Australian Art and Letters, ed. Geoffrey Dutton and Max Harris (South Melbourne: Sun Books, 1968), pp.156-8.

7. For example, Kirpal Singh, 'Patrick White: An Outsider's View', in R. Shepherd and K. Singh (eds.), op. cit., p.118, writes that '... White suffers from an impoverished spiritual kinship with the society in which he lives; both artistically and spiritually White writes in a vacuum'.

8. Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p.37

9. Ibid., p.40

10. Ibid., p.133

11. Peter Beatson, op. cit., p.48

12. Veronica Brady, op. cit., p.84

13. Psalm 49, 10-13 (R.S.V.)

14. T.S. Eliot, The Idea of a Christian Society (Faber and Faber, 1939), pp.61-62

15. William Walsh, Patrick White's Fiction (Sydney, London: Allen and Unwin, 1977), p.125

16. Paul Fiddes, 'Patrick White and the Vision of God', Christian 9, no.4 42-54

17. White, Three Uneasy Pieces (London: Jonathan Cape, 1988)

18. R. Rees, Simone Weil: A Sketch for a Portrait (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p.134

19. 'It is not outside, it is inside: wholly within' (Meister Eckhart) - epigram to White, The Solid Mandala (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969)

20. cf. the following from Wordsworth's Ode on Intimations of Immortality from recollections of Early Childhood:

> Thou little Child ...
> Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke
> The Years to bring the inevitable yoke,...
> Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
> And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
> Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

21. Bruce Wilson, *Can God Survive in Australia?* (Sutherland: Albatross, 1983), p.221

22. Veronica Brady, op. cit., p.78

23. Quoted in E.W.F. Tomlin, *Simone Weil* (Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1954), p.45

24. William Walsh, *Patrick White: Voss* (London: Edward Arnold, 1976), p.31

25. I am indebted to the work of Veronica Brady, which draws attention to these affinities.

26. Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1977), p.65; quoted in Veronica Brady, 'The Novelist and the Reign of Necessity: Patrick White and Simone Weil', in R. Shepherd and K. Singh (eds.), op. cit., p.109

27. Veronica Brady, ibid., p.113

28. Simone Pétrement, op. cit., p.493; quoted in Veronica Brady, ibid., p.113

29. White, *The Solid Mandala*, p.20

30. Veronica Brady, op. cit., p.113

31. Monica Furlong, *Travelling In* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971), p.14

32. William Walsh, op. cit., p.30

33. David Malouf - epigram to White, *The Twynborn Affair* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981)

# CHAPTER 3

## THE EYE OF THE ARTIST

In the last chapter, I hinted at the importance of art for White in his sense of the rebirth of images. In this chapter his central concerns are focused in this theme. As we have seen, his novels seek to celebrate life at its most 'real', at the expense of the mere conventions of society. For White, as especially seen in The Vivisector, which is devoted to exploring the artistic vocation, the role of the artist is to call into question these conventions. The artist is an iconoclast, judging people's perceptions in order to recall them to the point of decision. The artist sees intensely, and so continually helps to inject a 'tired' world with new vitality. Art, too, is a quest - a kind of quest of religion. White's fiction in itself represents such a quest, and it is a quest taken up by the artists among his characters. He describes himself as a frustrated painter; [1] and he is very well aware of the advantages of oil painting as an artistic medium, able as it is to create a sense of shifting planes and perspectives. His questing, linguistic style is itself very accumulative, as though he is building up a whole body of paint.

### Looking and Seeing

I begin with another quotation from Austin Farrer:

> I count poetical vision and even amatory passion

> the friends of religion, in spite of the fact that their abuse may easily tend the other way. But though poetry often breeds an attitude of fancifulness and egotism; and love, heaven knows, of animality and complacency; yet we have on the other side to set this - that the lover and the poet at least look at something and see it. And the chief impediment of religion in this age, I often think, is that no one ever looks at anything at all: not so as to contemplate it, to apprehend what it is to be that thing, and plumb, if he can, the deep fact of its individual existence.[2]

Art affirms the existence of other modes of cognition than the rational intellect. Indeed, it subverts our expectations as to what is 'rational'. White's work shows that art conveys a knowledge which imparts a heightened understanding of some inner facet of reality. Characters like Theodora Goodman in The Aunt's Story and Mrs. Godbold in Riders in the Chariot are admitted through music to a state of heightened perception. In Arthur's dance, in The Solid Mandala, Mrs. Poulter grasps something of the wider meaning of their lives - 'he danced the passion of all their lives' (p.266). Amy Parker in The Tree of Man and Elizabeth Hunter in The Eye of the Storm gain through painting a vivid insight into their own spiritual predicament. All this is shown to be not 'mere' subjectivism, but to evoke powerfully vital aspects of reality. In any case, as White shows repeatedly, human beings are not the coolly rational beings which they sometimes imagine themselves to be; it is the 'games' which they play which are often the most powerful parts of their experience. This can be very sinister. For example, in Riders in the Chariot, as we shall see, when

the games of a group of factory workers indulge in the mock crucifixion of an innocent victim from among their number. But the 'games' of art may realize the powerful particularity of a subject. By abstracting or distorting aspects of experience, new light may be thrown on them. For example, in The Tree of Man, Mr. Gage's paintings, condemned as 'mad' by blinkered adherents of 'common sense', speak powerfully to Amy Parker. One of these paintings depicts a woman reaching for the incandescent sun. In the painting's corner there is the skeleton of an ant filled with a fire as intense as the sun's. The painted woman, the ant and Amy are thus identified, and seen as aspiring to the transcendent absolute of the painting's sun.[3] Another novelist, Iris Murdoch writes, 'Art is concerned neither with comfort nor with the possible. It is concerned with truth in its least pleasant and therefore most truthful form'.[4] The Australian artist Terry Smith in an article on The Vivisector, describes Hurtle Duffield as a 'semi-figurative' painter[5] - that is, not for the most part a figurative (naturalistic, representational) painter. Rather, he abstracts from (distorts, changes, modifies, reduces, 'vivisects') the appearance of the things in the world he paints. The art of figuration creates 'oddities' which become realities, making life rather larger than it usually appears. Not only is there presented what we can see, with whatever degree of intensity, but also what the artist has perceived. As Patricia Morley states, in the last two chapters of The Vivisector, after Hurtle's stroke, the distortions of language illustrate the

theory that art distorts in order to reveal. White's use of pun at the end of The Vivisector allows an enormous concentration of meaning. As Morley points out, the novel's last letters ('end-less obvi indi-ggoddd') pun on death as end and life as endless, and the final grouping contains 'obvious', 'indicate', 'vindicate', 'indigo', 'God'. [6]

What White celebrates in the artistic vocation, then, is this ability to perceive or 'see' intensely, a peculiar perceptiveness which enables the artist to have insights not available to those for whom the rational intellect is supreme. It is a similar kind of perceptiveness to that granted to White's other visionaries, like the four 'riders' (Riders in the Chariot), or Theodora Goodman or Arthur Brown. The Solid Mandala is a story about twin brothers, Waldo and Arthur Brown. Waldo is a self-conscious writer in flight from reality, Arthur a simpleton with an uncanny ability to see into the heart of things. Arthur is to Waldo '... the brother who looked right inside him when they opened their eyes on twin pillows in the morning' (p.39). Interestingly, in Riders in the Chariot we are never actually told whether Alf Dubbo is a good painter, and perhaps this is not the point. There seems to be a sense in which White is saying that all human beings may be artists of the spirit. All White's visionaries display many of the characteristics of the artist - a sense of the dehumanizing aspects of culture and society, a feeling of alienation and a particular perceptiveness.

In The Vivisector there is the recurrent imagery of light

and sight - phrases like 'revelations of light' (p.307), 'the mystery of pure being, of unrealized possibilities ... in children's eyes' (p.411), the artist's 'third eye' (p.577). Hurtle Duffield's 'spiritual child', Kathy Volkov, tells him that it was he who 'taught me how to see, to be, to know instinctively' (p.539). To use Paul Klee's words, who, Geoffrey Dutton tells us, [7] stirred White's thinking about art, 'Art does not reproduce the visible but makes visible ... Formal ideas must fuse with a vision of the world'. [8]

Judgement

In The Vivisector, the artist's eye indicates his special instinct, enabling him to discern truth behind appearances. It is also a knife, a torturing instrument in the search for truth. His 'third eye' is used ruthlessly to vivisect vulgarity, pretentiousness and falsity. Mrs. Courtney says to the young artist Hurtle Duffield, '"You Hurtle - you were born with a knife in your hand. No", she corrected herself, "in your eye"' (p.146). White's artists - Mr. Gage in The Tree of Man, Alf Dubbo in Riders in the Chariot, and Hurtle Duffield, are able to distance themselves from their surroundings, or intensify awareness of their surroundings through their art, and so see them from a new perspective. In doing so, they may reveal aspects of reality altogether uncomfortable and unpleasant - the evil which is so often ignored. The light which the artist sheds, then, may be that of judgement. The epigram to The Vivisector from St. Augustine makes this clear:

'They love truth when it reveals itself, and they hate it when it reveals themselves'. The kind of experience which the work of the artist can evoke, 'nice people' and 'professional intellectuals' condemn as 'ignorant and tasteless' (p.578). To borrow words from St. Mark's Gospel (4:11,12), for those outside the artistic vision, limited by 'common sense', 'everything is in parables'. To get to the heart of his subject, the artist must uncover layers of protection and penetrate beyond human artifice to reveal things which others might prefer left untouched and unnoticed. The result may be hurt and destruction. Vision involves judgement. White writes in his autobiography that he is horrified at times by his own art: 'My pursuit of that razor-blade truth has made me a slasher. Not that I don't love and venerate in several senses - before all, pureness of heart and trustfulness'. [9] To be true to art involves uncovering life's ugliness and cruelties. Hurtle says, 'Whatever the accusations, he was not, he never had been, in love with himself: with his art, yes; and that was a projection of life, with the ugliness and cruelties, for which some of his critics held him personally responsible' (p.408). In Riders in the Chariot, Alf Dubbo's enthusiasm for painting is encouraged by his guardian Mr. Calderon, until the results are seen to be shocking. Artists and the like, Hurtle reflects ironically, 'threatened the harmonies the bland evening was pouring out' (p.420). Just as, in White's novels, the wilderness smashes the society which encroaches on it, artificial limits cannot be placed on art, although in The

*Vivisector* people nevertheless try to buy Duffield and his paintings like groceries. The succession of women in Hurtle's life all try to possess him without entering his vision, and the result is symbolically destructive of them.

*The Vivisector* presents in a horrifying way the results of Hurtle's art. The tragic death of his mistress Nance is shown to be related to the candid exposure of his art. His study of his deformed step-sister Rhoda, evokes guilty pity in Boo Davenport. Hero Pavloussi is driven to a suicide attempt by Hurtle's painting of a woman committing suicide. In these cases, art has jarred the woman into admitting something in herself she would rather have kept covered - it is judgement through self-knowledge. When such judgement is internalized, a moment of crisis and decision is forced. Art can in this sense represent a threat to identity. Veronica Brady quotes T.S. Eliot, that 'human kind cannot bear very much reality'. [10] At the end of *Riders in the Chariot*, Mrs. Godbold discovers Mrs. Hare's journal, with its description of Mary Hare as a child. She reads, 'Her statements stop a person short. Will not deny that M.'s remarks usually contain the truth. But the world, I fear, will not tolerate the truth, at least in concentrated form' (p.466).

Coleridge's conception of the 'secondary imagination' is interesting with regard to White's artists. The secondary imagination, Coleridge writes, 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to re-create ... It is essentially vital ...' [11] This implies a 'defamiliarizing' process in order to reconstitute

perceptions afresh. Hurtle has a hope of making others see - 'that part of him which, by some special grace, might illuminate a moment of truth' (p.202). White's conception of art, then, is rather parabolic. Like the parable, when internalized it makes one admit something about oneself. It is the light which lays bare the distinction between the demonic and the divine, and the demonic, as we have seen, may be present in the most unprepossessing ways. The last words of Iris Murdoch's novel, The Black Prince, make a useful point of comparison here: 'Art is not cosy and it is not mocked. Art tells the only truth that ultimately matters. It is the light by which human things can be mended. And after art there is, let me assure you, nothing'.[12]

Chaim Potok's novel, My Name is Asher Lev (1972),[13] the portrait of a young displaced artist, reflects this same dilemma of art, that fidelity to its demands may conflict with the claims of orthodoxies. Asher Lev belongs to a devout orthodox Jewish family living in a Jewish quarter of New York. For him the dilemma is between fidelity to his received religion and fidelity to his art. Asher Lev reads in an art book lent to him that the artist 'should be careful of the influence of those with whom he consorts, and he runs a great risk in becoming a member of a large society, for large bodies tend toward the leveling of individuality to a common consent, the forming and adherence to a creed' (p.178). Or, as Asher Lev's art teacher instructs him, 'As an artist you are responsible to no-one and to nothing, except to yourself and

the truth as you see it ... An artist is responsible to his art. Anything else is propaganda' (p.191). Yet the price of Asher Lev's adherence to his vocation is the pain he causes his parents for whom the seeming excesses of his art simply represent apostasy. What they are asked to accept is that, as Hurtle says, 'To be truthful, I don't believe the artist can belong to anyone' (p.424).

The sight of the artist - a faculty for seeing which may be ultimately redemptive but which judges the self and others - is analogous to the imagery of light and sight in St. John's Gospel, where coming to see represents coming to faith in the saving power of Christ - not only physical sight but spiritual perception. 'Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also' (John. 14:19). In St. John's Gospel, too, the light of Christ also judges those who do not have eyes to see.

### The Recovery of Immediacy

Also similar to the Gospels is White's notion that perceptiveness is connected with the quality of childlikeness - the ability to see intensely, an inquisitiveness and delight in the everyday. Striking in this respect once again is the contrast between Waldo and Arthur Brown in <u>The Solid Mandala</u>. Whereas the childlike Arthur lives intensely in the present moment, Waldo fails to come to terms with the present and lives perpetually in the past:

> If any, <Waldo's> religion had become a cultivation

> of personal detachment, of complete transparency - he was not prepared to think emptiness - of mind. In this way he suffered no immediate hurt, and would only remember years after fragments of conversation overheard. (p.177)

In others of White's characters, like Theodora Goodman in The Aunt's Story and Mary Hare in Riders in the Chariot, their lives display this sense of delight in the everyday and inquisitiveness, and they are preoccupied with the objects of nature and the immediacy of their experiences. In The Vivisector, Rhoda says to Hurtle, 'You were a child, weren't you? I think perhaps, in many ways, you still are; otherwise you wouldn't see the truth as you do: too large, and too hectic' (p.470). It is a largeness and hecticness of vision which, as Patricia Morley says, is a distortion but necessary in order to get an effect and which 'is still a more accurate reflection of truth than the mirror image of verisimilitude'. 14

White knows better than to idealize the child, however. This interest in largeness and immediacy of vision goes with a knowledge that 'a child can grow into a monster, a destroyer'! 15

**Strangers and Pilgrims**

Once again, it is with those who feel uncomfortable with the way society often works, with a sense of alienation, who have insight into the way things truly are; it is those who sense the dehumanizing aspects of culture and society who may

reconstitute culture and society for others. There is a kind of necessity in the artist's alienation; he is in many ways the paradigmatic alienated figure. Just as the Messiah must be somewhat apart, so it is for the artist, for art must be self-authenticating and responsible to no-one. In _Riders in the Chariot_, it is said of Alf Dubbo (p.407), 'Neither the actor, nor the spectator, he was that most miserable of human beings, the artist'. Mr. Gage in _The Tree of Man_, is regarded by many as mad - he lives intensely and is satisfied to sit for hours staring at the ground and its insect life. The image of alienation applied to Duffield is particularly vivid - he comes from a working-class background, where he stands out as different, and is sold into a wealthy family in which he feels equally alien (the 'dirty deal between Cox Street and Sunningdale' - p.337). He feels that the little aborigine girl bought by Cosma and Hero Pavloussi makes him 'sick with apprehension for his innermost core, for one of his most precious secrets, and for Alice-Soso's fate, which to some extent matched his own' (p.345). (Similarly, in _Riders in the Chariot_ Alf Dubbo's aboriginal mother sells her son to Mr. Pask.) As a child, watching his step-mother and father embrace, Hurtle Duffield 'saw how beautifully they fitted together. He had never fitted together with anyone in such a way. He wondered whether he ever would' (p.102). As an established and successful artist, he lives in a curious house, one side of which overlooks a poor working-class area, the other a wealthy suburb, and he is seen to fit into neither. Yet

it is because he is at one remove from society that he is able to 'feed' on it artistically. The general public tends to regard him, like his hunch-back step-sister, as 'a freak, an artist' (p.475). Like the 'white crook-neck fowl' in the Duffields' garden at the beginning of the novel, society pecks at the artist, 'Because they don't like the look of it. Because it's different' (p.9). The artist is seen as 'mad', rather like the divine fool, because the 'sane' have not been destabilized and their sanity has not been probed and judged.

