A STUDY OF THE

NOVELS OF PATRICK WHITE

"Man and the Individual Experience."

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C O N T E N T S

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

> She thought of the narrowness of the limits within which a human soul may speak and be understood by its nearest of mental kin, of how soon it reaches that solitary land of the individual experience, in which no fellow footfall is ever heard. (Olive Schreiner).
> Epigraph to Part One of The Aunt's Story.

The title of this study, 'Man and the Individual Experience', has been taken from the passage quoted above, and the quotation itself serves admirably to suggest the main preoccupations of Patrick White in all his novels. For White, in spite of certain shifts of emphasis and diversity of treatment, has been concerned primarily with the problems of human existence; with the isolation of the individual, and his attempt to establish some communication with those nearest to him, and to arrive at a satisfying condition of personal integration and self-fulfilment.

From his desire to suggest the "mystery and poetry"[1] of life and to attempt an imaginative synthesis of some greater metaphysical reality with the observed realities of ordinary living, White has succeeded in adding another dimension to the novel in this country. Previous Australian novelists have belonged rather to the naturalistic tradition, and White's

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1 P.White, 'The Prodigal Son', Australian Letters, vol. I, no. 3 (1958), p.39.

emphasis on the inner and spiritual life of the individual has introduced a new element; one, however, which has been evident for some time in Australian poetry. Through the exercise of his imaginative vision and the immediacy of his presentation he has attempted to open up for the reader the world of greater realities of which he himself is convinced. His concern is not with nationalistic or social issues, but with man and his search for personal identity, for complete self-realization and for a share in some final and satisfying reality.

I have attempted to trace the gradual development in White's novels from a completely negative, even nihilistic attitude towards life, to an increasing preoccupation with spiritual values. His earlier novels show White to be more convinced of the futility of man's existence than inspired with any real hope of a satisfactory resolution of his problems. Man, as presented by White in these novels, is a lonely, frustrated individual with no assured belief in any meaning in life or in any Reality which could transcend the limits of his empirical knowledge. In order to arrive at any peace of mind, man must resign himself to the inevitable limitations of existence and to the suffering imposed on him by his sense of alienation from the physical world, and his spiritual isolation from those nearest to him.

> "You cannot reconcile joy and sorrow," Holstius said. "Or flesh and marble, or illusion and

> reality, or life and death. For this reason, Theodora Goodman, you must accept."
> (The Aunt's Story, p.293).[1]

The movement towards a metaphysical vision comes with the fourth novel, The Tree of Man, and White's interest here is in the ordinary man's life-long search for some ultimate and transcendent reality. In this book the chief character, Stan Parker, learns to establish a certain harmony within himself, and does arrive finally at a certain understanding of God. His whole life is revealed as a search for the Divine reality which alone can make his life meaningful, and this search becomes of primary importance to him as the other interests of life gradually fall away. This preoccupation is summed up in Parker's own words, when he adds, after admitting his ignorance of God,

> "But I hope that in the end I shall know something. What else is there that would be any use to learn?"
> (The Tree of Man, p.457).

This somewhat bewildered and tentative groping towards an understanding of God gives place in White's latest novel to a far more assured and triumphant vision. It is not of course reasonable to demand that White should offer a solution to the problems of human existence, and his earlier novels which do not attempt any such solution can hardly be criticized on these grounds. But there can be little doubt that in this sixth novel, White has felt convinced that a solution is possible for at least certain individuals, and in his own way he has succeeded

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[1] All quotations from The Aunt's Story are taken from the 1958 edition (Eyre and Spottiswoode, London).

in coming to satisfactory terms with these problems. It seems indeed that there is a complete resolution offered in Riders in the Chariot. The contact of the four illuminates with the Divine element is for each of them a completely satisfying experience.

In the later chapters of this thesis I have been concerned with White's resolution of the problems of human existence, since it is undeniable that in Riders in the Chariot, at least, his final vision of man is a triumphant one. The reliance on the supremacy of the imagination, the nature of the religious experience of his illuminates and their extraordinary manner of intuitive mutual understanding all form part of White's final answer, and I have examined these aspects of his work in greater detail. As will be seen, there are elements in White's final achievement which I feel to be unsatisfactory, and the quality of his work I have judged to be rather uneven.

I am doubtful, too, as to whether White's treatment of the individual in his relation to society as a whole can be termed satisfactory. In his concern for the complete integrity of the individual, White condemns the modern way of life, with its narrow outlook, its materialistic and false values and its complete absorption in trivialities. If one is to preserve an inner spiritual vision, he seems to tell us, it is necessary to retreat from the banality of ordinary existence, and this appears to involve a certain alienation from society. I am inclined to

suspect that White's insistence on this progressive alienation from society may be a serious flaw in his treatment of man, and have tried to determine how far his characters' withdrawal from the customary relationships of ordinary living can be found to provide a satisfactory means to their goal of individual excellence.

It has not been my intention to examine White's style in detail, and I have done this only incidentally when it has seemed to me that a discussion of his technique may serve to illuminate his treatment of the individual. It is very apparent that as his realization of the complexity of man's experience deepens so too does the complexity of the books' structure and language. In his later novels there is a more intense subjective quality and a heavier reliance on symbolism and obliquity of style to convey the growing sense of mystery. His use of allegory and myth is occasioned by the difficulty of communicating religious ideas to readers who lack a common background of accepted philosophy or religious beliefs.

His vision is an intense and personal one, and it is necessary to examine how far he has succeeded in portraying dramatically the problems of man's existence, and in achieving works of art which have a universal significance.

CHAPTER TWO

MAN AND HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH EXTERNAL REALITY

White's chief characters, in their growing self-awareness, must achieve a certain harmony with the world outside themselves, and must come to terms with their environment. Those who are out of harmony, or who are too shallow or materialistic ever to arrive at a sympathetic relationship with the natural world, are not the ones who arrive at self-knowledge. This tenet in his philosophy is established in his first novel, and developed with deepening emphasis and widening of meaning in all his subsequent books. For White, the ability to face up to the reality of a situation, or the reality of one's own existence, necessitates also the ability to live in harmony with one's environment.

If this were all, then there would be little to comment upon, but White's treatment of man's relationship with his external world is far from simple. Physical objects play an important role in the consciousness of his characters, and there is a gradual development, and indeed, a change of purpose evident in White's conception of this role. From the resigned acceptance of their environment which is finally achieved by Oliver and Alys in Happy Valley, he moves to the complete subjectivization of Theodora's world, and, in his later books, to a more mature balance between the objective reality of

external things and their subjective significance to the individual.

In the first novel, Happy Valley, there is a deliberate attempt to present nature as an alien force, sometimes hostile, but more often merely remote, and the characters as unhappy victims of a deterministic universe. There is a perverse concentration on the more unpleasant aspects of the countryside, and an arbitrary selection of macabre details with the obvious intention of showing man as the passive sufferer at the mercy of an impersonal fate. We can detect a certain kinship with Hardy here, but White's philosophy, vague and confused as it appears in this first novel, lacks the convinced and deeply pessimistic quality of Hardy's thought.

The opening of the story, with its description of the sterile countryside and a still-birth, symbolises the frustration which is to be the theme throughout the book. There is no harmony between man and nature:

> The hawk was absolved from this, absorbed as an agent into the whole of this frozen landscape, into the mountains that emanated in their silence a dull, frozen pain while remaining exempt from it. There was a kind of universal cleavage between these, the agents and their objects... (p.18).

Although the story is set in rural surroundings, and the characters live in a small mountain township, there is no sense of affinity between them and the natural world. In a passage describing spring (it is uncertain whether these are the thoughts

of Oliver or of the author) this is made clear:

> The frost thawed early under the sun. But all this was incidental, you felt, there was no reciprocation on the part of man, almost no connection with the earth, or else it took longer for the corresponding tendency to penetrate and touch the instincts with which he is endowed... (p.115).

But Oliver and Alys are the products of a superficial culture. Clem, who lives a more primitive existence in his search for physical satisfaction, could perhaps be expected to sense a deeper relationship with his surroundings. But this is not so; he is quite incapable of appreciating it:

> It was a godforsaken part of the world... (p.23).

and again:

> But the country, it made you sick, just to look at, not a blade of grass, though they said it was the country for sheep... (p.24).