## Art as Necessity

As we saw in the last chapter, White shows that one's longing for an absolute good which corresponds to the sense of exigency, can never be satisfied by anything in this world; so it exists as a kind of curse. This is just the case for the artist. As is sometimes said, the genius is preordained for the greatest suffering. [16] The quest of the artist becomes a necessity of his being. The demands of art take him over and may be extremely self-destructive. Art becomes a kind of religious quest and the artist must come to terms with the 'cross' which he has to bear. In Gospel terms, it is rather like Jesus' words in Gethsemane, 'Not my will but thy will be done' (Mark 14:36). White seems to follow in the venerable tradition which believes that the eye of the artist is in God, that artistic inspiration partakes of the divine. The Australian artist Terry Smith sees White in The Vivisector conflating, like the Romantics and many following them, the

theory of expressionism (that an artist should seek to give expression to his own inner states of feeling in works of art) with the revelation theory of art (that the artist can reveal in his art metaphysical truths about man and the world because of his special perception).[17]

The Vivisector shows the process of Hurtle's coming to terms with his artistic 'affliction'. His 'own chandalier', associated with his artistic eye, made him 'at times jangle and want to explode into smithereens' (p.53). His affliction is, as Rhoda accuses him, to be 'obsessed - by what you like to think is the truth' (p.247). He tells the grocer Cutbush that art can be 'dragged out of you, in torment and anguish, by a pair of forceps' (p.259). Hurtle finds that to be true to his vocation he must 'pour out <his> life-blood' (p.517). At the end of the novel, Christina McBeath 'conscripts' him into her 'limping army':

> I believe the afflicted to be united in the same purpose, and you of course as an artist and the worst afflicted through your art can see farther than us who are mere human diseased. (p.613)

**The Journey of Art**

The quest of the artist is another of White's motifs of spiritual exploration. Hurtle Duffield must explore the country of the mind and come to terms with the necessity of his art. For most of his life, he sets his art up against life - he keeps his world divided (p.302). He must grow to accept the

world and himself as part of it. He must realize that his painting and himself are gods which could fail him (p.518). As happens when he attempts his so-called 'God-paintings', he must relinquish his will and learn to paint anew, trying to master 'the razor edge where simplicity unites with subtlety' (p.569). He must learn, as White writes of his own development, that 'the state of simplicity and humility is the only desirable one for artist or for man'.[18] It is the kind of quiet simplicity and moral and spiritual engagement which characterizes the artist Mr. Gage in The Tree of Man. He would sometimes 'sit for days without saying a word' and 'would sit looking at an empty plate as if it were an object of importance, or on the old iron bedstead under the pepper tree, in his singlet, as everyone had known him, just sitting' (p.280). It is the kind of moral and spiritual engagement, too, which evokes the involvement of, and inspires perception in, others. So Amy Parker recognized in looking at one of Mr. Gage's paintings that 'a bottle can express love. She had never before seen a bottle of adequate beauty. This one tempted her to love her neighbour' (p.282). Art produced in such a spirit may, then, possess a kind of sacramental power, injecting familiar daily objects with new significance. It is somewhat like the condition of 'waiting on God' which Simone Weil describes. It is achieved most profoundly by White's visionaries at the end of their lives. When, at the end of his life, Alf Dubbo in Riders in the Chariot paints his Chariot, 'just as he had not dared completely realize the body of the Christ, here the chariot was

shyly offered. But its tentative nature became, if anything, its glory, causing it to blaze across the sky, or into the soul of the beholder' (p.458).

Artistic vision is fractured and distorted by what Iris Murdoch calls the 'fat relentless ego' [19] and this troubles Duffield, as it troubles all human endeavour, until the end of his life. He gradually becomes aware that the 'great discrepancy between aesthetic truth and sleazy reality' (p.193) must be resolved in unity - the two must be inseparable. This seems to be what the painter Paul Klee is suggesting when he writes that '... what counts is not to paint precocious things but to be a real person, or at least to become one. A basic condition for all creative utterances is that one should have mastered life'. [20]

Judgement and Acceptance

The Vivisector seems to move towards a sense of balance. It is a novel with a profound sense of the darker side of life and the necessity of judgement - of laying bare evil and distortion. C.G. Jung reminds us that the light and the dark exist together and that human self-confidence easily ignores the dark. The artist judges, and lays bare all kinds of human artifice and may have to hurt in the pursuit of truth. Yet love grows through acceptance, the kind of acceptance which Hurtle grows towards. As Paul Fiddes says, the other side of judgement is acceptance and they must interpret each other. [21]

For most of the novel, Hurtle remains in the realm of

judgement, not acceptance, and so he sees God in terms of judgement, as the divine vivisector. But God, the God who reveals Himself in the silence when images fail, is, in Carolyn Bliss's words, '.. the final unity in which all such antitheses as artist/vivisector or creator/destroyer are subsumed'.[22]

## Antinomy

To return for a moment to Chaim Potok's novel, Asher Lev comes to see that 'The demonic and the divine were two aspects of the same force. Creation was demonic and divine. Creativity was demonic and divine ... Then be a great painter, Asher Lev; that will be the only justification for all the pain you will cause. Paint the anguish of all the world ... But create your own moulds and your own play of forms for the pain. We must give a balance to the universe' (p.319). In other words, the demands of art reach beyond morality and the artist is, in a sense, untouchable. Only so can he be true to the truth he discerns. One sees evil in the truth; the evil is part of the truth of things. The quotation from Blake which prefaces The Vivisector makes this clear:

> Cruelty has a Human Heart,
> And Jealousy a Human Face;
> Terror the Human Form Divine,
> And Secrecy the Human Dress ...

Peter Beatson writes, 'This antithetical quality is itself part of the purpose of God. Joy and suffering, life and death, good

and evil, and love and hate work together to a higher end. Neither side is sufficient in itself'.[23]

## Art and Truth

The very fact that for White art is to do with the truth is highly significant. It is a profoundly hopeful understanding of art. Truth, the reality which the artist pursues, cannot be contained but is always elusive and dangerous. It is dangerous because art as judgement brings things to light. It is elusive partly because one sees evil in the truth, because the evil is part of the truth. The great achievements of White's artists are always tentative. The attention of the American client, Propert, who visits Hurtle's studio, is captured by a collage which is in process: '"What appeals to me is its tentativeness," Propert was saying. "I'd like to keep it in a state of becoming ... - before the music sets into architecture"' (p.461). Just as truth is elusive and can never be 'caught', so to impose a 'meaning' upon a work of art must be reductive. In The Solid Mandala, Arthur reflects ironically that '... it is ordained that great works of art should be exposed, becoming what they were never intended for: done-by-the-public sculpture' (p.118). Truth is what one pursues by necessity, it is not a possession.

It may be appropriate to make comparison between the truth which the artist pursues and the Gospel notion of βασιλεία (Kingdom). βασιλεία means 'kingly rule' or 'sovereignty' rather than just 'kingdom' and as such it is active, not

static. βασιλεία is germinal rather than complete. The presence of the germinal Kingdom of God challenges the men among whom it stands and calls for a decision while there is time. The Parables of the Kingdom evoke crisis when their truth is internalized. The costliness of the decision is emphasized but also the great value of the possession of God's Kingdom. The members of God's Kingdom are those who repent. The Kingdom of God has come so near as to provoke an unavoidable crisis: it is now for men to draw near to the Kingdom of God, to respond to it.

Truth, as active, then, is a matter of doing. As Hurtle's disciple, Don, says,

> But I know there's a point you can't sort of talk beyond. You can only do. Or be, sort of. And that is what Mr. Duffield. The painter. I can't talk. I can only. Why can't you let us alone to do? Otherwise there'll be nothing - no thing - done. There'll only be people squatting in front of the box, hoping somebody they thought too big for them will turn out as little as themselves. Then they'll be happy. Watching him pull himself off at a camera. (p.595)

Propert's sentences fracture under the difficulty of expressing what he believes. Truth is only to be seen in the active, effective vision of the artist, which is also a sacrificial vision. It is sacrificial because, as we have seen, the artist is victim to the necessity of his art.

The emphasis on 'doing' is, among other things, very Jewish. It is a kind of pragmatism - the awareness that,

because truth cannot be grasped, it is one's quest which is supremely important, the journeying rather than the arrival. So it is that, for the the Jewish Rabbis it is the midrashic process of dialogue, rather than answers, which is important. Similarly, Iris Murdoch writes that great art envigorates without consoling.[24] Or, as Carolyn Bliss states, 'Art may organize, emblematize and interpret experience, but it must not be allowed to supersede it'.[25] So, all White's artists fail to arrive at the truth which they pursue. The artist is limited not only by his own finitude but by his materials, which are never totally subject to him. As Peter Beatson points out, 'White's style, as well as his situations, emphasizes the dichotomy of aspiring soul and earth-bound body'.[26] This failure is presented symbolically in the fiction. In The Tree of Man, the postmistress, Mrs. Gage, sells her husband's paintings for a substantial price and uses the money to insulate herself from reality, the unsettling flux of existence, in the comfort of a suburban home. Alf Dubbo's paintings disappear, and Hurtle's final picture, though he has achieved 'the never-yet-attainable indigo' (which represents among other things an anagram for 'I in God') is blemished by brushhairs which cling to the painting, keeping it imperfect. Hurtle may reach towards God but never to Him.

## Art and Sacrifice

These paradoxes of art are discussed in a fascinating way by Harold Bloom, in his book The Anxiety of Influence (1973).[27]

He points out that man is by nature an interpretative creature - that he must interpret his experiences in order to make sense of them; only so can he maintain coherence and sanity. This means that human beings readily fall into closed systems of interpretation. The importance of the artist, therefore, is to break temporarily these settled perceptions and so allow 'truth' to break in. However, the artist, like everyone else, is prey to the abuse of interpretation. Art involves the quest for new perception in the wake of what has gone before - the quest for what Bloom calls 'discontinuity' -, for 'Every poet is a being caught up in a dialectical relationship (transference, repetition, error, communication) with another poet or poets'.[28] In order to do justice to both the steadfastness of the reality which the artist pursues and the newness of its revelation, art must seek discontinuity in continuity.

> ... repetition belongs to the imperfect which is our paradise. The strong poet survives because he lives the discontinuity of an 'undoing' and an 'isolating' repetition, but he would cease to be a poet unless he kept living the continuity of 'recollecting forwards', of breaking forth into a freshening that yet repeats the precursors' achievements.[29]

Kenosis represents for Bloom a radical opening to discontinuity - an emptying takes place in relation to the precursor:

> This 'emptying' is a liberating discontinuity, and makes possible a kind of poem that a simple repetition of the precursor's afflatus or godhood

could not allow. [30]

The truest moment of art, for Bloom, is the moment when interpretation is impossible, the moment of death - it is the point at which such kenosis becomes self-fulfilling.

This is precisely the case with Hurtle, who having been the Great Monster Self of The Aunt's Story, moves towards his truest artistic moment when his illusions are destroyed through illness, old age and finally death. He sets out to cross the vastest desert he has ever crossed, in which there are no mirages. Art in order to be art has to be destroyed. Rather as in the Cross, Christ has to be killed, but precisely His crucifixion is part of His salvific activity.

Paradoxically, then, while the artistic vocation is inescapable and vital, the only way finally to resolve the tension between acceptance and art as judgement, is to sacrifice one's art - only by sacrificing one's art is one true to art. The same can be said of Prospero in Shakespeare's The Tempest, in which the 'art' of Prospero, defending what is right, good and true, is necessary to ensure the brave new world for Ferdinand and Miranda, but ultimately that brave new world can only exist if the artist is self-denying. For Prospero, once the aims of his project have been achieved and once the limitations of his art have been acknowledged, then it is necessary to sacrifice his art.

I have bedimm'd
The noontide sun, call'd forth the mutinous winds,

> And 'twixt the green sea and the azur'd vault
> Set roaring war: to the dread- rattling thunder
> Have I given fire and rifted Jove's stout oak
> With his own bolt: the strong-bas'd promontory
> Have I made shake; and by the spurs pluck'd up
> The pine and cedar: graves at my command
> Have wak'd their sleepers, op'd, and let them forth
> By my so potent Art. But this rough magic
> I here abjure; and, when I have requir'd
> Some heavenly music, - which even now I do, -
> To work mine end upon their senses, that
> This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,
> Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
> And, deeper than did ever plummet sound,
> I'll drown my book. (V,i, 41-57)

An article by E.F. Osborn interestingly discusses the predicament of the artist. He draws attention to the inevitable distance between the flawed self of the artist and truth:

> Truth is quiet, sober, confined; true logos becomes silent in the presence of the highest, while art treasures its volubility because it treasures itself and wishes to become like the truth, indestructable and eternal. The enjoyment of art may lead to a limited but false self-knowledge based on egoism.... The abyss of faith lies beyond images and argument. The bad artist sees only the images in the Cave and construes the world in terms of his own dream life. We all have the bad artist and naive fantasist in us, seeing the world in terms of our own personal dream-life. [31]

There are a number of characters in White's fiction who are self-conscious artists, whose art is an attempt to escape the flux of the world rather than confront it, a form of self-indulgence. Waldo Brown in <u>The Solid Mandala</u> is a good example:

> ... he thought how safe he would be returning from the books in the Library to write his own. Comparatively safe, anyway. He would still have to

face Arthur and his own doubts. (p.106)

> Searching the faces in the streets for reflections of his own sentiments, he almost composed a poem. (p.183)

However, Osborn tells us, good art may pierce through the dream world and discern the real. In order to do so, the artistic quest must, as we have seen, be a sacrificial quest. Simone Weil writes that in art, 'though second-class work, brilliant or mediocre, is an extension of the self, work of the very highest order, true creation, means self-loss'.[32] Art involves questioning others' illusions and also the continual sacrificing of the artist's own illusions - the artist, then, is in a sense both priest and victim. Waldo Brown feels threatened by the 'true' artist Arthur:

> Perhaps he dreaded Arthur most of all, because of something Arthur might tell him one day. (p.167)

Osborn writes,

> By contrast, creative-imagination keeps on saying 'no' to 'the prompt easy visions of self-promoting fantasy'. The world of fantasy must be rejected, protective egoism must be pierced so that reality can be grasped. The artist's worst enemy is the cosy dreaming ego. Art, despite its abuse and Plato's concern, is still the best training for truth ... It is freer and more available, it touches ordinary life at so many points, and in its defenceless purest form it still pierces the veil of fantasy.[33]

So it is that in The Vivisector Hurtle's life is described as a series of ever-enlarging circles. His art is continually defeated at the hands of life. Carolyn Bliss points out that Hurtle undergoes six cycles, each associated with a woman and each ending with a symbolic death or disappearance which results in rebirth. [34] He must keep trying again, avoiding the mirages which 'offer illusory solace' (p.613). Finally, 'An immensity of space had given him his visual freedom, or more: he was being painted with, and through, and on' (p.614). So the career of the artist, too, involves a series of beginnings, '...of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become'. [35]

## Notes

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2. Austin Farrer, 'Poetic Truth', Reflective Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology (London: S.P.C.K., 1972), pp. 37-38

3. See Patricia Morley, The Mystery of Unity: Theme and Technique in the Novels of Patrick White (Toronto: McGill - Queen's University Press, 1972), p.111

4. Iris Murdoch, The Black Prince (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p.410

5. Terry Smith, 'A Portrait of the Artist in Patrick White's "The Vivisector"', Meanjin Quarterly, 31 (1972) 173

6. See Patricia Morley, op. cit., p.228

7. See Geoffrey Dutton, Patrick White (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp.6-7

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9. White, Flaws in the Glass (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp.70, 155

10. Veronica Brady, 'The Artist and the Savage God: Patrick White's "The Vivisector"', Meanjin, 33 (1974) 138

11. S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (London: George Bell, 1905), p.144

12. Iris Murdoch, op. cit., p.416

13. Chaim Potok, *My Name is Asher Lev* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974)

14. See Patricia Morley, op. cit., p.213

15. White, op. cit., p.70

16. See Karin Hansson, *The Warped Universe: A Study of Imagery and Structure in Seven Novels by Patrick White* (Lund: Lunds Universitet, 1984), p.221

17. Terry Smith, op. cit., 169

18. White, 'The Prodigal Son'

19. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Ark, 1985)

20. Quoted in D. Cooper, *Paul Klee* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949), p.5

21. Paul Fiddes, 'Patrick White and the Vision of God', *Christian*, 9, no.4, 51

22. Carolyn Bliss, *Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p.130

23. Peter Beatson, *The Eye in the Mandala: Patrick White: A Vision of Man and God* (London: Paul Elek, 1976), p.21

24. See Iris Murdoch, op. cit., pp.85-90

25. Carolyn Bliss, op. cit., p.98

26. Peter Beatson, op. cit., p.109

27. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973)

28. Ibid., p.91

29. Ibid., p.83

30. Ibid., pp.87-88

31. E.F. Osborn, 'Negative Theology and Apologetic', *Prudentia*,

Supplementary Number 1981, 61

32. Quoted in E.W.F. Tomlin, Simone Weil (Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1954), p.51

33. E.F. Osborn, op. cit., 62

34. Carolyn Bliss, op. cit., p.125

35. David Malouf - epigram to White, The Twyborn Affair (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981)

# CHAPTER 4

## SACRIFICE

> When man is truly humbled, when he has learned that
> he is not God, then he is nearest to becoming so.
> In the end, he may ascend. (Voss, p.384)

The verb 'to sacrifice' comes from the Latin word 'sacrificare', which means 'to make sacred'. This is precisely White's concern in his fiction - to reconstitute life on a 'religious' level, to rescue it from arbitrary and ultimately dehumanizing interpretations. His myth of Australia revivifies the notion of our primal myths, which point to what is most pressing and important, and seeks to save us from the abuse of trying to make over the world to our own specifications. Again, The Oxford English Dictionary defines sacrifice as 'The destruction or surrender of something valued or desired for the sake of something having a higher or more pressing claim'. White's heroic characters, such as Voss (Voss) and Ellen Roxburgh (A Fringe of Leaves) find themselves in situations in which they sacrifice themselves and increase in self-knowledge. As Beatson says, this act of sacrifice is sometimes reluctant, sometimes willingly accepted, but it must always be effected and endorsed, or the individual will die imprisoned in a limited self-awareness. [1]

White's myth of Australia makes it clear that man cannot by

his own will rebuild paradise. Paradise is already there and may in some sense be realized anew when, in Luther's terms, man recognizes the bondage of the will and the need to rediscover what is most worthwhile. It is in the dislocating environment of Australia that these basic values are re-negotiated. What is often necessary is the death of familiar and childish certainties. Only through such 'death' may it be possible to address the particularity of one's situation, rather than taking flight from it through false culture and pseudo-religion. This is the guiding theme of Voss, which I will consider in more detail in this chapter.

As we saw in the last chapter, the artist plays an important part in this whole process. His role is constantly to seek to uncover artifice and lay bare essential truths. As Donald Reeves writes in his recent book Making Sense of Religion (1989), the artist is an unarmed prophet, who

> may give public voice to the pain, grief and suffering of those whose cries we do not wish to hear. In what appears to be a way of life, a culture which is enduring and resilient, these artists draw attention to the frailty of what looks invincible. The root of their criticism is that what seems eternal is in fact fragile, and failing. It keeps the present provisional and refuses to make it absolute.[2]

One only recognizes the fragility of many day-to-day preoccupations when one grows in awareness of the particularity, or fullness, of the present moment, through crisis or willing sacrifice. As Laura Trevelyan in Voss says,

at the death of her maid Rose, 'I was destroyed, yet living more intensely than actual sunlight, so that I no longer feared the face of Death as I had found it on the pillow' (p.239).

## The Search for 'Pureness of Being'

The search for 'pureness of being', a condition of complete simplicity, is central to White's writing. In Voss, Voss tells Le Mesurier, 'To make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself' (p.34). Or again,

> Every man has a genius, though it is not always discoverable. Least of all when it is choked by the trivialities of daily existence. But in this disturbing country ... it is possible more easily to discard the inessential and attempt the infinite. (p.35)

White's early short story 'The Twitching Colonel' (1937), brings these perceptions to light in a striking way:

> But sleep confirms the importance of decay that is renewal and the relative unimportance of breast or thighs which Maud refuses to see, throwing a hawser round empirical reality and headaches and cups of tea so that she is attached to herself beyond escaping. Only in dissolution is salvation from illusion, in dream perhaps that is shadow of death, or decomposition of substance, the frail symbol of reality which man clutches, holding himself by the throat, strangling himself through fear while denying suicide, this is man ...[3]

As Le Mesurier says in Voss, 'The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming' (p.271).

The idea of sacrifice does not readily fit into conventional perceptions of what is important and meaningful. The Enlightenment represented a growing confidence in the essential rationality of man and his progress over his environment. Even in a century challenged by world wars, the Jewish holocaust and the nucleur threat, one is still constantly aware of unchallenged and unexplored assumptions as to human reason and progress, though such assumptions are claimed to be unfashionable.

## Establishing Moral Integrity

René Girard, in his literary study of anthropology Violence and the Sacred (1977), [4] seeks a return to essential moral concerns - questions of relationship, questions concerning life and death, love and hate. He shows that sacrificial practices are an attempt to address the reality of human violence. 'Violence, if left unappeased, will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area. The role of sacrifice is to stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitution and redirect violence into "proper channels"'. [5] Girard suggests that modern man, living in a world in which violence is regulated by law and institution, tends to rationalize his nature and its powerful potential for violence. As White demonstrates, man prefers to forget the fact that non-rational human processes are often what principally motivate people. In 'primitive' societies, however, there is an urgency to face these issues - '... where the slightest dispute can

lead to disaster - just as a slight cut can prove fatal for a hemophiliac' - the necessity of sacrificial practices is intensely felt, and through sacrifice aggressive impulses are redirected towards 'victims that may be actual or figurative, animate or inanimate, but that are always incapable of propagating further vengeance'. [6]

It is not difficult to see how all this is relevant to White's concerns, who is passionately concerned to uncover human potentialities, recover the fundmental moral concerns which face everyone, and strip them of their veneers. Girard goes on to state, again in a way which highlights White's concerns, that in 'primitive' societies, '... where every action or gesture may have irreparable consequences it is not surprising that the members should display a "noble gravity" of bearing beside which our demeanor appears ridiculous. The commercial, administrative, or ideological concerns that make such overwhelming demands on our time and attention seem utterly frivolous in comparison to primitive man's primary concerns'. [7] So, in the novel A Fringe of Leaves, Ellen Roxburgh's assumptions are radically challenged and renegotiated in the unsettling environment of the Australian outback, and she is brought face to face with the primal impulses of man, and her own ugliness and greatness, in the aboriginal society into which she is adopted. Later, brought back to 'civilization', she is aware of the vacuousness of much that here passes as important.

We are mistaken if we think that human impulses are

essentially <u>different</u> in 'developed' societies. As Girard points out, 'modern' society possesses just the same violent impulses but they are regulated and rationalized in our developed judicial system. 'In modern societies retribution still holds sway, but forged into a principle of abstract justice that all men are obliged to uphold and respect.' [8] Such institutionalization, however, may have a kind of deadening effect in so far as it insulates us as individuals from moral responsibility. 'The constant presence of a restraining force <the forces of law> allows modern man safely to transgress the limits imposed on primitive peoples without even being aware of the fact. In "policed" societies the relationships between individuals, including total strangers, are characterised by an extraordinary air of informality, flexibility and even audacity.' [9] This is again like the Australian 'exaltation of the average', which White describes, and which can be seen in every 'developed' society. John Austin Baker writes, in his book <u>The Foolishness of God</u> (1970),

> There is evil that stalks abroad and sickens every man's stomach. There is also evil so in tune with the spirit of the age that only the truly good suffer when they see it. Particular forms of Man's cruelty, greed, and arrogance may pass in and out of fashion, be checked or allowed by law. But the capacity of the human being for evil in general does not change. There is no 'progress', because progress here depends on the individual and his growth towards understanding, freedom, love. Each generation, each single life has to begin again, and to decide for itself what is good in its inheritance, what it will keep, what it will change. [10]

White, too, is concerned with the need to rediscover value and significance, rather than relying passively and uncritically upon received standards; like the Romantics, a process of disconfirmation and rediscovery is necessary.[11] In White's fiction the mildest forms of violence appear as horrifying, because they have been rationalized and their moral status unexplored. In Riders in the Chariot, the mock crucifixion of Himmelfarb is presented with such power because the violence being done is not even recognized as such, but is seen merely as a joke, akin to the play in a school playground. Similarly, the pettiness of Mrs. Flack and Mrs. Jolley, the suburban housewives in Riders in the Chariot, is realized as so evil, because they tend to clothe what are merely arbitrary conventions and blind prejudice with a veneer of 'morality'. '... the most devilish ideas will enter the heads of some women as they sit together in a house at dusk and listen to their stomachs rumble' (Riders in the Chariot, p.305). Beatson writes,

> for Patrick White, the categories of 'the ethical' and 'the spiritual' do not completely coincide. Moral flaws may be irritants or catalysts that lead to spiritual development. Ossification (and goodness can be a form of ossification) can be more spiritually damaging than perversity, since perversity carries with it the redeeming urge to 'reach the unknown'. To go beyond the normal, the reasonable, the 'decent', to be driven by a daemon or genius that expresses itself through the conquest of distance, in art or in the desire to create sensuous intoxication, is already to be exposed to a domain where justice ends and mystery begins ...
>
> The most important distinction in White is not between 'the good' and 'the bad' but between those

> who have undertaken the pilgrimage and those who have stayed at home.[12]

In a letter, White wrote, 'I feel that the moral flaws in myself are more than anything my creative source ... The churches defeat their own aims, I feel, through the banality of their approach, and by rejecting so much that is sordid and shocking which can still be related to religious experience'.[13]

As Bishop Baker, in the prophetic tradition, says, it is only the few - those who are uneasy in society, destabilized, alienated, like the few chosen 'zaddikim' who are described in *Riders in the Chariot* - whose self-sacrifice brings awareness of the real moral divisions. When we take for granted second-order institutions for regulating society, we lose sight of the real moral concerns and so fail to grapple with good and evil. The point of the story of Voss is that he *does* struggle with this evil, even if he fails in the end. Indeed, such failure is essential as part of the sacrifice.

### Love in 'homeopathic doses'

Moral categories, when abstracted, become empty words - no-one, for example, can define conventionally the word 'love'! White writes at the end of his autobiography,

> You reach a point where you have had everything, and everything amounts to nothing. Only love redeems. I don't mean love in the Christian sense. To lavish what is seen as Christian love, indiscriminately on all mankind, is in the end as

> ineffectual and destructive as violence and hatred. Love in homeopathic doses can be more effective than indiscriminate slugs of the other doled out to a sick society. Christian love has lost its virtue, as antibiotics lose theirs through over-dosage. Christians will say I don't understand Christian love. Perhaps I don't; it is too grand a theory. When I say love redeems I mean the love shared with an individual ... [14]

On the contrary, White seems to understand the practice of Christian love only too well. The idea of love in 'homeopathic doses' is a fascinating one. An example of this principle being put into practice is _Voss_. The unrealized love of Laura and Voss is precisely love in homeopathic doses. In medical terms, homeopathy involves the treatment of disease by drugs which in a healthy person would produce its symptoms. In other words, one gives poison to someone in order to fight poison. So in _Voss_ love is starved that it may flourish and be more intensely felt - 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder'! This is just the kind of paradox we find in Christianity - Christ died but lives. Coleridge says the same thing when he writes in _Aids to Reflection_ (1825) that the truth of Christianity is realized in the individual when he feels the want of it: 'Make a man feel the want of it; rouse him, if you can, to the self-knowledge of the need of it; and you may safely trust to its own evidence'. [15] This is so for Laura in _Voss_:

> ... there are certain beliefs a clergyman may explain to one from childhood onwards, without one's understanding, except in theory, until suddenly, almost in spite of reason, they are made clear. (p.386)

As Beatson says, all White's writing endorses Socrates' observation in Plato's Symposium, that love is typified by lack, not possession, by longing, not by fulfilment. [16]

> He <White> chooses to write of a more strenuous type of love, not the contentment of love achieved, but the perplexity, troubles and torments of love thwarted or distorted. Love is a memory and a desire; it is implanted in people from the very beginning as a dim intuition, and it directs a quest through the phenomenal world towards something which lies ultimately outside that world. [17]

White's point is powerfully realized in his work. The figure of Mrs. Docker in the short story 'A Cheery Soul' shows how love, when turned into an abstract principle, may become something very unpleasant, a kind of demonic parody of itself. To borrow words from another short story, whatever Mrs. Docker understands is 'punctual, decent and docketed'. [18] In Dutton's words, Mrs. Docker 'embodies the sin of militant virtue, of doing good to others whether they want it or not'. [19] Mrs. Docker's 'When you only want to help a person. When there are so many people waiting to be helped. So much Christian love waiting to be poured out on those who are willing to accept it. The world would be a wonderful place', [20] represents a kind of Christian parody. In a grotesque incident, a dog which she tries to befriend urinates on her. She realizes that 'dog' is 'God' turned round! [21] Mrs. Docker consistently fails to address the real demands of the situations she faces; instead,

she imposes her own misguided interpretation on others' experiences: 'It is all personal... I am God if I think I am. Only I would not be so bold. And sin. Sin is what you make it'.[22] Mrs. Docker's God is a reflection of herself, and she sacrifices people to her 'love' rather than engaging in the self-sacrifice which alone can challenge illusion. True love is recognized in the confusing particularities of experience. So, in The Solid Mandala, 'If Arthur made no attempt to convert Waldo to the love he preached, it was perhaps because love in the end becomes an abstraction like everything else' (p.211).

## The General and the Particular

White, then, is concerned constantly to try to realize the particular. This is the purpose of sacrifice. Art, as we have seen, in order to see the particularity of a subject and free itself from the abuses of interpretative activity, must constantly sacrifice itself. The point of White's constant attack on aspects of culture and society, is that 'civilization' tends to the general, the abstraction - we tame the world by generalizing -, whereas he is concerned with the particular, which involves breaking down defences, and with individual, existential experience.

## The Threat of Idolatry

White shows, then, that human beings cannot do without a notion of sacrifice, and that where such a notion is not acknowledged, it will re-appear nonetheless, often in the most

unpleasant ways. He constantly shows that a failure to grapple with the particularity of one's situation involves the creation of scapegoats, the projection of one's inadequacies outwards, rather than facing them oneself. In *Riders in the Chariot*, Rosetree externalizes himself and refuses to recognize his own particularity, by masking his Jewish roots in order to assist his social progress. The result is his disintegration and suicide.

White sees a world in which neutral things, like the trappings of wealth and social advancement, are allowed to develop lives of their own. Contrariwise, he seeks to rebuild categories which have been neutralized. The lesson his fiction teaches is that one must take upon oneself the consequences of good and evil, which the often arbitrary and artificial concerns of 'civilization' do not allow us to do. The consequences of trying to mask moral categories can be terrible - violence will erupt in the most sinister ways - as is demonstrated in the 'crucifixion' scene in *Riders in the Chariot*.