But growth in self-awareness of both Oliver and Alys shows also a parallel growth in the recognition and acceptance of their environment. Oliver feels a certain affinity - albeit a sentimental one - with nature, because of his love for Alys. And in his final state of self-knowledge, Happy Valley becomes for him a symbol of the reality which for so long he has refused to face:

> He looked up through the window where the clothesline cut across the sky, the drops of moisture on the cable, and beyond it the valley swept back, very tangible, no longer receding into a cloud that the mind substituted... (p.294).

In this first novel, in spite of the vagueness of its implications and the uncertainty of the author's vision, we can

detect two noteworthy aspects of White's treatment of the external world. The first is his tendency to associate honesty and the ability to face "reality" with an acceptance of the harshness of one's environment. This tendency is developed and emphasised further in The Aunt's Story, and Voss.

Natural surroundings have very little place in his second novel, The Living and the Dead, where White has moved away entirely from the rural atmosphere. He has set the story in London, but a London where all is cheapness and artificiality, and the prose itself seems to have been deliberately drained of vitality, in order to achieve an over-all effect of futility and lifelessness. That this is not due to a deficiency in imagination can be proved by White's earlier descriptions in Happy Valley, and by a quotation from one of the rare occasions in this second novel when he breathes life into a natural setting:

> Outside the houses there was spring weather again. In the parks you were conscious of the change, the intent but diffident duck, floating brown and secretive in the lap of water, or moored in the shallows, her breast close against the mud. There was a pressure outward, earth and tree, of shoot and bud, a thawing of frost in the otherwise passive brick of the closed pavilion... (p.306).[1]

But, on the whole, the emptiness of the characters is

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[1] All quotations from The Living and the Dead are taken from the 1962 edition (Eyre and Spottiswoode, London).

reflected in the emptiness of the urban life, mechanical, cheap and tawdry.

Eden, in her effort to establish some meaning in life, dimly senses some kind of harmony:

> It was not a malicious desire to annihilate
> that cancelled the personal relationship,
> that bound the earth in its harder seasons.
> The stripping of the bough was a sacrifice
> of detail to some ultimate and superior
> design... (p.309).

But Elyot can find no such relationship, and eventually reaches the conclusion that everything in life is meaningless. It is significant that Joe Barnett, who is a more positive character than any of the others, experiences a closer harmony with his world and can derive a deep satisfaction from his manual work. It is only his sense of responsibility for the misfortunes of others that eventually drives him to give up his settled, comfortable existence.

One critic has remarked that this novel is "drenched in the pathetic fallacy," and adds that "the weather is never good."[1] The latter statement is rather inaccurate, but it is the over-all impression which is important, and this is undoubtedly one of dreariness and futility. But the remark about the "pathetic fallacy," while not correct, points to one of the most significant elements in White's treatment of the physical world. Far from

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1 M. Barnard, 'Novels of Patrick White', Meanjin, vol. XV, no. 2 (1956), p.161.

implying that Nature is in sympathy with the moods of the individual, White has introduced a much more subtle interpretation, which is to be developed even further in the next novel. In The Living and the Dead, he deliberately allows the external environment to be a reflection of the inner state of mind of his characters.

It is worth looking more closely at this technique, which is to play such an important part in White's treatment of the individual and his experience. It seems necessary first of all to question the objectivity of external reality, or the amount of reality which the external world has for his characters. Although it does not appear that White belongs strictly to any specific philosophical school, a close reading of his works has made me conclude that there are affinities between some of his ideas and those of the Existentialists. A quotation from a modern critic of this doctrine may help to clarify my meaning here. In speaking of Existentialism, Jolivet says:

> By a necessary reaction against materialism, existentialism took on the task of developing the value of the subjective... "The world is human."...(But) the world which is human becomes exclusively human. Subjectivity, by a movement inverse to that of materialism, absorbs and consumes objectivity. For disastrous objectivization there is substituted a subjectivization so radical that one can no longer grasp what reality the things of the world still retain for man brought back to himself.[1]

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1 R.Jolivet, 'Existentialism', Modern Catholic Thinkers (London, 1960), p.526.

This subjectivization is true of a number of White's characters, who do not merely achieve a harmony with their external surroundings, but reduce them to nothing more than a reflection or symbolism of their own inner states. It is not that they have fallen victims to the "pathetic fallacy" but that they subjectivize their external world, and make it almost a projection of their own emotions. We can detect a beginning of this technique in The Living and the Dead, where everything contributes to the overall dreariness of the setting, but The Aunt's Story is its apotheosis.

Theodora is scarcely interested in things for their own sake. The rocks and stones of Meroe are important to her because they point to a reality and permanence which she desires. When they "crumble" (and the "crumbling" is only in Theodora's mind) they disintegrate only in respect to herself. She has lost contact with them, so therefore they are lost. Here we have the first example in this story of this subjectivization. Theodora becomes progressively incapable of finding a reality in physical objects, and the external world is for her only as real as she feels herself to be. Everything is reduced to a projection of her mental state, and when she doubts her own mind, then she necessarily doubts the reality of external objects. She eventually loses the sense of reality for the objects themselves because of her excessive tendency to subjectivize, not because of any actual withdrawal from them. Nature and the external world become only a register for her emotions, so that Book Two,

Jardin Exotique, may have been used by White to demonstrate the logical culmination of this tendency.

It is interesting to speculate whether White's treatment of the relationship between his characters and the physical world is the result, not merely of an artistic device, but of trends or interests in his own philosophical thinking. The technique itself accords with what I have judged to be White's own belief in the power of the imagination and his distrust of the more abstract thought processes, which we shall examine in a later chapter.

We may turn now to the problem of White's use of symbolism to portray the states of mind of his characters. This seems to be a natural outcome of the tendency to regard external objects only as subjectivized states, but Theodora is the most extreme example of this treatment. Where everything becomes a symbol, nothing is real, and this is so here. With her, the reader also loses touch with any external reality, since White does not establish sufficient detachment from his character, nor any criterion other than that of her own mind.

This brings us to the question of the validity of White's use of symbolism, which has bewildered and irritated so many readers. I feel that the main reason for this confusion lies in the fact that he uses symbolism for two different purposes in his earlier novels, and it is often very difficult to distinguish between these purposes. In the same novel, we find

the author using objects and events as symbols of his theme and the characters themselves reducing the external world to symbols of their own inner experiences. This actually begins in a crude way in Happy Valley, where Vic Moriarty relates the state of the cyclamen to her own feelings, Oliver associates the harshness of his environment with Fate, and where White himself uses the setting of his novel to symbolize the struggle of man against alien forces.

In The Living and the Dead, Elyot sees his life as an empty box:

> (the house) was a receptacle. They were two receptacles, he felt, the one containing the material possessions of those who lingered in its rooms, the other the aspirations of those he had come in contact with... (p.20).

There is also the "glass box" symbolism, emphasising the brittleness and superficiality of their lives. But it is difficult to know when it is the author's, and when the character's interpretation. The real problem here, as in The Aunt's Story is that White has not detached himself sufficiently from his characters.

There appears to be a definite failure in structure in The Aunt's Story. Some symbols exist only in Theodora's mind, some in the author's, and some have been taken over by the author in his interpretation. In Book Two, there is a confusion of objects which all have some inner significance for Theodora; the roses, the cacti, the ruined tower, the music, and so on.

But together with this symbolism, which is Theodora's own, we have the kitten, the fire, the hawk and the duck, the nautilus shell, the Syrian, the rocks and stones of Meroe (the last of which are also Theodora's). This list could go on much longer, but I would merely be adding to the confusion which already exists in the author's treatment, a confusion which comes, not so much from Theodora's state of mind, as from the merging and flowing of the two streams of symbols.