Attitudes easily become idolatrous. As these idols grow, we become dependent on them, and defend them, anxious that if they are challenged and collapse, we will have to face the unsettling flux of existence, and the real issues of life and death. Gradually the idol imprints its image on the maker, and so artificial barriers are erected which prevent us from properly reflecting and absorbing our experience - the experience of society is channelled into its own demonic, self-

perpetuating system. The narrator of _Voss_ reflects of the wealthy merchant Mr. Bonner, that 'The comforts, both material and spiritual, so conveniently confused in comfortable minds, inspired the merchant's residence' (p.155). When people like Mr. Bonner confuse priorities and make material comfort their highest priority, the value or worth of individuals is distorted. The importance of Voss's expedition into the Interior is that the real issues facing human beings are rediscovered in an environment which leaves no room for artificial securities. Imaginative, sacrificial exploration, of the kind undertaken by all White's visionaries, is necessary if experience is to be recovered as something real and vital. A sacrificial vision _is_ vital, because it generates awareness of the constant potentiality and life in a world of flux, which can also be threatening and dangerous, whereas the artificial stabilities which societies create can be deadening. This is why Laura Trevelyan in _Voss_ asserts that the only way to escape 'our inherent mediocrity as a people' is to intensify awareness through art. Sacrifice, by stripping away the layers of artifice, discovers the moral divisions which are often unrecognized or distorted. The important thing about Voss's life is that 'If he was composed with evil along with the good, he struggled with that evil. And failed' (p.445). His sacrifice is a willing attempt to uncover and put into practice moral categories - he recognizes and struggles with evil rather than rationalizing it.

'For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men' (I Corinthians 1: 23-25)

Those who do not wrestle with these moral categories are presented in White's fiction as somehow humanly stunted, because they do not engage in what is the most important quest of man. Voss tells Le Mesurier at the beginning of the novel, 'If I were not obsessed, ... I would be purposeless in this same sea' (p.33). Voss later reflects that 'Mediocre, animal men never do guess at the power of rock or fire, until the last moment before those elements reduce them to - nothing' (p.61). Or again Voss says to Laura,

> Atheists are atheists usually for mean reasons ... The meanest of these is that they themselves are so lacking in magnificence they cannot conceive the idea of a Divine Power ... But the God they have abandoned is of mean conception ... Easily destroyed, because in their own image. Pitiful because such destruction does not prove the destroyer's power. 'Atheismus' is self-murder ... (pp. 88-89)

As Kirpal Singh states, White is addressing a world where it often seems as though God is dethroned and man is master of his destiny. In response to this situation, White is searching for an integrated relationship between inner and outer realities. His answer is in terms of a 'via negativa'. He subverts common assumptions by implying that it is not that the universe is meaningless because there is no God to sanction it, but that <u>man</u> is meaningless until he can 'transcend his geometric coordinates and behold the mystery of the universe'.

[23] As Girard argues, the alienation and the civilized veneer of the way life is so often conducted does not allow moral categories to enter in; instead, only pragmatic categories are considered. This is why the 'heroes' in White's vision appear to others as 'mad' - because they do explore the real moral divisions. It is like the 'foolishness' of God, God as alien. Mrs. Poulter in The Solid Mandala reflects of Arthur, 'Of course she knew he was a nut. Though he wasn't. They'll say anybody's a nut. They said about Jesus' (p.300). Or as Arthur says, 'How could he tell them of his dreams ... except as something to laugh about' (p.224).

## The Old Testament

We live in a vestigially Christian culture which finds difficulty in assimilating the notion of sacrifice. A scholar like Jurgen Moltmann does a good deal to recover the notion of sacrifice as vital to the Christian life. The flight from the Hebraic culture out of which Christianity grew often makes it difficult to understand the sacrifice of the Cross. White's work, consciously or unconsciously, seems to return us to Hebraic insights.

Sacrifice was clearly an important part of the Israelites' covenant relationship with Yahweh. As in White, it sought to guard against trust in false security by for ever seeking to reconstitute life on a 'proper' religious basis. When any man offered a burnt offering or a peace offering, he laid his hand upon the head of the animal to symbolize the identification of

himself with it, so that its death might symbolize the removal of whatever stood between him and God, or his surrender of himself to God in gratitude and loyalty. The firstfruits were brought to God because they were seen to be His. The alternative was to make the world over to human specifications, which involved the creation of idols - anathema to Israelite religion. The fruits of the earth, as God's gifts to man, were only rightly to be enjoyed when they had been dedicated to God. The offerings, animal or vegetable produce, were things needed to support life, and as such were part of human life. Sacrifice involves giving these away but it also involves spiritual gain.

Therefore through sacrifice what was most dear to the community was sacrificed to ensure that what was most supremely important, the covenant relationship with Yahweh, would remain. The necessity of continually engaging in this process implies the realization of one's inability to be fully oneself - the paradox that to realize oneself involves the recognition of the impossibility of being fully oneself in the necessity of things. Any greater stability involves idolatry, because it involves finite ends. It is the need constantly to recognize oneself as part of the creation, rather than master of one's destiny. Sacrifice brings one back to one's true position before God.

It was essential to Israelite religion that repentance was of greater importance than sacrificial practices, and in cases for which no sacrifice was prescribed true repentance might lead to forgiveness. Sacrifice involves a longing to restore

things - to renew the Covenant. It is about *trying* to be what God created you to be. It is because the relationship between man and God is always broken that one must keep repenting and sacrificing. In the Old Testament, from Judges to the Exile, there is a recurring pattern: the people are disobedient; God punishes; the people repent; God sends a saviour, a judge for restoration. It is a circular process. So, in the Old Testament there is an eternal cycle of sin and repentance, and sacrifice is part of this repentance. It involves trying to get oneself right with the processes of creation, establishing oneself as created, and establishing where one's priorities exist. Where this process goes wrong and the creature is worshipped rather than the creator, the prophets are strong in their attack.

Perhaps it is not until Christ that there is a *willing* victim. The Cross is Old Testament sacrifice transfigured, because it is a willed *self*-sacrifice. White adheres to such a notion of self-sacrifice, and it may be useful to see his vision as a kind of transfigured notion of Old Testament sacrifice.

## Victims and Scapegoats

The following passage from *Riders in the Chariot* clearly illustrates these issues. Mordecai Himmelfarb, having escaped from a Second World War concentration camp, reaches Israel and meets his brother-in-law Ari.

> 'What do you believe, Ari?' Mordecai was compelled to ask.

'I believe in the Jewish people,' his brother-in-law replied. 'In establishing the National Home. In defending the Jewish State. In work, as the panacea.'

'And the soul of the Jewish people?'

'Ah, souls!' He was very suspicious, jabbing the earth. 'History, if you like' ...

'History,' Himmelfarb said, 'is the reflection of the spirit.'

Ari was most uneasy in his state of unemployment. He fidgeted about on his broad behind.

'Should we continue to sit, then,' he asked, showing his short strong teeth, 'and allow history to reflect us? That is what you seem to suggest.'

'By no means,' Mordecai replied. 'I would only point out that spiritual faith is also an active force. Which will populate the world after each attempt by the men of action to destroy it.'

'I did not tell you,' Ari interrupted, 'but Rahel and I have already made two splendid children.'

'Yes, Ari,' Mordecai sighed. 'I can tell that you are both fulfilled. But momentarily. Nothing, alas, is permanent. Not even this valley. Not even our land. The earth is in revolt. It will throw up fresh stones - tonight - tomorrow - always. And you, the chosen, will continue to need your scapegoat, just as some of us do not wait to be dragged out, but continue to offer. ourselves.'

Ari invests his hope in general, abstract concepts with an inappropriate weight - grand objectives become universal remedies. He creates idols out of abstract goals such as establishing the National Home, defending the Jewish State, and work 'as the panacea'. He creates idols of identity. They are concerns which are 'designed to blot out all the regrets and anxieties ... and guilt-laden feelings belonging to the past'. [24] Himmelfarb recognizes that the fulfilment of Ari and his family is illusory or momentary, that real fulfilment demands a radical re-orientation. It is less a matter of what people can

'do' or 'make' than what they can <u>be</u>. The concern to <u>make</u> children and <u>establish</u> the National Home must give way to offering oneself. This involves a recognition that 'nothing is permanent'. All empty concepts are drained of significance when people recognize a spiritual dimension and themselves as subject to a world of necessity in which basic concerns of life and death, love and hate impose themselves. This involves self-sacrifice. To avoid these issues is to create scapegoats, whether they be conceptual scapegoats, such as 'the Jewish nation' or 'work', or individuals. In this case, the Jewish people make <u>themselves</u> the scapegoats - it is part of their national awareness that they should do so. In practice, only the few will undertake the dangerous task of <u>offering</u> themselves.

In Chapter 5 of <u>Riders in the Chariot</u>, in Miss Hare's discussion with Himmelfarb under the plum tree, when Miss Hare has told him her name, Himmelfarb points out that the 'hare' is the sacrificial animal:

> 'In some parts of the world, they believe the hare offers itself for sacrifice.'
> 'Oh, no!' she cried. 'I do not like to believe that. One meets with too many knives by the way, without going deliberately in search of one.'
> 'The concept of the willing hare is surely less painful than that of the scapegoat, dragged out, bleating, by its horns.' (p.93)

Voss

The story of Voss represents in many ways an exploration of the notion of sacrifice. Voss has the moral courage for exploration, but he disastrously misapprehends the nature of the sacrifice he must undergo. He is dedicated to the self-deification of man to be achieved through self-sacrifice, but it is to be achieved through a sacrifice of all that is distinctively human, born of pride and will. Voss says, 'to make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself' (p.34); but, as Patricia Morley says, this aphorism is ambiguous and contains both the theme and its own demonic parody.[25] The self-immolation which he envisages is not sacrifice of the self but sacrifice to the self. His 'wife', Laura, counters this with acts of self-renunciation based on humility rather than pride. Experience teaches him, with Le Mesurier, that the mystery of life is not solved through success, by fighting and conquering one's physical limitations - which is an end in itself - but through failure, which is open-ended, and may truly lead to transcendence. He must learn to give himself - 'He would have liked to give, what he was not sure, if he had been able, if he had not destroyed this himself with deliberate ruthlessness in the beginning' (p.92). It is a matter of the individual refusing to make himself the final end.

The direction of redemptive sacrifice is towards the re-claiming of the self but on a new basis. In The Aunt's Story, only at the end does Theodora Goodman give up her quest for the

'freedom' of perfect emptiness; and, by doing so, she gains a new and altered access to her memories.[26]

## The Example of Kierkegaard - Fear and Trembling

A number of critics discuss White in terms of a Christian exstentialist in the tradition of Kierkegaard.[27] White shares with existentialist thinkers such as Kierkegaard a sacrificial sense of self-discovery involving surrender followed by recovery. Kierkegaard speaks of the necessity of 'losing one's mind', one's rational faculties, in order to grow in vision.[28] Those who do not open themselves to such self-sacrifice are subject to Kierkegaard's 'levelling principle', which is reminiscent of White's loathing of the exaltation of the average.

Kierkegaard's reflections on the sacrifice of Isaac in his book Fear and Trembling[29] throw light on our discussion. For Kierkegaard, Isaac represents the whole world for Abraham, and so Abraham's willingness to part with Isaac represents the renunciation of the human possibility of possessing the 'whole world'. 'Abraham is accepting that the good things in life, represented for him by Isaac, derive their value, not from the mere fact that they exist and can be valued, enjoyed, delighted in, but in the source of existence itself. Abraham is handing Isaac back in order to receive him again on the proper basis.'[30] This is reminiscent of Whitean characters such as Theodora Goodman in The Aunt's Story and Ellen Roxburgh in A Fringe of Leaves, who, after their journeys of purgation, must reclaim

themselves and face the mundane daily realities but on a new level. This is shown at the end of The Aunt's Story in the imagery of Theodora Goodman's hat with its defiant rose:

> So Theodora Goodman took her hat and put it on her head, as it was suggested she should do. Her face was long and yellow under the great black hat. The hat was straight, but the doubtful rose trembled and glittered, leading a life of its own. (p.287)

At the end of The Solid Mandala, Mrs. Poulter, after all she has experienced with 'the brothers Brown', '... turned, to do the expected things, before re-entering her actual sphere of life' (p.316).

To return to Kierkegaard's reflections, Abraham is forced to a situation where no illusions, and no doubts as to motive, are possible. Like Voss as he faces death or Hurtle Duffield as he reaches towards his 'never-yet-attainable indigo', faith may be said to be self-authenticating (no longer reliant on external proof, plain in itself). 'In intending to kill Isaac, Abraham has no other interest but to testify to his faith - faith that he is going to keep Isaac despite the impossibility of doing so if he puts Isaac to death. Abraham's faith cannot be the means of alleviating pain when it is the cause of the pain it is supposed to alleviate.' [31] As Colonel Trevellick reflects, in 'The Twitching Colonel', 'Only in dissolution is salvation from illusion'. [32] By contrast, Voss reflects on people of whom 'It could well be <said> that, in the surrender to selflessness, such individuals enjoyed a kind of voluptuous transport'

(p.48). Abraham is able to act in a way which unambiguously conveys his belief about the things he values, without his personal interest in these infecting the belief in a way which can normally make professions of faith suspect.

Kierkegaard's commentary on the sacrifice of Isaac shows that the impossibility of attaining something or someone one sets one's heart on, may be very creative. This is why White's religious quest is so vital; because categories are never presented definitively, the room for growth and exploration is immense. For Laura and Voss the chance of physically meeting again becomes increasingly less likely as the expedition makes its grim progress; yet the impossibility of their meeting in a curious way helps them to explore the richness of their relationship - again, 'homeopathic' love.

The problem which the sacrifice of Isaac raises for modern commentators is how one reconciles the idea that Abraham's sacrifice can be a good action because in fulfilment of God's command, with its being an action in total defiance of any conceivable ethical standard. It is a problem given haunting expression in Wilfred Owen's poem, 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young', where God's seemingly unreasonable demand upon Abraham is taken to its logical conclusion:

> But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
> And half the seed of Europe, one by one. (lines 15-16)

The story of the sacrifice of Isaac demonstrates that 'Abraham

acts as though there were a superior measure of moral performance which makes social intentions irrelevant; he supposes himself to have an absolute duty to God that overrrides the ethical defined as the universal'. [33]

White seems to have a very similar sense. In his work, as we have seen, the truly moral seems often to defy societal claims. It is when one is 'truly humbled', when one recognizes one's physical and spiritual need, that perceptions may be revivified and reality transfigured; and such a sense takes one beyond agreed or conventional categories of morality. To see the Deity in the contrived conditions of civilization is, indeed, for White at best futile and at worst demonic. This seems nearer to Old Testament conceptions than to what we think of as 'Christian morality'. There is a kind of arbitrariness in the accounts of God's treatment of man in the Old Testament. What has happened during its history is that a theological net has been placed over the Christian tradition, whereas the religion of the Cross constantly evades such definition. In any case, much of what we call Christian morality is a veneer comprising among other things pragmatic concerns and the concerns of expediency. Whitean characters such as Ellen Roxburgh and Hurtle Duffield challenge the complacent 'morality' which tends to be a substitute for genuine religious perceptions.

Kierkegaard was reacting against the philosophy of Hegel, who believed that the principles of social and political cohesion underlying any actual society, are expressions of

universal human goals. According to Hegel, then, in order to become moral the individual should conform to the principles of public morality that any state must be based on. 'The State', says Hegel, 'in and by itself is the ethical whole'. [34] According to such a view the kind of a-moral action I have been describing is morally evil. 'Hegelians would assume as a matter of principle that there is an inseparable link between acquiring the status of a developed human being and conforming ever more successfully to some accepted general specification of "human"'. [35] White shows how such a procedure can go disastrously wrong. As we have seen, he presents such conformity as often sinister. He shows that it is necessary to fragment our conformity so that the particular becomes very significant, if painful. 'In Abraham, <Kierkegaard shows>, the universal becomes an expression in turn of a humanity pre-established, as it were, at the level of the particular and no longer the category in which humanity is established... Where Hegelians believe individuals realise themselves by being taken up, consciously and willingly into the universal, Abraham represents a diametrically opposite view in which the universal - or the presence of a social intention - has first to be established prior to entering (or re-entering) the universal'. [36] Someone like Kierkegaard or White, is concerned when he sees people who have allowed themselves to be so much swallowed up in the system that they have lost sight of what it means to exist, of the sense of being a particular.