But this is perhaps the only way now for Theodora to be presented. Having rejected, or having lost touch with the objective validity of things in themselves, her state can only be revealed by a series of analogies. But the reader, too, loses touch. There is too much arbitrariness about the symbolism, and an artificiality which fails to convince the reader. Had the author managed to maintain a detachment from Theodora, and to present her objectively, the book would have been much stronger. The stealing of the nautilus shell and its destruction at the hands of the General and Mrs Rapallo are examples of this type of treatment; in fact, the whole of Chapter Nine, Part Two, where Theodora "loses herself" (p.203) in the personalities of the other inhabitants, although without doubt a brilliant piece of writing, seems nevertheless to lack a centre of gravity and has the effect of depriving Theodora of her own recognizable personality.

In The Tree of Man, where White returns to a more conventional

treatment, and the Parkers' relationship with their surroundings is a natural and harmonious one. They experience no sense of alienation from nature, and, while their realization of its beauty is largely unimaginative, neither is there any undue subjectivization. Although they have no real "communion" with Nature, since this would require more imagination than either Stan or Amy possesses, their harmony is expressed by a wordless feeling of well-being and contentment with their environment.

Amy lacks the close relationship with nature that Stan feels, since she is far more interested in human relationships and domesticity, although she too finds peace and contentment in the milking of cows and in her garden. But Stan, with his closeness to the natural world, is the one who eventually comes nearest to understanding himself and God.

> Besides, he recognized and accepted the omnipotence of distance.
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> But this was something she did not, and perhaps never would. She had begun to hate the wind, and the distance, and the road, because her importance tended to dwindle... (p.22).

Stan is more in communion with the elements, and the lightning has for him some spiritual significance, the "power to open souls."

White's symbolism throughout this story is organic and unobtrusive, and there is none of the confusion here that is to be found in <u>The Aunt's Story</u>. There is no ambiguity, since the symbolism is the author's, not the characters'. The flood,

the fire, the drought, are factual events, but are given a much deeper significance as both the causes and the symbols of changes in the Parkers' spiritual lives. The significance of these we can leave for a later discussion, but it is important to notice that White, in his epic of two ordinary, unheroic individuals, has chosen natural events for his symbols, and in this, has effected a decisive improvement in his craftmanship. The four parts of the novel, with their quiet, symbolic overtones, suggest the vigour and growth, and final fading into old age of the lives of Amy and Stan.

His static symbol of the rose-bush, signifying Amy's need to possess and domesticate her surroundings, is so unobtrusive as to be overlooked by many readers, but White has handled this very skilfully, and it becomes an accurate register of her own emotional state, and even of the contempt expressed by Ray for his mother's idea of domesticity.

Vincent Buckley, in his article entitled 'Patrick White and his Epic', has given us a penetrating interpretation of this symbol.

> This is the rose-bush which Amy planted in the first days of her marriage, to be an outward sign to her of her emotional rights; and it is played off throughout the novel against the symbols of a deeper rootedness, symbols of the tree of man. The tree of man is uncontrollable though rooted; the trunk which gives life to the branches can neither comprehend nor even know them; it cannot even know itself in any satisfying way; and against its great size, its inadvertent

> reaching towards nihilism, there is only the rose-tree, the small, casually noticed, domesticated flower bush which once meant something to Amy, but cannot mean more to either of her children than part of an ethos which they are rejecting.[1]

In Voss, White returns again to the use of physical objects to portray the inner state of his characters, and they are again given a subjective value. There is a direct connection here between The Aunt's Story and this later novel. Theodora, in the Hotel du Midi, found herself

> retreating from the jaws of roses, avoiding the brown dorr, of which the brass teeth bristled to consume the last shreds of personality... (p.145).

Voss's party entered a luxuriant valley, where

> Heat appeared to intensify the green of a variety of splendid trees, some sprouting with hair or swords, others slowly succumbing to a fleshy jasmine, of which the arms were wound round and round their limbs... The breath of jasmine cajoled the air. Platters of leaves presented gifts of moisture. And there were the birds. Their revels were filling the air with cries and feathers, rackety screams of utter abandon, flashes of saffron, bursts of crimson, although there were also other more sombre birds that would fly silently into the thoughts of men like dreadful arrows... (p.209).

Voss and his party are influenced by the nature of the country through which they pass, and it, in turn, reflects their emotions

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1 V.Buckley, 'Patrick White and his Epic', Twentieth Century, vol. XII, no. 3 (1958), p.245.
I am indebted to the whole of this article for its interpretation of the symbolism of The Tree of Man.

and reactions. White's technique is neither straight-forward nor purely naturalistic, and the reader is aware at the same time both of the actual journey and of the spiritual and mental states of the men. This extract from Voss, while showing White's sympathy with the Expressionistic school of painters, also shows a return to his previous descriptive style. But here it is handled more skilfully, and we are made aware at the same time of the exotic luxuriance of the surroundings, and of the feelings of the men on entering the valley. This is not confusion, but exceeding skilful technique.

So, too, are White's analytical descriptive passages of Laura during and after the birth of Rose's baby. One critic however, has objected to what he has termed a resemblance to "the flowery over-writing in the bad passages of the late Charles Morgan's Sparkenbroke."[1] But an examination of the passages shows that White has done this with very deliberate intent.

> Those ensuing days, she was exhausted, but content. They were the baby's days. There was a golden fuzz of morning in the garden. She could not bring herself to tread upon the tender flesh of rose petals that were showered at her feet. To avoid this, she would walk round by another way, though it meant running the gauntlet of the sun. Then her duty was most delicious. She was the living shield, that rejoiced to deflect the most savage blows... (p.247).

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1 H.J. Oliver, 'Patrick White's Significant Journey', Southerly, no. 1 (1958), p.48.

This is sufficient to show that these are Laura's own thoughts, and that the world is now coloured and transformed with her own emotions. The slightly Victorian effusiveness of the style is characteristic of Laura in times of excitement or emotional stress, as White shows again in her second letter to Voss.

The journey into the desert is used as the central symbol of Voss's journey into his own interior life, in his search for self-fulfilment. But White has managed this symbolism much more expertly than he did in The Aunt's Story. There is no longer the confusion in character-author symbolism, although there are ambiguities in the final resolution which may be due in part to a confusion of symbolism. A discussion of this will have to be deferred until we come to examine Voss's experience. There is, too, the solidity of the other members of the party, which does much to offset Voss's spiritual experience, and helps to objectify him in a way which does not happen with Theodora.

Animals do not play any real part in a relationship with the men, and Voss in fact kills one of the dogs as part of his masochistic purification from all human weakness. Occasionally, they are used, like the scenery, to reflect a subjective state:

> One aged doe had searched his mind with such thoroughness as to discover in it part of his secret, that he was, in fact only in appearance, man... (p.185).

There is no sense of kinship with the animals; nor is there

any sense of relationship as fellow-creatures of a supreme Creator. In fact, it is important to notice that Voss himself, in his complete self-sufficiency, feels himself creator of his world:

> The creator sighed, and there arose a contented little breeze, even from the mouth of the cave... (p.301).

As the party progresses through the desert, the forces of nature become harsher, and the sun becomes a "tiger" and a "gong," but the harshness of his surroundings is the only fit testing-ground for Voss, who must endure all in order to prove himself. The relationship between the physical world and man has now been lifted onto a higher plane, where it becomes part of an allegory of the spiritual life. The spectacle of Voss, testing his spirit against the cruellest forces of nature, is a far remove from White's first novel, where Oliver Halliday can adopt only a passive resignation in the face of an alien and hostile environment.

In his two latest books, White's interest moves away from the natural level, and becomes absorbed in the spiritual life of his characters. The physical world no longer has the same importance for him, although in Riders in the Chariot, each of the four illuminates enjoys an harmonious and sympathetic relationship with his natural surroundings. Himmelfarb lives always very close to nature, and delights in the simple natural world around him:

> The bloke Himmelfarb had gone out, and was walking alongside the green river, where nobody had ever been seen to walk. The river glistened for him. The birds flew low, swallows probably, almost on the surface of the water, and he held out his hand to them. They did not come to him, of course, but he touched the glistening arcs of flight. It seemed as though the strings of flight were suspended from his fingers, and that he controlled the whirring birds... (p.228).

Mrs. Godbold accepts and loves the world of nature around her, just as she accepts and loves the homely objects of her daily life, the 'various vessels and utensils of her office.' (p.536).