The Cross

In White's fiction, the Cross appears repeatedly as an image of self-sacrifice. Veronica Brady writes that each of White's visionaries undergoes a kind of 'crucifixion':

> Every one of his main characters in one way or another experiences a kind of crucifixion or is in some sense or another an equivalent of Isaiah's Suffering Servant who bears in his or her body the consequences of the sins of other people. They may begin with power and possessions, but increasingly they are drawn beyond them into some 'mystery of silence' within themselves, a mystery of worship, of 'waiting, not to give, but to receive' and so set apart from most of the people they live with.[37]

The final Cross-event, the moment of extinction, is the moment at which illusion is impossible. The Cross is the Christian existentialist moment 'par excellence' - the moment which will not yield to definition or theory, because it is the moment at which definition and theory are extinguished, yet the moment of departure for definition or theory. This is the kind of uneasy tension from which White creates his fictional world. One must live within this tension. The human aim is self-containment. Some kind of equilibrium is achieved through moments of self-sacrifice, rather like the Romantics' 'spots of time', but the tension is only resolved in the Cross. Carolyn Bliss says the same thing when she states that the quest of White's visionaries is a quest for 'individuation' yet knowing it beyond one's power.[38] Carolyn Bliss's whole theme in her study of White's fiction, the paradox of fortunate, facilitating

failure, makes this clear. Or to use the image of White's autobiography, Flaws in the Glass, there are always flaws in the glass of vision.

### The Example of Moltmann - The Crucified God

One of the classic twentieth-century texts of 'theologia cruxis' is Jürgen Moltmann's book, The Crucified God (English translation, 1974) [39] Again, it is a text which throws light on White's concerns. White's use of the symbolism of the Cross is, I think, telling, since the Cross is, as Moltmann makes clear, the ultimate destroyer of the idols and illusions projected in our lives. It aligns the destabilized or outcast with the divine, and puts an end to the alliance between God and the status quo. Moltmann writes,

> If faith in the crucified Christ is in contradiction to all conceptions of the righteousness, beauty and morality of man, faith in the 'crucified God' is also a contradiction of everything men have ever conceived, desired and sought to be assured by the term "God". That "God", the "supreme being" and the "supreme good", should be revealed and present in the abandonment of Jesus by God on the cross, is something that it is difficult to desire. What interest can the religious longing for fellowship with God have in the crucifixion of its God? ... [40]

Again, as in our discussion of the sacrifice of Isaac, faith in the crucified God can be self-authenticating, because it represents freedom from illusion. Moltmann contrasts 'The fatal and liberating contradiction which man experiences in his

most sacred religious feelings when faced with the crucified Christ' with 'the tacit religious assumptions of his modern criticism of religion, with which he legitimizes his flight and his contempt..., the self-deification of atheist movements of liberation ..., the post-Christian idolization of the laws of history and historical success, ... post-Christian confidence in an eternally productive nature'.[41] Committing oneself to the crucified God does not promise the confirmation of one's own conceptions, hopes and good intentions; rather, it promises the pain of repentance and fundamental change. 'It is not positive and constructive, but in the first instance critical and destructive. It does not bring people into better harmony with themselves and their environment, but into contradiction with themselves and their environments. It does not create a home for them and integrate them into society, but makes them "homeless" and "rootless"' ...[42] - strangers and pilgrims.

It is not difficult to see how these concerns relate to White. Moltmann describes the way in which, as the Church became the prevailing religion of society, and set about satisfying the personal and public needs of society, the more it left the Cross behind. For Moltmann, rather like White, dehumanized man is he who pursues his own interest and cannot let God be God, 'but must make himself the unhappy and proud God of his own self, his fellow men, and his world. At this level the word of the cross liberates dehumanized man from the fatal concern for deification'.[43] Dehumanized man uses his religious insights in the interests of his own self-

deification. As a result he becomes increasingly less human. 'The knowledge of the cross does not confirm him as what he is, but destroys him. It destroys the god, miserable in his pride, which we would like to be, and restores to us our abandoned and despised humanity. The knowledge of the cross brings a conflict of interest between God who has become man and man who wishes to become God.' [44]

We may remember here _Voss_, and Laura Trevelyan's 'three stages':

> How important it is to understand the three stages.
> Of God into man. Man. And man returning into God.
> (p.386)

In the next chapter, I will explore White's use of the imagery of the Cross further, looking in some detail at the episode of the mock crucifixion in _Riders in the Chariot_.

## Notes

1. Peter Beatson, The Eye in the Mandala: Patrick White: A Vision of Man and God (London: Paul Elek, 1976), p.48

2. Donald Reeves, Making Sense of Religion (London: B.B.C., 1989), pp.22-23

3. White, 'The Twitching Colonel', London Mercury, 35, no. 210 (April, 1937) 602-9

4. René Girard, Violence and the Sacred (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977)

5. Ibid., p.10

6. Ibid., p.18

7. Ibid., p.20

8. Ibid., p.21

9. Ibid., p.20

10. John Austin Baker, The Foolishness of God (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1970), p.402

11. See Stephen Prickett, Romanticism and Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p.277

12. Peter Beatson, op. cit., p.38

13. Quoted in ibid., p.167

14. White, Flaws in the Glass (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp.251-2

15. S.T. Coleridge, Aids to Reflection (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1825)

16. Peter Beatson, op. cit., p.42

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18. White, The Burnt Ones (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p.313

19. Geoffrey Dutton, Patrick White (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.35

20. White, op. cit., p.161

21. Ibid., p.189

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23. Kirpal Singh, 'Patrick White: An Outsider's View'; in R. Shepherd and K. Singh (eds.), Patrick White: A Critical Symposium (Adelaide: Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978), p.121

24. F.W. Dillistone, Patrick White's 'Riders in the Chariot': Introduction and Commentary (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), p.24

25. See Patricia Morley, The Mystery of Unity: Themes and Technique in the Novels of Patrick White (Toronto: McGill - Queen's University Press, 1972), p.124

26. See White, The Aunt's Story (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), pp.299-300

27. See, for example, Carolyn Bliss, Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp.184,206;

Patricia Morley, op. cit., pp.131, 190;

Veronica Brady, A Crucible of Prophets: Australians and the Question of God (Australian and New Zealand Studies in Theology and Religion, Sydney, 1981), p.71

28. Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.171

29. Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985)

30. Ibid. - Introduction by A. Hannay, p.21

31. Ibid., pp.22,23

32. White, 'The Twitching Colonel', op. cit., 607

33. A. Hannay, op. cit., p.28

34. Quoted in ibid., p.28

35. Ibid., p.30

36. Ibid.

37. Veronica Brady, op. cit., p.74

38. Carolyn Bliss, op. cit., p.206

39. Jürgen Moltmann, The Crucified God (London: S.C.M., 1974)

40. Ibid., p.37

41. Ibid., p.38

42. Ibid., p.39

43. Ibid., p.70

44. Ibid., p.71

# CHAPTER 5

## CRUCIFIXION AT BARRANUGLI

The themes of this study - the wilderness and the importance of place; exile, art, sacrifice - converge very subtly in Chapter 13 of Riders in the Chariot.

Mordecai Himmelfarb is a Jewish refugee, caught up in the German persecution of the Jews, who escapes from a concentration camp, and finally settles in Australia, where he dedicates himself to a life of simplicity and prayer. He lives in a shed in a suburb, Sarsaparilla, and does a mindless manual job at a local bicycle lamp factory at Barranugli (barren-ugly, bare-and-ugly). As an outsider, he is subject to the suspicion and mild contempt of many of the people he meets. He becomes a kind of 'type' of Christ. The following passage, for example, brings to mind Jesus' rejection at Nazareth (Mark 6:1-6):

> Others, still, suspected him of being some kind of nark or perve, and cursed him as he lifted them out of their own vomit. Once or twice, outside the synagogues, on the Sabbath, he had spoken to those of his own kind. They were the most suspicious of all. They became so terribly affable. And collected their wives, who were standing stroking their mink as they waited, and got into their cars, and drove towards the brick warrens where they hoped to burrow into safety. (p.308)

It is highly significant that White achieves in Riders in the Chariot a mixing of the European history of the last forty years with a recognizable literary subject - the Crucifixion story. Chapter 13 represents a coming together of the mythical and literary within a cultural experience. The terrible events of the war-years, described so movingly in Riders in the Chariot, seem to represent for White the nadir of the decayed European experience; they expose its decadence and rootlessness and demonstrate more than ever the need to re-establish a new sense of life's priorities. Twentieth-century European civilization, with its reliance on reason, is exposed as only a mask. It is with those who have been destabilized through suffering - the holocaust survivors like Himmelfarb - to whom we must look in tracing the direction we should take. The poor and the fragile reveal to us the fragile nature of our security, and our inter-dependence. In their innocence, they show us the way to salvation. White seems fascinated by the Jew as a personification of fragility. Himmelfarb says, 'It is only that I have grown used to living in a small wooden house, Miss Hare. I chose it purposely. Very fragile and ephemeral. I am a Jew, you see' (p.301). Himmelfarb represents 'disintegrating recreation', gaining life by losing it in its stagnant forms. It is as though White is saying that the Cross experience, precisely disintegrating recreation, must be realized anew in the Australian environment of exile. If we do not re-appropriate the Cross, which for ever questions merely conventional assumptions but provides a kind of stability which

society cannot offer, and bring it to life in our cultural situation, we become self-made, and White shows that the results are disastrous. White's 'spiritually dead' characters spend their lives in flight from suffering and death; but the denial and cover-up of suffering has a numbing and brutalizing effect on the human spirit which comes through very powerfully in this episode. As Beatson writes,

> Suffering is unavoidable; everyone must be caught by it sooner or later. One has no choice in the matter, but one does have a choice in the quality of the response. White's message is that the law of suffering is effective for regeneration not to the extent that his characters are subject to it, but to the extent that they endorse it, let it slide into the soul and marry the innermost part. [1]

This cover-up, too, involves a failure to address collective guilt - the guilt of the decadent society exposed so brutally to the wartime atrocities - and come to terms with essential human insecurity. At the end of Chapter 13, in the words of the foreman Ernie Theobalds, the preceding violence is implicitly linked with over-confidence in the democratic ideal, the kind of hopeless trust in 'knowledge' which Himmelfarb abandoned when he left Europe:

> 'Something you will never learn, Mick, is that I am Ernie to every cove present. That is you included. No man is better than another. It was still early days when Australians found that out. You may say we talk about it a lot, but you can't expect us not to be proud of what we have invented, so to speak. Remember that,' advised Ernie Theobalds, laying the palm of his hand on his mate's back.

(pp.416-17)

But Himmelfarb feels unsteady at this level of reality (p.417) and, as Voss also teaches, true knowledge comes of death by torture in the country of the mind. As Dubbo gazes at Himmelfarb, pressed against the jacaranda tree, he realizes that '... knowledge would never cut the cords which bound the Saviour to the tree' (pp.412-13). The rational ideal is frail and ineffectual when faced with active evil.

Because the factory workers create false securities, the effect is apathy, restlessness, and the kind of insane outbreaks of violence we see in this story. Vitality and energy spring from the realization that destruction may bring rebirth. Without the Cross we are threatened by vain self-confidence and idolatry.

## Surface and Deep Structure

In this passage, shifts between different levels of existence are constantly being effected by White's technique. The effect of the Crucifixion story is partly realized through his careful irony, in which what appears to be happening is not what is actually going on. As Holstius tells Theodora in The Aunt's Story, 'there is sometimes little to choose between the reality of illusion and the illusion of reality' (p.278). White asks us to reconsider what is actuality and what is dream. The façade of life is easily accepted as the only reality. For Theodora (The Aunt's Story), 'The "reasonable"

society, with its Frost-like façade of decency and politeness and its pretence that a smiling countenance denotes inner calm, is the "reality" which is madness'. [2] Riders in the Chariot plays on the idea of madness as spiritual sanity, while those who are blind to spiritual realities are depicted as truly mad. Mrs. Jolley condemns Miss Hare as mad in order to preserve her own illusion of sanity. Miss Hare sees 'mad' as 'a sad, bad word ... Because it leaves out half' (p.294). Himmelfarb is reluctant to call Miss Hare mad because of his involvement in the same madness - that is, the problem of redemption. Madness is seen as mission, a mission to rescue people 'from the rubble of their own ideas' (p.306).

Himmelfarb's 'crucifixion' is a very ordinary experience of the crowd instinct - the impulse to create scapegoats, the idolization of the lucky few at the expense of the 'different' ('the difference' bleeds the best - p.280). But, placed within the framework of the biblical Crucifixion story, it has a very startling effect. The passage demonstrates that the really important issues are present in the most apparently insignificant pieces of language and event. For example, one of the 'Lucky Sevens' spits at Himmelfarb: 'He had filled his mouth with water, and now attempted to spit it in the mouth of the damn crucified Jew'. One might conceive an echo here of St. Paul's 'he who hangs on a gibbet is outcast (damned)' (Galatians 3: 13). So in the most apparently insignificant language and gestures people are communicating the most significant attitudes. One is saying more than one actually

realizes. Popular clichés and aphorisms such as we find in the conversations between Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack also serve as vehicles for what Patricia Morley calls 'apocalyptic' or demonic utterance. 'This folk material permits the use of myth and archetype in a displaced technique of verisimilitude.' [3] Patricia Morley further points to remarks like '"Young people are the devil"' with reference to Blue, or the warning that herring with tomato sauce is '"asking for resurrections" with a sour stomach'. This contributes to the theme while being perfectly suited to the character and situation. [4]

The episode in Barranugli shows that what is important lies in the unheeded things, whereas society goes its way irrelevant to these important concerns. As the critic A.A. Alvarez writes,

> Society swarms around us - in most of its manifestations rather distasteful: all plastic, chrome, and banging machinery - while significant life runs on in isolation below this turbulent surface, like the green, unnoticed river which flows beside Rosetree's 'Brighta Bicycle Lamps' factory at Barranugli. Which, according to Patrick White, is where the crucifixion took place. [5]

White's irony demonstrates that that which in social terms is often celebrated as most real, is merely artificial. Those who work in the bicycle lamp factory make artificial lamps, but their most pressing interests lie elsewhere. They live an essentially limited existence:

> It was, for one thing, the eve of Good Friday, and who was gunna work when Easter had as good as come? Better to close down, was the general

> opinion, and see to it that the meat was got home, and enough booze to last the holidays. But in the absence of common sense and justice, everybody sat and expected. Or toyed slightly with the metal parts which it was the habit of their second natures to put together. (p.401)

White, by identifying the usually unheeded but vital concerns, urges us to set out and follow the true light, 'a light that will reflect out over the community - all the brighter from a bare room' (p.128) - seen in such people as Himmelfarb. Himmelfarb, then, represents something stable, despite all his apparent instability as an exile and outsider.

## Irony and Parody

Wayne Booth in his book A Rhetoric of Irony (1974) [6] sets out four marks of stable irony: The irony is intended; it is covert - intended to be reconstructed with meanings different from those 'on the surface'; it is stable in the sense that 'once a reconstruction of meaning has been made, the reader is not then invited to undermine it with further demolitions and reconstructions'; [7] it is finite in application - the reconstructed meanings are in some sense local and limited. Stable irony '... delimits a world of discourse in which we can say with great security certain things that are violated by the overt words of the discourse'. [8]

The kind of stability that White is seeking to recover through his irony, one which he obviously feels is in danger of being lost, is the stability of suffering love. In irony of

this kind, the 'normal' and the 'mad' are inverted. The characters who are opposed to or excluded from the decadent society have the reader's sympathy, because the reader takes another meaning from the one intended by the character in the fictional situation. Irony shows the desirable society, in this case the society of the four 'riders', in its infancy, suppressed by the society it should replace. [9]

One of the advantages of White's irony in this passage is that, since cruelty often takes on a comic mask, and Blue's sadistic treatment of Himmelfarb masquerades as a joke, it is fitting that it should be unmasked and exorcised by the technique of comic parody. Also, as Beatson says, White's irony 'is a reflection of his constant and inescapable sense of the imperfection and limitation of the human vessel, the inherent inadequacy of form to convey the full implications of idea'. [10]

More particularly, our passage constitutes a parody of institutionalized Christianity. Parody must have a victim. The victim's style is imitated and distorted. In reading parody, we make use of external references in order to understand what the parody is attacking. In White's case, he is parodying the merely conventional interpretations which tend to domesticate the Cross. As we have seen in our consideration of the artist, parody has an important part to play in the 'defamiliarizing' process. The Cross is repeated in a new incongruous context and is thus made perceptible again. Literature must be permanently self-conscious and recognize its continuous need for self-appraisal and re-alignment. [11]

White discovers the vitality of the Cross through parody. By parodying the Cross, he establishes it, for parody bites into our interpretations and strips away accretions. Familiar imagery is distorted and used in unfamiliar contexts and so is revivified.

The point is, too, that the Cross is itself a parody, a parody of the whole Jewish and religious institution at the time of Christ, in which anyone hanging on a gibbet would be unclean. The Cross, as we have seen, is by definition resistant to theory and institution, though it may set the agenda for theory and institution, for in the Cross self-consumption becomes self-fulfilling. So if it is to be realized afresh, the Cross must be realized as a parody of theory and institution. All modern attempts to represent the Crucifixion must be parodies if they are to succeed. White effectively does what the Passion narrative does, on the Passion narrative!

Wayne Booth points to the double irony implicit in St. Mark's account of the Crucifixion of Jesus:

> The cry 'Hail, King of the Jews,' an example cited by Thomas Hobbes, was intended initially to satirize Christ's followers who had claimed him as king; presumably the chief pleasure for the shouting mob was the thought of the victims, including Christ himself. But what of Mark as he overtly reports the irony ironically in his account of the crucifixion? [12]

The second irony here, of course, is that Jesus is a King, and so the joke is reflected back onto the jesters. This is

precisely what happens in White's account. White shows how the willing scapegoat subverts the cruelty of the tormentor, because the inadequacies of the tormentor are brought to light. White's account makes it clear that the tormentor, Blue, is the obscenity, because he is unable to address his condition.

When one plays games with the Cross, as Blue and his friends do, the Cross, against all expectations, may come to life. The joke which the factory workers play becomes a joke against itself. They play a joke with the Cross but become the <u>object</u> of the joke. They persecute the 'Jews who crucified Our Lord' but fail to recognise that Jesus was a Jew!

One of White's frequent concerns is that the Cross has become for many people a cliché, a comforting image to wear on a chain around one's neck. The wife of the manager of the bicycle lamp factory, Mrs. Rosetree, has a little gold cross:

> Whenever she got excited it bumped about and hit her breasts, but it was comforting to wear a cross .. (p.208)

The artist, Alf Dubbo, is not able to unite the Christian stories he is told as a child with his own experiences and intuitions:

> The parson told of spiritual love and beauty, how each incident in Our Lord's life had been illuminated with those qualities. Of course the boy had heard it all before, but wondered again how he failed continually to appreciate. It did seem he could grasp only what he was able to see (p.320-

21)

> Mostly he read the Bible, or the few art books he had bought, but for preference the Books of the Prophets, and even by now the Gospels. The latter, however, with suspicion and surprise. And he would fail, as he had always failed before, to reconcile those truths with what he had experienced. Where he could accept God because of the spirit that would work in him at times, the duplicity of the white men prevented him considering Christ, except as an ambitious abstraction, or, realistically, as a man. (p.371)

It is not until the 'joke' at the bicycle lamp factory that Dubbo's Christ is rediscovered. So too, in The Solid Mandala, Mrs. Poulter's crucifix dramatically falls to the ground, and the spotlight is moved to the simpleton, Arthur, suffering on behalf of his brother. 'Then <Mrs. Poulter> fell down ..., bludgeoned by this moment at which the past united with the present, her own pains with those of others' (p.304).

Paradoxically, if one sets out to re-present the crucifixion again, without nuance, the effect is a bloodless, lifeless representation, because one simply repeats the events together with two thousand years' interpretations and accretions, which we take for granted; whereas if one sets out to parody, or 'creatively deform', the Cross, as White does, one may realize its power. As Moltmann writes, 'To restore Good Friday in all its horror and godlessness (Hegel) it is necessary for Christian faith first of all to abandon the traditional theories of salvation which have made the way the cross is spoken of in Christianity a mere habit'. [13] Our passage shows us how the artist White - the kind of artist he shows us in his

fiction, in someone like Duffield - is presenting the Crucifixion. What White is doing in this chapter is what he is exploring in terms of his own great fictional artists. It is in writing like this that 'vivisecting' becomes recreative. Chapter 13 of Coleridge's Biographia Literaria tells us that the secondary imagination defamiliarizes, parodies, in order to rediscover the essence of a thing. [14] Continuing the theme of sacrifice, it is when the image of the Cross is 'offered up', that its powerful particularity may be realized.

In this passage, Himmelfarb's 'crucifixion' is not a crucifixion because it remains at the level of a joke, yet because it fails to be a crucifixion and Himmelfarb fails to be Christ, it realizes the truth of the crucifixion and Himmelfarb becomes most Christ-like. As Carolyn Bliss states, it is precisely Himmelfarb's failure to become Christ, together with his recognition and acceptance of this failure, which make him so Christlike. [15] Konrad Stauffer suggests to Himmelfarb, 'I wonder whether the pure aren't those who have tried, but not succeeded ... atonement is possible perhaps only where there has been failure' (p.163). In order to re-present the significance of the Cross, it must be realized anew as, in the world's terms, a 'failure'. Because the Cross has been institutionalized and triumphalized, the only way to achieve this is to make the Crucifixion story fail on its own terms. White's story never exactly follows the sequence of events of the Crucifixion story. For example, though Himmelfarb dies on Good Friday, his 'crucifixion' takes place the day before.

White's method is much more subtle than mere allegory or representation. Nevertheless, the allusions are clear, and they 'bite' because of the nature of the narrative.

### Theodore Ziolkowski: Structural Analysis

Another important text in relation to White's chapter, is Theodore Ziolkowski's book, Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus (1978).[16] Ziolkowski points out that we live in an age which, 'having no strong religious ties, has come to regard the figure of Jesus with an aesthetic detachment bound by few preconceptions of doctrine and denomination'.[17] This situation, he suggests, can have a liberating effect. As Moltmann says, 'The more post-Christian humanism breaks away from the religious and humanist "roses" of the cross, the more Christian faith today is forced back upon the naked cross without all the roses of tradition'.[18] Ziolkowski defines a genre called 'fictional transfiguration', which, he says, is 'a fictional narrative in which the characters and the action, irrespective of meaning or theme, are prefigured to a noticeable extent by figures and events popularly associated with the life of Jesus as it is known in the Gospel. The action, the imagery and the organisation identify him beyond any doubt as a "transfigured" Jesus'.[19] In these 'transfigurations', it is the structural parallels which establish the parallel between the original source and the modern counterpart, and the meaning can range from a serious re-interpretation to parody.[20] This is like 'iconotropy' in

art, when an image associated with a particular context is used in a new context. In this process, the associations which the image arouses expand the implications of the painting and produce a more universal significance.[21] By contrast, F.W. Dillistone, in his book The Novelist and the Passion Story (1960)[22] and in his commentary on Riders in the Chariot (1967),[23] takes as his criterion theme rather than structure - that is, the power of redemptive suffering:

> There is always a central character who is ready to accept suffering and even death in the service of a transcendent value, a worthy end.[24]

I suggest that, as an approach to the text of Riders in the Chariot, Ziolkowski's is more appropriate. The chapter forces us to reflect on White's narrative method - the way in which he changes, distorts and elaborates the structure of the Passion Story - and it is through such reflection that a sense of theme emerges. Parody is revealed through structural parallels.

In 'fictional transfigurations', Ziolkowski tells us, the death presents a challenging fictional problem, 'because crucifixion is no longer fashionable',[25] so recourse may be had to satire and incongruity. In Himmelfarb's case, his 'crucifixion' is a bad joke, a kind of parody of the historical event. The structure of the story-telling reflects with reasonable accuracy the story of Christ's death, yet the hero does not even die publicly, but is rescued by the foreman who assures him that it was all a joke and done in the best

traditions of Australian banter. Himmelfarb's humiliation is thus intensified and in the process, paradoxically, the resonances of Christ are all the stronger. The parody reaches its climax when Himmelfarb walks quietly away - '... it had not been accorded to him to expiate the sins of the world' (p.418). The use of the structure of the Gospel parallel arouses certain expectations in our imagination, and our reaction very much depends on the manner in which these expectations are fulfilled. '... if the author contrives to satisfy our expectations in an unexpected way, our enjoyment is enhanced'. [26] This is just where White is so successful. He employs just that 'psychological insight' and 'ironic understatement' which Ziolkowski enjoins. [27] If the Cross is the necessary image which shatters all images, then to evoke this image but at the same time break it down, is to evoke it all the more strongly, because one is doing what the Cross does within its tradition. In all art, when one starts playing games, one may realize the powerful prticularity of one's subject.

**The Text**

As Wayne Booth states, most ironies are richer than any translation we might attempt into non-ironic language, so there is a sense in which interpreting our passage must be a failure. Usually indeed, the process of reconstructing irony is so fast and intuitive that to hesitate and describe what is happening is difficult and in a certain sense 'spoils the game'. One is left constantly with the feeling that one is merely repeating

platitudes, whereas the effect of reading the text itself is much more complex and powerful.

As has been suggested, the narrative structure of this passage is so effective, because the mystery of redemption at the heart of Christianity is realized anew by placing the pattern of Calvary over everyday events, or vice versa. The result is that unexamined assumptions and attitudes take on an astonishing importance. Our everyday encounters become part of the drama of the Cross.

I suggest that in this passage and throughout White's fiction, the great 'betrayal' which man engages in consists in the erosion of moral categories, leading to a lack of hope and a dulled imagination. It is a failure to realize what is really important. Life becomes a matter of luck - of winning the lottery, like the 'Lucky Sevens' in our passage. Suffering is rationalized or not recognized - 'Nothing is cruel if you don't see it that way' (p.397). People like Mrs. Flack and Mrs. Jolley show that the most insidious sin consists in moral blindness, defining others in the light of one's prejudices. This involves a failure to 'see' - 'I do not think Mrs. Jolley sees beyond texture-brick and plastic' (p.300). Our passage calls us to unmask idolatries, and face up to what is really happening, and who does what to whom, and why. Artificial securities represent a form of bondage from which people need redeeming. Travelling from the home of his employer, Mr. Rosetree, where Himmelfarb had been to invite him and his family to share the Passover, 'In the compartments, no one but

the Jew appeared to notice they were returning to a state of bondage they had never really left' (p.391). On this journey, there is, too, a very vivid description of the squalor engendered by the consumerism of an Australian city; it is as though White is implying that this is the state into which we dissolve without transcendental categories. Patricia Morley sees the city identified with the doomed city of Sodom and the sorrow of the Babylonian exile and captivity.[28]

Mankind's betrayal is seen in the twisted attitudes of people like Mrs. Flack. Blue telephones Mrs. Flack to tell her of his success in the lottery. The substance of this conversation is that one must enjoy one's luck when one has it and husband it carefully, while protecting oneself from everything that threatens one's security:

> Because there is so much that is far from nice. Which reminds me, Blue, someone that we know of was visiting last night, so I am told, by lantern-light, a certain person. Yairs, dear. Forgetting, it would seem, the time of year. It was them that crucified Our Saviour. Tomorrow. Think of it. Tomorrow! Yet, someone that we know of must consort - to put it blunt ... Do not think I am bitter, as has sometimes been suggested. I am not. I am realistic, that is all, and must bear the consequences of seeing things as they really are. And suffer every Easter to know the Jews have crucified Our Lord. Again. Blue? Something that the young do not need to understand. Not while they have their lovely bodies. Eh? Blue? Enjoy, boy, enjoy, then! Bust your skin open, if that is what you want! It is only a game to let the blood run when there is plenty of it. And so red. Nothing is cruel if you don't see it that way. Besides, it lets the bad out, too, and I would be the last to deny there is plenty of that waiting to turn to pus in anybody's veins (p.397)

One of the ironies here, of course, is that Jesus was a Jew, and that people like Mrs. Flack continue to crucify Him. Far from seeing things as they really are, the point is that Mrs. Flack fails to see things as they really are. Also, however, there is the double irony that in one sense she does see things as they are; on one level hers is a realistic assessment. Here, as often in White's fiction, the demonic is presented as a parody of the desirable state. Mrs. Flack is 'realistic', pragmatic, and she fails to move beyond realistic and pragmatic categories - she fails to perceive what is going on beneath the surface. As Peter Beatson writes, people like Mrs. Flack tend to identify the 'I' with their thinking, their doing or their having. 'They fortify themselves in the rational, social ego, and from this citadel they try to construct a sense of reality of both the nature and possibility of the external world and the meaning and processes of their own psyches.' [29] The result is that Mrs. Flack represents the sin of defining everyone else in the light of her prejudices, making the world over to her own specifications. In her attitudes, evil dresses itself up as goodness. Such evil is plausible and in a certain sense attractive, rather like Satan in Milton's Paradise Lost. The implication is that this is precisely the evil which Christ redeems.

For people like Mrs. Flack and her friend Mrs Jolley, the end, death, is insignificant - practical (an extremely prosaic word), whereas for White's visionaries, death is often the

touchstone of their spiritual resources. In The Eye of the Storm, Elizabeth Hunter acknowledges the difficulty and importance of death:

> Extraordinary the number of people who insist that death must be painless and easy when it ought to be the highest, the most difficult peak of all: that is its whole point. (p.184)

Mrs Jolley asks, 'Are we a pair of crows!' This is precisely what they are for White - perhaps carrion crows, associated with society's putrefaction.

People like Mrs. Flack fail to distinguish between light and dark. These categories have become overtaken by artificial demands. When Himmelfarb wakes up on the morning of the 'crucifixion', he thanks God for giving the cock the intelligence to distinguish between light and dark, but man has known better and operated on the cock!

The artist Alf Dubbo, who also works in the factory, is identified with Peter, and at the crucial moment is unable to commit himself to Himmelfarb:

> At times the abo would shiver, though. Especially when recognised by the Jew. He did not want that. He did not wish to become involved in a situation which he might not have the strength to endure. But which he must learn ultimately to express. (p.402)

The detachment of the artist is implicitly linked to Peter's denial - he shuns active involvement but seeks artistic expression.

The questions of the factory owner, Rosetree, to Himmelfarb, asking him why he has come to work when it was suggested he stay at home, bring to mind Pilate's questioning of Jesus. Rosetree asks,

> 'What for you come when I told you to lay off over "Pessach"?' Mr. Rosetree sputtered.
> Himmelfarb replied:
> 'I have never escaped the consequences by avoiding them.' (p.403)

There is here judgement of Rosetree. The whole point of the apparently inevitable series of events leading to Himmelfarb's 'crucifixion' is that Himmelfarb, the suffering Jew, is among those who recognize the real consequences of their actions, who have eyes truly to discern the 'real' beneath appearances. The horrifying implication of the overtones of Calvary and Pilate's disclaiming of responsibility is that to truly 'see' must, as with the artist who sees so intensely, lead to suffering.