> In the course of her life, she had developed a love and respect for common objects and trivial acts. Did they, perhaps, conceal a core, reveal a sequence? Whatever the explanation, she would go about planting a row of beans, not as though she were covering seed, rather as if she were learning a secret of immense importance, over and over. She would go amongst her pots of ferns, freeing the young crooks from the bonds of spiders... (p.536).

For Dubbo, the impressions of light and colour and texture of the physical world are synthesised by his artistic genius to form the inspiration of much of his painting:

> In that it was so very recent, the paint still wet, the creator could not see his work as it must appear and remain. He could at least admire the feathery texture of the angel's wings as a problem overcome, while forgetting that a little boy on a molten morning had held a live cockatoo in his hands, and opened its feathers to look at their roots, and become involved

> in the mystery of down. Later perhaps, falling asleep, or waking, it might occur to the man how he had understood to render the essence of divinity... (p.404).

Guided by instinct as she is, Miss Hare is completely immersed in her natural surroundings, and is unable to differentiate between her own individuality and the objective world.

> Whereas she, Miss Hare, whose eyes were always probing, fingers prying, would achieve the ecstasy of complete, annihilating liberation... (p.12).

For Miss Hare, Divinity is to be found in Nature itself, and in her own non-rational existence. She is, in her own way, a complete Pantheist. As White says of her, she is "illuminated by the light of instinct"... (p.509).

> Of course, truth took many forms, Miss Hare suspected. Or was couched in the formlessness that she herself best knew; of wind and rain, the falling of a leaf, the whirling of the white sky... (p.473).

Her relationship is closer than a rational, or even intuitive, sympathy with lower creation. For she herself is a non-rational creature, relying on her instincts, and having an instinctive, animal-like affinity with her surroundings. A participation in and a mingling with Nature are the means of her attaining her imaginative vision.

In this novel, too, as in The Aunt's Story, and Voss, the characters' perception of the outside world is influenced by their emotional states. But here, with the author's surer and

more discriminating touch, it is only Miss Hare in her empathy with nature, who experiences this. Her sense of impending trouble or disaster is reflected in her own hitherto familiar world:

> Great cloudy tumbrils were lumbering across the bumpy sky towards a crimson doom... (p.77).

It is interesting to compare the two following passages, where, with great imaginative power, White has presented two different aspects of Miss Hare's feeling for her surroundings. In the first, she is simply enjoying the sight and feel of vegetative life, and in the second, her mind is beset with fears of Mrs. Jolley's evil influence:

> But the way developed over good, soft loam, and velvet patches of leaf mould, lovely if the knees were allowed to sink for a moment into a surface from which would rise the scent of fungus and future growth.
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> So Miss Hare was pushing and struggling now, because it was what she liked, and chose. Scratched a little, but that was to be expected once the feet were set upon the paths of existence. Slapped by a staggy elder bush, of which the buds had almost reached the edible stage. Whipped by the little sarsparilla vine, of which she could have drunk the purple up. Stroked by ferns, and ferns... (p.13).

> Light was no longer distributed by the sun in honest golden metal; it oozed, a greenish, steamy yellow from the flesh of grass. As Miss Hare went out into the green prevalence, the arrow-heads of grass pricked her; she was the target of thousands. But had experienced worse, of course. So she went on.

> She went down through the militant, sharp, clattering grass, and through the patches of shade where the soft, indolent swathes lolled and stank... (p.98).

There is then a very evident development in White's treatment of man's relationship with his objective world, and his vision has enlarged considerably. From Happy Valley, where he viewed Nature as a hostile force, subjecting man to its implacable will, he has arrived at a far more profound understanding in Riders in the Chariot, where his four chief characters are sensitively aware of the natural life around them, and experience a deep harmony with it.

Except in the case of Miss Hare, whose fear of death and the destruction of "the incorporeal part of her" is symbolized in the collapse of Xanadu, physical objects are no longer used as symbols in any important sense. Instead, man himself has become the symbol, and the Chariot itself is merely a projection of the mind, or the product of the imaginative vision of the characters. In the climax of the story, the symbolism provided by the crucifixion and deposition is no longer that of the natural world, but is a dramatic enactment by the characters themselves. But it is to be noticed that the descriptions of nature and natural surroundings have a freshness and immediacy which places them among the best passages in the novel. His fine discriminations amongst the sensations of sight and smell and touch are exceptionally good, and in this last novel, he has succeeded in assimilating these sensations perfectly into

the consciousness of his characters, so that their deep sense of union with the natural life around them is not only perceived, but experienced intimately by the reader.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PROBLEM OF COMMUNICATION

The isolation and loneliness of the individual and his intense longing and inability to share his inmost experiences has been one of the central themes of twentieth-century literature, and White, in this respect, is very much a writer of his time. R.F. Brissenden, in his lecture on Patrick White, discusses this theme of human loneliness, which, he says,

> ... enters to some extent into all of White's novels. It is in his preoccupation with this problem that White is perhaps most obviously 'modern'. Not that loneliness is a problem peculiar to life in the twentieth century - nonetheless it is one with which the writer of today seems especially preoccupied. It forms one of the main themes in James Joyce's Ulysses; in more recent American fiction Carson McCullers at one level and the Beat Boys at another are troubled by the problems of the unloved, the solitary and the rejected; Colin Wilson wrote a book about it, The Outsider; and it is one of the dominant themes in the poetry of A.D. Hope, a theme revealed most clearly in the poem from which the title of his book, The Wandering Islands, is taken:

> "You cannot build bridges between the wandering islands;
> The mind has no neighbours, and the unteachable heart
> Announces its armistice time after time, but spends
> Its love to draw them closer and closer apart."[1]

In the earlier books, White's characters fail to understand each other, or are forced to live a life of loneliness as a

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[1] R.F. Brissenden, 'Patrick White', Meanjin, vol. XVIII, no. 4 (1959), p.417.

result of circumstances. The sense of frustration, which results from this enforced solitariness of mind and spirit, changes finally to a recognition of its inevitability, and with this knowledge come a certain calmness and resigned acceptance of the situation. The suffering incurred by the sense of separation and loneliness becomes a means of arriving at self-knowledge.

But with Voss and Riders in the Chariot White's whole attitude changes. The theme of isolation, which in the earlier books forms part of the central experience of the character, becomes something quite different in his last two novels. No longer is the individual doomed to a life of loneliness and isolation; he has discovered a means of sharing his experience and his inmost thoughts, or rather, he finds that this communication comes naturally and effortlessly to him. Physical separation has no meaning now, since the communion he enjoys is essentially a spiritual one.

This change of attitude is unexpected, since few, after reading White's first four novels, would be prepared for such a solution to what has become accepted as an insoluble problem. What can be the explanation of this development? The answer can only lie in a change of attitude to the whole problem itself. As White's books have become increasingly metaphysical, as the central experience of his characters becomes a more purely spiritual one, so the problem of interpersonal relationships

becomes less important, or resolves itself in a communion of spiritual intuition. It is interesting to trace this development in White's ideas, and to consider their effect on his treatment of the individual. As his understanding of the need for this communication develops and changes, so too does his treatment of the nature of the communication itself.

In his first novel, Happy Valley, the problem of isolation and interpersonal relationship between the characters is on rather a superficial level, reflecting the author's own lack of maturity at this period. Each character is searching for a panacea for his loneliness, but, apart from Margaret's and Rodney's tentative gropings towards a shared intimacy, the relationship between Dr. Halliday and Alys Browne is the only one which rises above a purely physical plane. These two, sensitive, but ineffectual and romantic, are looking for someone to understand them, and since they are the only two likely persons in this small town, they meet and embark on what is, for them, a satisfying relationship. Oliver has been growing increasingly concerned with the idea that one cannot identify oneself with another person, - "see beneath the surface." He feels that, with Alys, he has succeeded in getting below the superficial commonplaces of ordinary living, and has reached some kind of deep understanding with her, although this is more hinted at than realized dramatically in the novel.