While Rosetree is speaking to Himmelfarb, there is an intervening episode in which a circus processes through the street outside. Rather as in Shakespeare's plays, such as Antony and Cleopatra (V,ii), or in the doorkeeper episode in Macbeth, examples of the dramatic device of 'the fool', this episode, in which a clown pretends to enact a public hanging on the platform of a lorry, is not only proleptic, but by escaping into humour, heightens the growing intensity of the scene. Further, the path of redemptive suffering is a 'foolish' path in that it means breaking away from easy securities, truly

facing consequences. Also, the clown here seems in many ways to be the key to White's narrative method in the passage as a whole. White's method of treating the Cross throughout the passage shows that when one makes something a joke, one may recognize its significance. Humour reveals. So, a second procession, a funeral procession, meets the circus procession, and,

> As the clown spun at the end of his rope, and the little property coffin hesitated on the brink of the lorry, and confusion carried voices, brakes, horses' wind into the upper register, a woman rose in the first funeral car, or stuffed herself, rather, in the window: a large, white woman - could have been the widow - pointing, as if she had recognised at last in the effigy of the clown the depth, and duration, and truth of grief, which she had failed to grasp in connexion with that exacting male her now dead husband. (p.404)

The ability to laugh at oneself is so important because it involves a recognition of the essential inadequacy of the human being, despite all his aspirations, and at the same time it may point beyond. 'It is not the meaninglessness of the universe and the futility of all human enterprise that makes man absurd. On the contrary, man's absurdity exists in face of a fullness of Being so vast that his pretensions can only be seen as comic. The clown's mask in White does not conceal a void. It is stretched over a plenitude so rich and charged with meaning that no human face is adequate to express it'. [30] White writes repeatedly that life is a tragi-farce. [31] Through the joke played on Himmelfarb, those with eyes to see catch something of

the significance of Christ, through participation in the Divine Comedy of redemption. Humour is a test of affinity and a sign of recognition. It can, moreover, be both cathartic and demonic. Patricia Morley writes,

> Each of the Riders has been shown, more than once, to be a comic figure in the eyes of the world, although each experiences the depths of suffering. In the interlocked processions of life and death, seen by White as the Divine Comedy where death is not an end but a beginning, the answer to the mystery of failure is centred in the lolling figure on the 'divine tree'. The demonic parody of this aspect of White's vision is found in 'the convention which demanded that cruelty, at least among mates, must be kept at the level of a joke', and the fact that 'there is almost no tragedy which cannot be given a red nose'. [32]

We are returned to Rosetree, who is trying to insure himself against the possibility of guilt for what may happen. Rosetree is one who has had experience of the destructive potential of collective behaviour, but rather than address it, he has chosen to take the easy way out, by insulating himself in a cosy home and renouncing his own Jewish roots. Like Pilate, his concern is expediency.

> 'I must ask you, I must order you to leave!' ...
> 'It could be for your own good,' Mr. Rosetree threatened.
> But the Jew smiled sadly. He was not so sure.
> 'At once. Before.' The boss was booming and exuding.
> The shaped, but silent words bounced like blown egg-shells.
> The Jew had replied in his own vein of sad irony:
> 'You will not be blamed.'
> Sometimes the velvet belting of machinery

> actually soothed.
> 'Nobody but myself,' Himmelfarb could have been saying, 'will be held to blame for anything that may happen. (p.405)

Himmelfarb is not so sure that to leave would be for his own good. The implication is that it is for his own good, rather, that he should face his 'cross' - a sense of 'not my will but thy will be done' (Mark 14:36). The cross one is called to bear involves for White facing consequences, discerning the 'real' beneath appearances. Rosetree's words, on the other hand, bounce back at him, hollow, failing to explore his real feelings.

Rosetree then resigns the situation to the gathering storm and disappears into his office to make a telephone call. The immediate betrayal is Rosetree's who, significantly, as Judas, later hangs himself. Rosetree, then, as both Pilate and Judas, is in both roles the betrayer. He tries to convince himself that he has done his best to placate the situation and he tries to salve his conscience by imagining that Himmelfarb, not the excited workers, is the enemy of reason:

> Mr. Rosetree continued up the stairs, inadequately protected by the knowledge that he had done his best. If there was an enemy. of reason, it was the damned Jew Himmelfarb, who must now accept the consequences. (p.406)

Himmelfarb has to endure something of the stripping and mocking of Christ, though his shirt is only torn off by

accident.

> 'You bloody buggers!' Blue laughed. 'You black bastards!'
> The Jew's shirt surrendered up, most comically, a long, unprotesting strip. (p.408)

The crowd chants:

> 'Go home! Go home!' giggled and chanted the young girls.
> 'Go home to Germany!' sang the older women.
> There was a clapping and stamping as the men's chorus interpolated:
> 'Go home! Go home! Go home to hell!' (p.409)

(Later, pp. 413-14, a young girl throws an orange at him, and one of the 'Lucky Sevens' spits at him:

> Then a young fellow, one of the Sevens, called Rowley Britt, came down, who remembered his mother dying of cancer of the bowel. He had filled his mouth with water, and now attempted to spit it in the mouth of the damn crucified Jew. But it missed. And trickled down the chin.

This is reminscent of the offering of the sponge to Jesus.)

In all this, as has been said, the most significant things are revealed in the most apparently insignificant pieces of language. In the taunting, one can easily place oneself anywhere from a school playground to a contemporary city suburb to 1930's Berlin. The chanting is especially dreadful because it brings resonances of attitudes often regarded as 'respectable' - 'It is the foreigners that take the homes'

(p.410). The insidiousness of racism is forced upon us, and striking too is the way in which the racially 'different' in societies are implicitly linked with Christ.

Attention is then focused on an old jacaranda tree in the yard, and it is clear that this is going to become the 'cross'. As a cross, it is singularly unimpressive, 'lopped back before its season of blue', 'deformed and angular', and it is only the artist Dubbo, who is 'in the vision', who is able to see it as the 'divine tree' (p.409).

Throughout the passage, human motive and emotion are realized very persuasively and with great psychological insight. We gain a strong sense that the banality of suburban life is the power which crucifies Christ:

> Men usually decide to destroy for very feeble reasons. ... It can be the weather, or boredom after lunch. They will torture almost to death someone who has seen into them. Even their own dogs. (p.304)

It is ironic that Himmelfarb, who has survived a concentration camp, should be destroyed in peaceful Sarsaparilla; but, as Miss Hare tells Mrs. Jolley (p.293) 'all bad things have a family resemblance' - there is a chain of evil (p.305). We are asked to relate obvious dramatic evil, such as the Nazi treatment of the Jews, to the quietly insidious evil lurking in the acts of daily life. In The Solid Mandala, Waldo Brown tries to idealize Australian society and absolve it from its part in the collective guilt: 'What's that to do with us? We don't put

people in ovens here'. Arthur retorts, 'We didn't think of it' (p.174). A number of critics - for example J.F. Burrows and R.F. Brissenden - object that the evil which Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack set in motion is insufficiently motivated. [33] However, White believes that evil is like this, and that it reveals a tragic dimension in existence which cannot be explained away. For example, the kind of vicious curiosity which makes a child pull the legs off a spider, is superbly realized:

> <Himmelfarb> had begun to bleed from above his left eye, which appeared to the mass of the spectators both repulsive and rewarding. (p.409)

To point to these easily recognizable human impulses and present them within the structure of the Crucifixion story is most disturbing. Not only does it achieve a real purchase-hold on experience, but it brings this experience back into the drama of the Cross and so rescues the Cross from religious frigidity. The whole process is extremely evocative and disturbing.

Similarly, the theme of the scapegoat is very strong in the passage, and a repeated emphasis is how maddening it is for people when a willing sufferer breaks the circle of retribution and spoils the game:

> Some of the men would have taken a hammer, or plunged a knife, if either weapon had been at hand. Into the Jew, of course.
> Nor would the latter have protested. That was

> what maddened the crowd. His mouth was not even set to endure suffering, but was ever so slightly open, as if to receive any further bitterness. (p.409-10)

As Himmelfarb is rammed against the tree trunk, Blue feels moved to remind his friends that it is only a joke and they should be less rough - he 'could not lose sight of the convention which demanded that cruelty, at least amongst mates, must be kept at the level of a joke' (p.410). As we have seen, where something becomes overt cruelty it loses much of its perniciousness, because it has the advantage of being easily sanctioned. Covert violence, as this whole passage shows, can be extremely sinister: cruelty can be worst of all when it is a joke.

The spotlight is turned on Dubbo. Once again, the necessity of the artist's preserving a distance from the object of his art, rather than intervening, is given the force of necessity, and here in a curious way represents Peter's denial:

> Now Dubbo knew that he would never, never act, that he would dream, and suffer, and express some of that suffering in paint - but was, in the end, powerless. In his innocence, he blamed his darker skin.
>
> Somewhere clocks were chiming. (p.410)

The implication is that Peter's 'cross', the burden of denial, is the artist's 'cross'. Art is at one remove from life, but only so can it perceive as clearly and painfully as it does. It is Peter's 'art' to stand back and remain unable to live things

at first hand, but this causes his suffering. In The Vivisector, Hurtle Duffield, at the end of his life, has to forego his art in favour of acceptance; but his art has nevertheless been necessary and important. The suggestion is that life must be a dialectic of interpretation and acceptance. This, indeed, seems to be the burden of White's whole writing. In Dubbo's case, though he cannot act to save the Jew and has a bitter sense of betrayal which links him to Peter, he bears witness in paint as Peter bore witness. (The biblical allusion to the cock crowing at Peter's denial is unmistakable.)

The monosyllabic 'At that hour' which opens the next section of the passage is again biblical, and there is an obvious allusion to the rending of the Temple veil:

> At that hour, descending the stairs at Xanadu, Miss Hare saw the marble shudder, the crack widen a little farther. She waited for the structure to fall. But it did not. (p.410)

Xanadu is in Riders in the Chariot a very complex image. First, the decadent Norbert Hare built Xanadu as a 'stately pleasure-dome', [34] for him wealth and success the recipe for happiness, the aesthetically pleasing corresponding to the truthful. Himmelfarb, by contrast, represents the frailty and flaws in human beings, acceptance of which opens the path to redemption. Himmelfarb moves towards a kind of self-containment through suffering. Victims appreciate life in all its fragility and promise; this is more difficult for those with power. Someone

like Himmelfarb shows that an inner strength is available to us all to regain possession of our essential humanity:

> From the beginning Himmelfarb had known that he possessed the strength, but did pray for some sign. Through all the cursing, and trampling, and laughter, and hoisting, and aching, and distortion, he had continued to expect. Until now, possibly, it would be given. So, he raised his head. And was conscious of a stillness and clarity, which was the stillness and clarity of pure water, at the centre of which his God was reflected. (p.413)

Here, as always in White, full humanity enables man's fullest approach to divinity. If we lose sight of our fragility we will lose sight of the transcendent. It seems significant that it is the staircase of Xanadu which is cracked. The staircase enables man's artificial ascent. Perhaps White's implication is that in order to keep a steady hold on 'reality' we must keep our feet firmly on the ground.

Xanadu is also a kind of Eden within the wilderness - it is not part of the levelling society which will eventually bulldose it. Even at the end of the novel, much of Xanadu is still a natural wilderness, welcoming the lovers with open arms. Significantly, the philistine Mrs. Jolley, employed as housekeeper at Xanadu, cannot cope with the sense of dangerous beauty and enchantment which she finds there, and she retreats to a texture-brick home in a suitably tamed suburb. In our passage, Xanadu is implicitly linked with the Temple. In the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark, the veil of the Temple is torn to indicate that the new and living way has been achieved.

Presumably, then, the staircase at Xanadu cracks because it is there that in some sense the living way is achieved. Perhaps Xanadu, which over the years has merged with its natural surroundings, indicates that where culture is open to the primal forces of nature, human integrity is achieved. Beatson writes,

> As the house is stripped of its pretensions and hypocrisies, as its defences are pierced and the icons to the ego and to social class are laid waste, it may be changed into the Temple. The soul comes into its own as the body begins to decay or decline from its habitual functions. This transformation is brought about by the acts of worship which are performed in the Temple. The nature of these acts of worship will be dictated by the core of being, which may express itself in prayer, in art, in love, in sacrifice, or even ... simply in being itself. Such worship will come most easily when the house is at its most rudimentary or dilapidated. Where the trappings of external existence are most eroded, essence can assert itself.[35]

In one of his epigrams to The Solid Mandala, White quotes Dostoyevsky: 'It was an old and rather poor church, many of the ikons were without settings, but such churches are the best for praying in'.

Interestingly, Xanadu is not destroyed at this point: it takes the developers, and the encroaching suburban sprawl, to do that job. Civilization merely tramps on, indifferent and heedless to what is going on, what is 'actually' happening, at Xanadu.

There then follow two sections juxtaposed to one another.

The crucifixion drama is brought to Mrs. Godbold's wash-room, and a sense of purity and freshness, where the tender, loving care with which she launders sheets is evocative of the women who received the Lord. Mrs. Godbold illustrates the truth of Himmelfarb's comment to Miss Hare earlier in the novel, that the simple acts of daily life may be the best protection against evil (p.304). It is in the simple, often unrecognized acts that redemptive love is experienced. By contrast, the conversation of Mrs. Flack and Mrs. Jolley underlines the banality of their lives and the insidiousness of their attitudes. Mrs. Flack says, 'The truth ... is what a decent person knows by instinct. Surely that is so?' (p.411) We have just seen, in the games at the factory, the results of such 'decency', so we are little inclined to accept her judgement. Mrs. Jolley, however, begins to experience doubts about her security, a hint of what is 'actually' going on around her:

> Sometimes now Mrs. Jolley took fright, particularly at the leaves of the 'monstera deliciosa', at the holes in their dark surfaces. Suddenly to catch sight of them, looming higher than the window-sill, gave Mrs. Jolley a turn, but it would have hurt Mrs. Flack to cut them back. (p.411)

The holes in the 'monstera deliciosa' represent a gnawing at the covering which protects Mrs. Jolley from the abyss of loneliness. As Himmelfarb shows, it is only by coming to terms with this loneliness, by embracing one's humanity, that it may be possible to approach divinity. Christ at His moment of

dereliction is supremely the one who recognized loneliness.

White shows that many people are involved in a negative and self-defeating flight from suffering - 'the defensive postures which people adopt to warn off this messenger, the contortions of subjects repudiating the law they already obey'. [36] Our passage shows how people attempt to destroy the object which generates suffering. Yet such defence mechanisms are ultimately ineffective and self-defeating. There is a sense in White, following religious thinkers like Simone Weil, that the root of suffering is the separation of the soul from God. Those who attempt to deny this suffering are denying God. 'The defence mechanisms bring at the very least spiritual mediocrity, at worst a condition of emotional and spiritual disintegration which even within time can resemble Hell.' [37] The basic affliction of mankind is separation from God, but it is only by accepting it in all its consequences, as does Himmelfarb, that man can finally return to Him.

> The act of failure is the final acceptance of and symbol for the nature of the lower world. Like everything else failure must be accepted and through this act of acceptance it is redeemed. By a paradox that is fundamental to Christianity, it is at the heart of the earthly labyrinth, the centre of Hell when man is at the greatest distance from God, that he discovers his divinity. It is now that he performs the true 'imitatio Christi', undergoing the same necessity that made Christ cry out, 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?' At the lowest point of the descent, when he arrives at Calvary, man merges with God. [38]

We are once more reminded that Himmelfarb is not being

crucified, because it is merely a joke:

> There he was, nobody would have said crucified, because from the beginning it had been a joke, and if some blood had run, it had dried quickly. The hands, the temples, and the side testified to that in dark clots and smears, too poor to attract the flies. (p.411-12)

The irony here, of course, is that at this point in the narrative, the sense of the Cross has never been stronger; and it is precisely the failure to be a crucifixion which makes it most so, because in the world's terms the Crucifixion was a failure. It is only those with eyes to see for whom Himmelfarb becomes a 'type' of Christ. The allusion relies on the associations and resonances set up in people's minds:

> If some of the spectators suffered the wounds to remain open, it was probably due to an unhealthy state of conscience, which could have been waiting since childhood to break out. (p.412)

Again, it is those who are diseased in the world's terms, in 'an unhealthy state of conscience', who see things as they really are. For Dubbo, the artist, his picture of Christ is brought to life. He is able to see most because he shares in the suffering of the victim, as himself an outsider and scapegoat. Past and present become one, instinct and abstract unite:

> Because he was as solitary in the crowd as the man they had crucified, it was again the abo who saw

> most. All that he had ever suffered, all that he had ever failed to understand, rose to the surface in Dubbo. Instinct and the white man's teaching no longer trampled on each other. As he watched, the colour flowed through the veins of the cold, childhood Christ, at last the nails entered wherever it was acknowledged they should. (p.412)

It becomes clear as the passage goes on that the joke is actually on Blue. Himmelfarb has the spiritual resources to transcend his physical limits, while the sense of frustration simply increases in Blue; he is trapped in a spiral of resentment:

> The Jew appeared, in fact, to have been removed from them, while the archtormentor himself might have been asking for respite from torments which he had always suffered, and which, in certain circumstances, were eased, he seemed to remember. (p.412)

The strong and 'normal' hate and are repelled by the weak and different; yet they are also fascinated by them. It is dimly sensed that these outsiders possess some secret gift which those who despise them lack and probably, without knowing it, long for. As Beatson says, most people suffer from a profound spiritual frustration, being estranged from the true source of their own being. The suffering which this causes becomes hatred for the scapegoat who is loathed both for his strangeness and, more significantly, for his affinity with a reality denied to the 'normal'. [39] Beatson writes of Himmelfarb's 'crucifixion' that 'the frustrated impulse towards God that exists in a

secular society expresses itself in the scapegoating of the Jew. The irony of this incident is that, through their obsession with the Christ they have suppressed, the mob's practical joke turns into a re-enactment of the very scene to which their material culture denies significance. As it gains momentum, everyone is swept up into an obsessive and ritual performance. They find themselves playing parts that suddenly reveal to them the truth of the Easter myth, and their actions bite back into their own souls, increasing rather than relieving their suffering'.[40]

Evil is for White ultimately self-defeating and self-consuming. In The Aunt's Story, the fire at the Hotel du Midi purges Theodora Goodman of evil passions. Miss Hare tells Himmelfarb:

> 'Oh, yes, there is evil!' She hesitated. 'People are possessed with it. Some more than others!' she added with force. 'But it burns itself out. Some are even destroyed as it does.' (p.154)

This is so for Blue. The roles are reversed, and the jester becomes the joke. Blue becomes the obscenity, the outsider, because he is unable really to address his situation. Those who fail to see the issues as they really are become enclosed in a spiral heading for destruction. White's irony establishes the foolish outcast Jew as the sane one, most in touch with reality. Blue becomes the lifelong sufferer of torments, and he fails to recognize that the means for their alleviation are before him, with the 'damn crucified Jew'.

It is significant that the whole episode is not ended because of moral victory on Himmelfarb's part, but for pragmatic reasons - people do not want to 'dirty their hands'. Those who turn away are keen to preserve their status as 'honest citizens':

> Many of the onlookers, to whom it had begun to occur that they were honest citizens, with kiddies at school, were turning away by this. (p.414)

Rosetree, too, has spent his life avoiding real moral issues. He knows the power of the crowd - which is why his neglect constitutes a betrayal - but for him <u>protection</u> is important:

> Mr. Rosetree had not looked, but knew. Nobody need tell him about any human act: he had experienced them all, before he had succeeded in acquiring adequate protection. (p.415)

The secretary Miss Mudge, who persuades Rosetree to get the proceedings stopped, has hitherto insulated herself to avoid some of the more unsettling aspects of daily living, but she gains a hint of a wider human responsibility. In <u>The Solid Mandala</u>, too, Arthur speaks of people who are 'Afraid of the blood and the nails, which, as far as I can see, is what everyone is afraid of, but wants, and what Dostoyevsky is partly going on about ...' (p.284):

> Miss Mudge was trembling horribly for the discovery she had made; that she, herself quite blameless, might be responsible for some man, even all men.

> Now her responsibility was tearing her. Her hitherto immaculate flesh, white and goosey, with the vaccination marks, did not know how to cope. (p.415)

## Retrospect

This complex passage provides an opportunity, finally, to draw together some themes from this whole study.

Behind White's stable irony is a sense of an underlying myth, of great religious concerns which are in danger of being lost or distorted. Australia, the hostile country which crushes the culture which encroaches on it, provides the 'defamiliarizing' environment in which these concerns are explored and realized afresh.

There is a very strong sense of the contingency of cultural arrangements and of the dangers of giving these a security they do not deserve. The adherents of the decadent society, an artificial growth on Australian soil, the Rosetrees or the Pilates, are shown to be obscenities in their claims for conventionality.

The implication of the passage, and of White's fiction in general, is that decision is forced at points of intersection between society and the primal forces of the bush, between the artificial and the essential. It is at these points of intersection that the important issues present themselves, because a tension is set up. Life has to be worked out within this tension. Himmelfarb's 'crucifixion', then, takes place in

such a 'liminal' environment, half way between the urban and the bush. In White's fiction, the way one treats one's environment is supremely important because it reflects one's perceptions and priorities; a respect for nature involves a proper self-respect. Where society is degenerate, place becomes sordid; where spiritual realities are being explored, place holds a kind of dangerous beauty and enchantment. One's freedom is discovered within one's limits. In a similar way to the Gospels, 'place' or habitation is important; it matters where you are, what you do to the place and what it does to you. Blue and his friends are not able to approach real freedom because they do not recognize their limits.

The theme of the artist is also powerfully realized in the passage. White's narrative technique shows the power of art to 'defamiliarize', or creatively deform, in order to discover the essence of a subject, a process which can be most unsettling. His fiction contains a vision of the extraordinary behind and within the ordinary, the 'mystery and poetry' [41] which makes our lives bearable. Artistic perception is linked with the ability of everyone to see clearly, beyond the artifice which confuses priorities. We must all become artists of the spirit if we are not going to fall in the direction of the Mrs. Flacks and Mrs. Jolleys. Without vision we perish.

The theme of self-sacrifice is clearly evident in the passage. Only by sacrifice can we avoid the kind of dehumanizing idolatries which give the 'Lucky Sevens' and the Mrs. Flacks and Mrs. Jolleys such a vain confidence in the

rightness of their interpretations. Life must, paradoxically, be a process of creative deconstruction, unravelling assumptions and always seeking the immediacy of experience. The Cross, the moment when such experience is self-fulfilling, is the key to this. It provides the possibility of real freedom, the meaning of suffering and the possibilities of salvation and atonement for evil. All the 'riders' show us the paradox of strength in weakness. Although powerless in the eyes of the world, they have acquired an inner strength. The tragedy of Patrick White is in the end affirmative. The artificial lamps of the lamp factory are taken over by the Christian parody, which actually realizes the mystery of redemption at the heart of Christianity anew.

## Notes

1. Peter Beatson, The Eye in the Mandala: Patrick White: A Vision of Man and God (London: Paul Elek, 1976), p.26

2. Patricia Morley, The Mystery of Unity: Theme and Technique in the Novels of Patrick White (Toronto: McGill - Queen's University Press, 1972), p.79

3. Ibid., p.28

4. Ibid.

5. Quoted in F.W. Dillistone, Patrick White's 'Riders in the Chariot': Introduction and Commentary (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), pp.29-30

6. Wayne Booth, A Rhetoric of Irony (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974)

7. Ibid., p.6

8. Ibid.

9. See Patricia Morley, op. cit., p.21

10. Peter Beatson, op. cit., p.87

11. See Terence Hawkes, Structuralism and Semiotics (London: Methuen, 1977), p.72

12. Wayne Booth, op. cit., p.28

13. Jürgen Moltmann, The Crucified God (London: S.C.M., 1974), p.33

14. S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (London: George Bell, 1905), p.144

15. Carolyn Bliss, Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure (London: Macmillan, 1986), p.87

16. Theodore Ziolkowski, Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972)

17. Ibid., p.viii

18. Moltmann, op. cit., pp.35-36

19. Ziolkowski, op. cit., p.6

20. Ibid., p.8

21. Ibid., p.11

22. F.W. Dillistone, The Novelist and the Passion Story (London: Collins, 1960)

23. Dillistone, Patrick White's 'Riders in the Chariot': Introduction and Commentary (New York: Seabury Press, 1967)

24. Dillistone, The Novelist and the Passion Story, p.22

25. Ziolkowski, op. cit., p.290

26. Ibid., p.292

27. Ibid., p.293

28. Patricia Morley, op. cit., p.180

29. Peter Beatson, op. cit., p.103

30. Ibid., p.90

31. See Carolyn Bliss, op. cit., p.86

32. Patricia Morley, op. cit., p.181

33. See, for example, R.F. Brissenden, Patrick White (London: Longmans, Green, 1966), p.33

34. There is a clear allusion to Coleridge's poem 'Kubla Khan'.

35. Peter Beatson, op. cit., p.155

36. Ibid., pp.26,27

37. Ibid., p.28

38. Ibid., p.30

39. Ibid., p.34

40. Ibid.

41. White, 'The Prodigal Son', Australian Letters, 1, no.3 (April, 1958), pp.37-40; repr. in The Vital Decade, Ten Years of Australian Art and Letters, ed. G. Dutton and M. Harris (South Melbourne: Sun Books, 1968) 156-8

## CONCLUSION

### Patrick White as a 'Postmodern' writer

Behind the recurring notion in White that, to grow in freedom, vision, art, one must continually destroy false or idolatrous images - endure sacrifice - there is the insistence that we do not possess the faculties fully to intuit significance. He shares with Northrop Frye the recognition that 'Illusion is fixed or definable, and reality is best understood as its negation'. [1]

White constantly emphasizes the inadequacy of language in this respect, and this accounts for his questing style. He foregoes any confidence in linguistic stability. In Flaws in the Glass he complains of the difficulty of forcing 'grey bronchial prose' to 'give visual expression to what is inside me'. [2] The following quotations from Voss make the same point:

> Words were not the servants of life, but life, rather, was the slave of words. So the black print of other people's books became a swarm of victorious ants that carried off a man's self-respect. So he wandered through the bush on that morning, and was only soothed at last by leaves and silence. (Voss, p.203)

> The man was yielding himself up to the simplicity of the drawings. Henceforth all words must be deceitful, except those sanctioned by necessity, the handrail of language. (Voss, p.274)

In The Vivisector, too, as Hurtle approaches the 'never-yet-attainable indigo', words crack under the strain of what they

are trying to express: 'too tried, too end-less obvci indiggodd' (The Vivisector, p.642). Like all artists, all one can do is live the truth. Truth, indeed, is 'the property of silence - at any rate the silences filling the space between words', over which he only 'sometimes' has control'. [3] In other words, what we do not know is often far more important than what we do know. [4] In Riders in the Chariot, Alf Dubbo discovers this:

> If Dubbo portrayed the Christ darker than convention would have approved, it was because he could not resist the impulse. Much was omitted, which, in its absence, conveyed. It could have been that the observer himself contributed the hieroglyphs of his own fears to the flat, almost skimped figure, with elliptical mouth, and divided, canvas face, of the Jew-Christ. (p.456)

White seeks this partial control over the spaces between words partly through irony of the kind discussed in the last chapter, partly through cryptic, enigmatic and satiric elements in his language. [5] The critic Ron Shepherd comments on the way White uses 'verbal texture like a belly-dancer's veil to reveal and conceal at one and the same time'. [6]

Another quotation from White reveals the same sense of awe at the enormity of the artistic quest:

> What do I believe? I am accused of not making it explicit. How to be explicit about a grandeur too overwhelming to express, a daily wrestling match with an opponent whose limbs never become material, a struggle from which the sweat and blood are scattered on the pages of everything the serious writer writes? A belief contained less in what is

said than in the silences. In patterns on water. A gust of wind. A flower opening.[7]

A related sense is our inability ever properly to know the self. This is the burden of The Twyborn Affair. It also informs Flaws in the Glass, where White has a strong sense of his self-delusion. As Carolyn Bliss says, he 'refutes and punishes the self <he> also celebrates'. [8] White says that in Flaws in the Glass he wanted to 'make and mar a portrait'. [9] As he also shows in the artists in his fiction, only by making and marring a portrait may one be most true to one's subject and realize the portrait most powerfully. Similarly, his characters tend to experience frustration at an inability fully to communicate with others, even those closest to them. This is so for Stan and Amy Parker in The Tree of Man.

The word 'quest' is appropriate to White. In his writing, the quest for truth is always an ongoing process. As Carolyn Bliss also points out, his novels tend not to end with the climactic moment of revelation, but with a coda in which the quest is renewed. [10] Interestingly, too, the later works seem to become increasingly resistant to resolution. Ann McCulloch argues that The Twyborn Affair represents the creation of authentic post-modern tragedy. [11] Clearly for White there is no book of answers; what is sought for is a deepening contact with 'reality'. This can only be achieved by for ever questioning our categories.

This in many ways corresponds to the post-Saussurean

recognition of the contingent or arbitrary relationship between 'signifier' and 'signified'. Since the meaning of a sign is a matter of what the sign is <u>not</u>, its meaning is always in some sense absent from it too. So, to elevate a sign as the full bearer of meaning is to idolize it. Such idols must constantly be destroyed. Characteristic of postmodern writers is the breaking down of ideologies which draw rigid boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not, between self and non-self, truth and falsity, sense and nonsense, reason and madness.

As we have seen, this is very much White's strategy. He shows how societies come to embarrass their own ruling systems of logic. Ideologies seek to convert culture into nature, and this, as we saw in Chapter 2, can be very sinister. His recognition, too, of the necessity of sacrifice is rather like Jacques Derrida's insistence on the perpetual deferral of meaning.

However, it is of paramount importance that White does not fall into nihilism. His retention of narrative and his sense of genuine and positive primary experiences, redemptive images, insist on this. There <u>are</u> powerful experiences such as these, though reflection on them must be tentative. A deconstructionist critic like Derrida never denies that there are great stabilities such as these, though one can never fully identify them. In the art of a novelist like Patrick White (as discussed in the last chapter) lies the ironic stability of White's vision. The irony is based on an irreducible stability, even though that stability cannot be dogmatized.

Alan Lawson writes that White's novels 'declare an interest in states of flux or of becoming and at the same time add that "perhaps the important things only happened in a flash"'.[12] As with the artist Dubbo in Riders in the Chariot, the tentativeness of his art is its glory. It is because White realizes that his art is unfinished and inadequate that his words 'bite'. His refusal to make present arrangements other than provisional is most positive and hopeful; it means that life is replete with potential and there is no awful possibility of assimilating the divine - 'The horizon of understanding, like that of perception, is one of possibility and becoming'.[13]

In his recent book Three Uneasy Pieces (1987) White writes, 'We do indeed grow wiser with age just as long as we disbelieve the myth about growing wiser with age'. This sums up much of what I have been saying. Our so-called 'postmodern' world sees itself as fragmented and often seems more aware of the fragmentation than it is able to trace direction. White shows us that a growing lack of confidence in what can be adequately stated or explored, is actually a most healthy awareness, as it returns us to a more realistic sense of our own limits and so enables us more appropriately to explore our potential. As White says, truth is a razor edge - dangerous, narrow and for ever destroying our attempts to contain it. Truth is elusiveness, the energy which requires us to reorganize and redefine what is important. It may illuminate because it gives activity and energy, like that of the active, effective vision

of the artist. Perhaps this is what Simone Weil means when she writes, 'Truth cannot be the object of love, for it is not an object. The object of love is not truth but reality. Truth is the splendour of reality'. [14] If truth is elusive, then, and can never be fully grasped, it may, as we have seen, flicker through the fabric of people's lives in the most beautiful and unexpected ways.

## Notes

1. Northrop Frye, The Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp.169f.

2. White, Flaws in the Glass, p.150

3. Ibid., p.42

4. See W. Iser, The Implied Reader (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974)

5. See Alan Lawson, 'Meaning and Experience: A Review-Essay on Some Recurrent Problems in Patrick White Criticism', Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 21 (1979) 287

6. R. Shepherd, 'An Indian Story: "The Twitching Colonel"'; in R. Shepherd and K. Singh (eds.), Patrick White: A Critical Symposium (Adelaide: Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978) p.31

7. White, op. cit., p.70

8. Carolyn Bliss, Patrick White's Fiction (London: Macmillan, 1986), p.186

9. White, op. cit., p.134

10. Carolyn Bliss, op. cit., p.199

11. See ibid., p.227n3

12. Alan Lawson, 'White for White's Sake: Studies of Patrick White's Novels', Meanjin, 32 (1973) 349

13. W.D. Ashcroft, 'More than One Horizon'; in Shepherd and Singh (eds.), op. cit., p.133

14. Simone Weil, The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration

of Duties Towards Mankind, tr. A.F. Wills (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), p.242

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