There is hardly any question here of a real communication

of spiritual experience; just a soothing relationship reminiscent of Schumann and of vaguely Romantic aspirations, where each feels, in some confused way, that he is "understood." Nevertheless, they do establish a satisfactory union, on the level of their own sentimental understanding, and Oliver's thoughts, when he is returning home from meeting Alys, indicate the effect it has had upon him, and his sense of awakening to a new life:

> I have been asleep, he said. It is like waking. And I must remain awake, or at least conscious, conscious in one person of the whole. The others are asleep, perhaps will never wake. You go up on to a high hill and look down at them asleep. If you could go down among the sleepers and open their eyes, touching them with your hand... I ought to feel sorry, but there is no regret, which is perhaps a perversion of the moral sense, if finding yourself is a perversion, because this is what I have done... (p.165).

This rather artificially construed meditation makes clear both the egotistical element in the notion of shared experience, and White's inability at this time to manage a dramatic presentation which would be convincing and realistic. But with Oliver's increased awareness comes gradually, too, a realization of what he is doing to his family, and he tells Alys that he cannot "willingly destroy, after facing the meaning of destruction in that house."...(p.294). When they are forced to separate, they comfort each other and themselves with the thought that the memory of their shared experience will

remain a joy in an otherwise bleak and lonely future:

> (Alys) began to think about Oliver, who was a moment in the past, but also present and future. I shall not live altogether in the past, she said. This is still alive. This is interminable... I shall not hurry, she said, I shall shape time with what I have already got... (321-2).

But the reader is not really convinced, since this consoling thought seems to be little more than another of their romantic illusions.

White's treatment of this theme in Happy Valley differs quite considerably from the treatment of it in his later books. In this first novel, the characters do not desire so much a communication of experience, as a relationship which is itself the experience. They find happiness and complete self-fulfilment in each other. White moves away from this conception, and as his understanding of what constitutes the life of the mind and the spirit grows, his characters' inner experiences become solitary ones. This statement will need qualification when we come to examine Voss, but by then, White's whole conception of the problem is on a different plane.

In The Living and the Dead, there is an even more deeply negative treatment of the isolation theme. The only relationship which is in any way satisfying is between Eden and Joe, and even this cannot give either of them complete fulfilment. Eden at first feels satisfied:

> Her relationship with Joe Barnett gave her life a form, a substance, she could touch

> it, touch herself, in a way she never could with Maynard or any of the others, she could not have said this is Eden Standish with any degree of certainty... (p.258).

But she becomes aware very quickly of their separate individualities, and realizes that, in spite of their moments of closeness, she cannot really share Joe's most intimate thoughts, or penetrate his remoteness. And Joe, who does love Eden, is unable to rest content in this personal world of happiness because of his sense of responsibility for the ills of the larger world outside himself:

> He could put out his hand and touch just so much certainty, the intimate, personal world they made. He loved Eden Standish, not in so many words, he never stopped to formulate this, it was sure enough, like meeting again, you expected this... The certainty of your own life, the day to day in Crick's workshop, the Saturdays with Eden, were no guarantee against the sick feeling in the pit of your stomach. This became the sad, sick, stinking world. He was responsible in a way. But his hands were helpless, could not cope... (p.255).

After Joe's departure, Eden cannot take refuge even in memories, as Alys had done, but must face the logic of Joe's act, and accept its meaning for both of them.

> There is no Eden Standish, just as there is no Joe Barnett, you said. There is more than this, there is the stock of positive acts and convictions that two people infuse into the dying body of the world, their more than blood... (p.293).

In this resolution, White seems to be denying the value of

a personal relationship and to be suggesting that the only means of self-fulfilment is a solitary positive contribution towards the business of living.

Elyot, shy and retiring as a boy, after a few tentative approaches towards communication with others, comes eventually to dislike the possibility of any intimate relationship. He desires only to be left alone:

> He very much needed this secret life. Something that he didn't have to explain, and which he had chosen for himself... (p.98).

He wards off the advances of Connie, and her threatened encroachment on his private emotions, and accepts the liaison with Muriel through indifference, and because it is such a superficial one, not requiring him to share his inner experiences:

> On the whole people bothered him, the effort, the having to communicate yourself, and most of all emotionally... (p.141).

The other major character, Mrs. Standish, needs other people more as a means of asserting her own individuality than for any mutual sharing of experience:

> She was as closely dependent on the telephone as the soul on its confessional. Hearing her own voice, timing her own laugh. It was more soothing, this statement of your own personality, than words at the other end... (p.42).

So White's resolution of the problem in this book, in so far as there appears to be one, is that no solution to the

apparent meaninglessness, or "shapelessness" of life can come from a mutual relationship. This can give a temporary relief only to the recurring pain of existence.

The note of frustration is renewed and intensified in The Aunt's Story. Theodora tries desperately to convince herself of her personal identity, and feels that, if she can only establish some communication with someone else, she will be successful. But she is shy and unattractive, even repulsive to others, because they sense that she has seen through their pettiness and subterfuges, as indeed she has. She is close only to her father, who is "close, closer to her than her own thought"... (p.87). But he dies, and except for fleeting moments of shared experience with the Syrian, the Man who was given his Dinner, and later, with Moraitis, she is completely isolated. Her friendship with Violet Adams could not be a real one, since Violet "could not endure the bones and stones," but

> It is still possible to love the ghost that has been exorcised. There remains the need... (p.61).

And this need she comes to feel more and more desperately. She would even be prepared to accept Frank Parrott as a husband, in spite of his stupidity, for the sake of having some relationship with another human being. Her contact with Lou, her niece, remains her last hope, but even this, she feels, is not satisfying:

> Theodora looked down through the distances that separate, even in love. If I could put out my hand, she said, but I cannot. And already, the moment, the moments, the disappearing afternoon, had increased the distance that separates. There is no life-line to other lives... (p.137).

After her journey to Europe, and establishment at the Hotel Midi, Theodora, in her desperation, tries to establish her identity by participating vicariously in the lives of others. She lives in a dream-world, where, in turn, she is with Katina, the General, Madame Rapallo and Wetherby, establishing herself as an indispensable element in their lives.

In this state of wish-fulfilment, she is loved and cherished by Katina, and rescues her from danger:

> In her arms, the child's body, still limp from sleep, was like her own nakedness. Their hearts beat openly and together, in the astonished morning... (p.151).

And she is necessary to the old General, as his conscience, his Ludmilla:

> But she came, as she had always come, to Alyosha Sergei... They were, in fact, that complementary curse and blessing, a relationship... (p.210).

Wetherby, the poet, is aware of Theodora's efforts to live a vicarious existence, and remarks cynically:

> If I could have loved Katina Pavlou, just as she leapt from your imagination, clothed in white, and all the nostalgia of what has never happened, then it might have been different... (p.245).

Even the General tries to force her to give up her illusions, saying to her:

> You can also create the illusion of other people, but, once created, they choose their own reality... (p.250).

After some months, discovering that "faces no longer opened," Theodora decides to return home, but realizes, while travelling there, that her idea of home as a place where she belongs is also an illusion. In the end, she has come to the conclusion that she can make contact with the lives of others through her participation in their joys and sorrows; she "knew that because she loved and pitied, the humiliation and the pain were also necessarily hers."... (p.238).

> In the peace that Holstius spread throughout her body and the speckled shade of surrounding trees, there was no end to the lives of Theodora Goodman. These met and parted, met and parted, movingly. They entered into each other... And in the same way that the created lives of Theodora Goodman were interchangeable, the lives into which she had entered, making them momently dependent for love or hate, owing her this portion of their fluctuating personalities... these were the lives of Theodora Goodman, these too... (pp.299-300).

But Theodora arrives at this conclusion, and is satisfied with it, only after she has completely lost touch with reality. White has intended to suggest that Theodora's complete isolation is due not only to the inadequacy of the society in which she lives, but also to her own honesty, sensitivity, and real

incapacity to communicate with others. But I do not feel that this is an altogether satisfactory explanation. The second section of the book, Jardin Exotique, while it is a striking dramatization of the disintegration of a personality, succeeds so well that the reader loses touch with Theodora as a character. The 'inevitable' quality of her resulting insanity is weakened by this, and her final complete isolation of mind is neither tragic nor even pathetic, since Theodora herself has become an abstraction.

At first glance, there seems little similarity between The Aunt's Story and The Tree of Man, with its saga of ordinary living, but it soon becomes apparent that White is concerned here with the same problem of communication. Stan and Amy are no more successful in sharing their most intimate thoughts and experiences than is Theodora. But although Stan ultimately fails to share with Amy what to him are the most important discoveries of his life, they nevertheless enjoy a mutual love and sympathy which Theodora never knows. R.F. Brissenden, in his lecture on Patrick White, comments on this:

> One of the most impressive things in The Tree of Man, which tells the story of the married life of two ordinary people, is the way in which he suggests the waxing and waning not of the love of Stan and Amy Parker for each other and for their children, but of their understanding of each other. They never achieve the rapport they hunger for with their children; and as the years pass, Stan and Amy, though still

> loving and needing each other, become locked more and more securely within the circles of their own souls.[1]

Their lives on the ordinary level are simple and harmonious and only they know that there is a vital part of themselves which they have somehow failed to communicate to each other. This they come to accept as inevitable and resign themselves to a mutual companionship which, although it does not satisfy, at least saves them from complete isolation.

Although White has emphasized the "ordinary" qualities of Stan and Amy he has nevertheless created two characters who are fundamentally very different in temperament and understanding. Amy, being more concerned with her life of safe domesticity and personal possessions, does not have the yearning for a more spiritual life which torments Stan. But she is consumed with the desire to possess those near to her, to know their secret thoughts, to dominate their lives. Of her husband she feels that:

> If she could have held his head in her hands and looked into the skull at his secret life, whatever it was, then, she felt, she might have been placated... (p.150).

> What does Stan, in his Sunday clothes, think of in Church? she wondered, brushing from her face the flies and a shadow of resentment. She resented some personal experience enclosed in him, subtler than her own yearning occasioned by the sad hymns... (p.64).

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1 R.F. Brissenden, 'Patrick White', Meanjin, vol. XVIII, no. 4 (1959), p.418.

But she does not succeed in penetrating the depths of Stan's mind, and feels resentful of his secret individuality. She tries, too, to possess her children, but finds, again, that "she could not compel." She has no great desire to share her own experiences, and she is very anxious to conceal her guilty thoughts from her husband.

> Or again, they would look at each other in the course of some silence, and she would wonder, she would wonder what she had been giving away... (p.147).

Stan on the other hand, does not want to possess, but in the beginning he feels an intense longing to come closer to Amy, and to share with her his dimly apprehended spiritual experiences.

> I should tell her something of this perhaps, he said, but how to mention, and what to mention, so he could not. He realized that it was some time since they had spoken together. Except to ask for things and recount incidents, they had not really entered into each other. She was closed, he saw. He was perpetually looking at her eyelids, as she walked or sat with these drawn down, in a dream... (p.303).

He fails, too, with his children, and never succeeds in sharing his experiences with Ray, or in establishing any contact with him. His final attempt indeed is a miserable failure:

> There, beneath that tree, under which they had pulled up, a gnarled, difficult native with harsh, staring leaves, the man and the boy were resenting each other for their separateness... (p.226).

White has rendered the fluctuations in sympathy and understanding between Stan and Amy skilfully, and in this

typical passage, we are shown Stan's bewilderment at the "remoteness" of his wife, and at the distance which separates him from a supposedly familiar person:

> Stan Parker would sometimes fail to recognize his wife. He would see her for the first time. He would look at her and feel, This is a different one, as if she had been several. She was, of course, according to which dream rose to the surface. Sometimes she was beautiful.
>
> But he respected and accepted her mysteries, as she could never respect and accept his... (147).

Realizing at last that Amy cannot understand or appreciate his experiences, Stan loses the desire to communicate, and is content with an enjoyment of his own inner vision. He dies without having shared his last most intense convictions.

But if real communication is impossible to them, they share at times a wordless intimacy, and these moments of close union are rendered very sensitively:

> Then Stan Parker looked up as he sat, he was tired, and saw that his wife was there. She stood in her dark wet clothes, with the bag falling from her shoulders and her hair drying in the wind. He was not surprised. He did not wave and make jokes, as other men did with acquaintances and relations. But he looked into her and was content. "Don't you have nothun to say to your husband now?" Mrs. O'Dowd asked her friend. But Amy Parker looked away. She had looked into him, into his eyes, and had never looked deeper, she thought. There was very little to say... (p.86).

White's debt to Lawrence is unmistakeable, particularly in the earlier part of The Tree of Man, where he adopts so much

of the former's treatment of the relationships between man and woman, and the conflict and interplay of character.[1] But his work lacks the force of Lawrence's.

In The Rainbow, the author moves from descriptive-analytical prose into scenes of great dramatic force and intensity, as that in Chapter Three, between Brangwen and his wife. But White has no parallel scenes, and the intimate scenes between Amy and Stan, where they come closest in conflict or in peace and fulfilment, have little dramatic power.

The reason for this is, I think, twofold. White's prose has little of the intensity and vigour of Lawrence's style; it is more detached and abstract, lacking the sensuous imagery and rhythms of The Rainbow. The other reason is that White's interests are not really so closely allied to Lawrence's, as may appear from the echoes in The Tree of Man. Two comparable passages dealing with the feeling of estrangement between husband and wife may make this clear:

> They were such strangers, they must for ever be such strangers, that his passion was a clanging torment to him. Such intimacy of embrace, and such utter foreignness of contact! It was unbearable. He could not bear to be near her, and know the utter foreignness between them, know how entirely they were strangers to each other... (The Rainbow, p.44)

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1 Cf. V. Buckley, 'Patrick White and his Epic', Twentieth Century, vol. XII, no. 3 (1958), p.243.

In place of the sense of urgency and passion, the exploitation of rhythmical and repetitive effects displayed in the above passage, White presents a much more detached, passionless, abstract prose:

> Even her hands at times, he felt, are distant. Even the mystery of possession is a mystery that it is not possible to share. And now, as they stood in the path, verging on the discovery of half-veiled shores, the child was not theirs, and he was already embarrassed by those things he would be unable to say to the stranger-child... (pp.53-4).

There is an inwardness about Stan, which convinces us that the importance for him (and for the author) is more in a silent communion with the unknown, than in the relationship with his wife. The reader is beginning to suspect that White's interest is focussed primarily on the inner vision of the individual character, and that the resulting isolation is, in fact, due to the concentration on this, rather than on the inter-relationship of his characters. Even the most 'normal' character in all his novels, Stan Parker, is still an isolated individualist, and this trait in White's work becomes stronger in his later novels.

This lack of vitality, of vigorous conflict and interaction between characters, constitutes one of the greatest weaknesses in The Tree of Man, and in White's writing as a whole. His characters are made to pursue parallel courses of action, rather than to engage in any real relationship with others, and their

consequent solitariness of mind seems due to the author's basic conception of the individual rather than to a sequence of forces and events inherent in the story itself. But the isolation of Stan and Amy from each other, from their children, and from their neighbours, is abnormal, and seems to have been imposed upon them to a large extent by their creator. In this novel, where there has been an explicit attempt to achieve a certain universality, the desired effect is considerably weakened by the lack of normality here.

From Stan Parker, who realizes that the individual experience is, finally, incommunicable, White now moves unexpectedly towards a much more affirmative and positive attitude. There are, indeed, the beginnings of this approach to be seen in The Aunt's Story, where Theodora experiences flashes of intuitively felt communication with the Syrian, The Man who stayed to Dinner, Moraitis, and Zack. But they are merely glimpses, not sustained, and it is doubtful whether White intended that there should be any real mutual recognition, since the experience is a one-sided affair on Theodora's part.

But in Voss, most of the previous atmosphere of frustration has disappeared, and instead, White has created two characters each of whom is able to communicate to the other the secrets of his inner life. He has introduced another dimension into the relationship of his characters, that of intuitive understanding, and it may be useful to sum up here what appears to be his

explanation of this new relationship. The problem of isolation can be solved by people who are so akin to each other in character, temperament and understanding, that they are able intuitively to share each other's experiences through an exercise of imaginative vision. Mutual understanding can be achieved without the necessity for long companionship, or lengthy discussion and explanations. Laura and Voss enjoy such a relationship, and, after two brief meetings, establish a telepathic communication which enables them to share all the sufferings and mental and spiritual experiences of the other.

Critics have questioned the importance of Laura's part in the story, and Douglas Stewart, in his review of Voss, doubts the necessity for Laura at all, adding:

> "But the love affair is not important. The journey into the wilderness is the thing."[1]

For H.J. Oliver, the chapters on Laura and the Bonners are merely an exasperating interruption to the interesting story of the exploring party.[2]

But, to interpret it thus, is to miss the most vital implications of White's theme. Voss must discover and accept not only his own weak humanity, but his need for other human

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1 D. Stewart, Bulletin, March 5th, 1958.

2 H.J. Oliver, 'Patrick White's Significant Journey', Southerly, no. 1 (1958), p.48.

society and his need for love. Only this will make him genuinely human, and strip him of the last pretensions to divinity and self-sufficiency. Laura is his alter ego, who, by her mysterious, telepathic influence over his mind, persuades him gradually to shed his illusions and to arrive at a more perfect stage of self-knowledge. If we object to the element of mystery, and to the account of an experience which is dependent for its significance on its relation to the spiritual, rather than the factual level of actuality, then we must deny any value or meaning to either Voss or Riders in the Chariot, both of which depend on this interpretation.

H.J. Oliver is puzzled too, by the necessity of "a physical symbol of a spiritual marriage." "Nor," he adds, "do I think that the novelist quite succeeds with his technique of alternating chapters."[1]

Waiving for the moment the question of the success of White's technique, we must try to appreciate the reasons for it. If we remember that the Laura-Voss relationship is one of "becoming," and that Laura's as well as Voss's state of awareness and self-knowledge must grow, we can see that this structure forms an integrated pattern of growth. It is not the "love affair" which is so important, but the mutual growth in self-awareness and purity of vision.

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1 H.J. Oliver, 'Patrick White's Significant Journey', Southerly, no. 1 (1958), p.48.

With regard to the 'physical symbol,' it must be noticed how much of Voss's dreams and psychic communications with Laura is rendered in physical images and experiences. This is due in part to White's practice throughout this novel of expressing abstract ideas in physical imagery, but also to his direct intention of conveying the attraction Laura, as a woman, has for Voss.

The dream-sequences are most important in the working out of White's theme. Far from being unnecessary excrescences or unrelated imaginative flights of fancy, they form an integral and necessary part of Voss's painful journey of the mind, and it is important to understand Laura's part in them. If we look carefully into the one on page 187, immediately after Voss's conversation with Palfreyman and his receipt of Laura's letter, we can see how important it is in the development of the story:

> Then Voss began to float, and those words last received. But <u>together</u>. Written words take some time to thaw, but the words of lilies were now flowing in full summer water, whether it was the water or the leaves of water, and dark hairs of roots plastered on the mouth as water blew across. Now they were swimming so close they were joined together at the waist, and were the same flesh of lilies, their mouths, together, were drowning in the same love-stream. I do not wish this yet, or <u>nie nie nie</u>, <u>niemals</u>. Nein. You will, she said, if you will cut and examine the word. <u>Together</u> is filled with little cells. And cuts open with a knife. It is a see seed. But I do not. All human obligations are painful, Mr. Johann Ulrich, until they are learnt, variety by variety. But gold

> is painful, crushing, and cold on the forehead, while wholly desirable, because immaculate. Only resist the Christ-thorn. Tear out the black thing by the roots before it has taken hold. She was humbly grateful for it, however. In her kneeling position, she continued to bathe her hair in all flesh, whether of imperial lilies, or the black putrefying human kind... (pp.200-1).

This dream echoes Voss's recent experiences, gathers up the impressions that he has received, expresses his desire for Laura, and the conflict between this desire, and his even more intense yearning to retain his spiritual self-sufficiency and independence. His bitter struggle against the Christian ideal and its necessary humility of mind (the 'Christ-thorn') is partially resolved at the end of the dream, where he finally agrees to accept Laura's terms ("I do accept the terms"), which require not only a humble recognition of his own weakness, but a mutual relationship, something against which he has always been struggling. So that when the dream finishes, Voss has moved a step further towards humility and self-surrender.

In order to appreciate fully Laura's part in the allegory, it is worthwhile to imagine what the book would have been like without her. White could have eliminated any real human relationship, other than that of the party, and Voss's communing could have been entirely with himself. This is what we have in The Aunt's Story (Jardin Exotique), which is artistically inferior to Voss. Voss's extreme isolation, his idiosyncrasies,

are tempered by Laura's warm humanity, and his lack of emotion by Laura's rushes of feeling. And she is the means of revealing that Voss has unsuspected desires for human relationship, both physical and mental. We are given a dramatically realized presentation of a man's spiritual progress. Voss, under Laura's influence, moves from a proud state of independence to a definite need for Laura's love and companionship. It is she who changes him into a human being, and convinces him finally of the falsity of his ideal of complete self-sufficiency.

In one of his last communions with Laura, just before he dies, he does arrive at a state of almost complete understanding and love:

> They were holding each other's heads and looking into them, as remorselessly as children looking at secrets, and seeing all too clearly. But unlike children, they were comforted to recognize their own faults. So they were growing together and loving... (p.408).

In his latest book, White again solves the problem of the isolation of the individual by means of a theory of intuitive understanding and sympathy. For Laura and Voss, complete understanding and agreement are reached only after a period of reluctance and aversion, although the recognition of mental kinship takes place earlier. Voss arrives at a stage of complete spiritual union with Laura only when he is near death.

But the union of the four major characters in Riders in the Chariot is not by means of any gradual process. Recognition of each other is instantaneous and complete, as in Miss Hare's meeting with Dubbo:

> She watched his back, gratefully rewarded. Both the illuminates remained peacefully folded inside the envelopes of their flesh. Each knew it was improbable they would ever communicate in words. Yet they had exchanged a token of goodness which would remain for ever in each other's keeping. From behind closed eyelids each would have recognized the other as an apostle of truth. And that was enough... (p.69).

And Dubbo, later, paints Miss Hare,

> not as he had seen her in her covert of leaves beside the road, but as he knew her from their brief communion, when he had entered into that brindled soul subtly and suddenly as light... (p.510).

Each realizes that the others possess in some way the same awareness of and contact with another world which he himself enjoys. This understanding and wordless sharing of experience has now nothing to do with any affinity of age, birth, education, religion, or social status. They are conscious of this shared experience in some inexplicable, instinctive way. Himmelfarb is convinced that he and Miss Hare

> were, and always had been, engaged on a similar mission... (p.342).

and Miss Hare, in her turn, feels a personal responsibility for Himmelfarb's safety.

With Himmelfarb and Dubbo, the relationship is again a

silent, though a real one:

> Yet, with this fellow flotsam, the Jew had formed, he now realized, an extraordinary non-relationship. If that could describe anything so solid, while unratified, so silent, while so eloquent... (p.347).

And White uses even stranger means than in Voss to establish communication among his four illuminates. Voss and Laura communicate by some subtle, telepathic means, which is less a communication than an extremely sensitive perception of each other's mental and spiritual states. It is quite possible to explain this relationship in psychical, rather than in spiritual terms, and this is what White seems to have intended.

But how are we to understand the communication of these four initiates from any human standpoint, either psychical, or spiritual? They are united by a shared intuitive vision of the great realities of life, and the reader does not find this so very difficult to accept. But White is determined to go even further than this; they are united also by their vision of the Chariot, which, we are told is "a symbol of the super-natural world."

White obviously wished to choose a symbol which would be acceptable and intelligible to each of the four, so different in race and creed, but instead of taking one from the natural world, which could have perhaps sprung as a spontaneous image in their minds, he selects instead an arbitrary symbol, which is an artifact of man's own ingenuity. The symbol here is not,

as in Voss, an organic part of the story, but is on quite a separate plane. He at once strains the limits of credibility considerably, and moves his story away from the regions of reality, either physical or spiritual. The implications of this reduction of the story to a fable must be considered in a later chapter, since we are concerned here only with the question of mutual relationships.

How, then, does White resolve the problem of man's isolation and separation from his fellows? Only by positing an intuitive understanding and sympathy among chosen souls, and to do this, he moves beyond the limits of the normal means of communication. This is scarcely a satisfying resolution. But a further consideration must be added here. In fact, the need for communication between these illuminates has almost disappeared. They no longer feel tormented by a desire to share their experiences, because instead, they have arrived at a state where their whole being is centred on a communication of another kind. The longing for human understanding and sympathy has given way to the longing for a closer union with some super-natural reality. When these people meet and recognize one another, they are indeed pleased and comforted, but chiefly because this communication strengthens their own hold on their inner vision of reality. Between Dubbo and Himmelfarb,

> a state of trust became established by subtler than any human means... (pp.417-18).

and Dubbo

> was conforted to know that the Chariot did exist outside the prophet's vision and his own mind... (p.418).

These characters feel, too, a sense of mutual responsibility for each other's welfare, both physical and spiritual. Miss Hare says to Himmelfarb, when she tries to warn him of the danger that she feels is so imminent:

> I am not interested in you! Not what you are, think, feel. I am only concerned for your safety. I am responsible for you! ... (p.341).

Dubbo, in the curious crucifixion scene, feels the weight of his responsibility towards Himmelfarb, although he can do nothing, and is overwhelmed by his failure to "bear witness." Mrs. Godbold's love extends towards all men, particularly to the miserable and the social outcast, but she prays especially for her "fellow-initiates." Himmelfarb, as a Jew, feels the weight of responsibility towards his own people, and eventually, as his vision and understanding enlarge, towards all mankind.

This element, which White calls "loving kindness," is new in his work. Laura, in the previous novel, feels a responsibility for Voss, and prays earnestly for him, but her love is that of a wife for her husband, and lacks the platonic element which we find in the relationship of the four illuminates. And Voss himself has no such sense, in spite of the fact that he forces himself to look after Frank in his illness, and declares that he

"loves all men." He seems to feel no responsibility for the lives lost on the expedition, and in this respect, as in most others, he is completely amoral, and isolated from the normal mores of society.

So White has resolved the problem of communication by removing the sense of isolation, by filling his 'chosen' souls with a force of love stronger than their feeling of emptiness and desolation, and by giving them a sense of responsibility towards others. The need for communication of experience has to a large extent been removed.

This is a far more altruistic philosophy than is to be found in his earlier novels, but whether it is acceptable depends on the inner vision with which White has filled the void.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SEARCH FOR REALITY AND MEANING IN LIFE (i)

> Oh to unstop my soul and there receive
> This boundless calm and beauty; to believe
> Life's festered limbs but fevered images;
> To soar in equity among the stars,
> And there forget that we are hostages
> Beating our futile wings against the bars.[1]

These lines from the poem 'Morning Soliloquy' were written by White in 1934, five years before he published Happy Valley. Although the sentiment is unremarkable, and the literary merit slight, they express that sense of frustration and failure to find any real meaning in life which is so evident in his three early novels. The development in these books is towards an increasingly negative attitude, moving from the passive resignation of Oliver Halliday in the face of inescapable misfortunes to the insanity of Theodora Goodman, who in her final state of understanding, rejects the values by which ordinary men live. His characters, searching for some meaning and design in their lives, arrive at only one conclusion; that there is no meaning, but each tries to "resist the shapelessness" in a different way. The bleakness of these early novels is due in part to White's limited, constricted viewpoint, and to the absence of any positive attitude towards the problem.

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1 P. White, The Ploughman and other Poems, (Sydney, 1935).

In Happy Valley, the issues, vaguely felt, are poorly presented. Oliver is seeking a rather nebulous form of happiness and self-fulfilment, which he is able to achieve for a time in his relationship with Alys. Although White was in his late twenties when this book was published, and although Dr. Halliday is over thirty, there is a decidedly adolescent quality about the latter's cynical reflections and yearning to be understood. There is little attempt to arrive at any reasoned and mature attitude to life. Oliver thinks:

> You began to talk about ideals. It was Hilda's sympathetic eyes. Later on you began to realize that sympathy in women was largely compound of stupidity and anxiety for the future. However that was later on... (p.16).

This rather superficial obviousness in the reflections of both Oliver and the author as commentator, is maintained throughout the story, and is well illustrated by the too-overt cynicism of the title.

Oliver's intimacy with Alys Browne is a fulfilment of his desire for some relationship deeper than the fondness which he feels for Hilda, and which is so unsatisfactory. ("There is something so passive and taken-for-granted about the state of being fond." ... p.73). He is able to feel some significance and reality in his life from this association with Alys.

> I haven't known what I wanted. I don't think many of us do. Except very occasionally by a sort of intuitional flash. Sometimes it's a physical or material solution, sometimes it's spiritual, sometimes it's

> both. All of a sudden you know... (p.162).
>
> Before this you had not thought you could have loved someone for their imperfections, but somehow they made her more real. She was a core of reality in Happy Valley... (p.191).

But to both of them, a deeper self-knowledge comes only after the failure of their attempt to share a new life together, and after the suffering of their separation. At first Oliver can only feel a blind anger against the fate which has thwarted his plans for their happiness.

> Go down the street, tell, he said, tell Hilda and the others you have won, only not you, something thrown in the road as a sort of ironical gage to pick up and carry back, they let you get as far as that knowing you would return, impotent. Because you cannot cast off the shell the ways and customs, except in death, as Moriarty has. You substitute fortitude, like Hilda, who is fortitude, sleeping in her wooden room, and call it a moral victory. He felt all the bitterness of a moral victory that was not rightly his... (p.278).

But this reaction gives way to a clearer understanding of his motives, and to the consequences of his proposed action on his family. From his association with Alys, and his realization of the sufferings caused in the Moriarty home by attitudes of self-seeking and evasion of responsibility, Oliver develops a more compassionate attitude towards his own family. He writes to Alys:

> There was all the futility and pain of wilful destruction about that house and two people trying to escape from the inevitable. Talking of the inevitable

> may sound defeatist perhaps. We might have escaped down that road to some form of personal happiness. But, Alys, I can't, I won't willingly destroy, after facing the meaning of destruction in that house. Man hasn't much of a say in the matter, I know. He's a feeble creature dictated to by whatever you like, we'll call it an irrational force. But he must offer some opposition to this if he's to keep his own respect... (p.294).

Alys, too, reaches through this suffering a higher level of self-awareness:

> I wanted to escape, she said, this, after all is California, its true significance. Understanding, you felt no pain in your body, that ice did not touch, in your mind that was a fortress against pain, and Happy Valley, and because of this, you lived... (p.321).

But the degree of self-awareness which is reached seems to amount to little more than a keener ability to see through the weaknesses and pretence of themselves and of others. Both Oliver and Alys finally come to a realization of their own ineptitude, and can derive from this a certain ironical satisfaction. They begin to see that they have lived a life of self-deception, and that they have failed to face up to the issues. They become more conscious of their own inadequacy, their own helplessness in the face of a hostile environment, and their own "irrational impulses." It is even difficult to know whether these impulses are the working of fate, or biological drives, or a combination of both. Oliver blames their misfortunes on an "irrational force," which is a vague term to cover his equally vague deterministic philosophy.

Both find their only comfort in the remembrance of their love and mutual experiences, and it is this, rather than any strength derived from self-awareness, on which they depend. Oliver, driving away from Happy Valley, thinks:

> ... And Alys Browne... is part of me for all time, this is not altogether lost, it is still an intimate relationship that no violence can mortify. This is the part of man, to withstand through his relationships the ebb and flow of the seasons, the sullen hostility of rock, the anaesthesia of snow, all those passions that sweep down through negligence or design to consume and desolate, for through Hilda and Alys, he can withstand, he is immune from all the ultimate destruction of the inessential outer shell... (p.327).

The mournful cadences of this final poetic reverie are sufficient to convince the reader that Oliver's awakening has not been forceful enough to dispel his romantic melancholy; or is it the author's? For there is nothing to suggest that White does not sympathize with and share these sentiments. Oliver is not treated with a detachment which could serve to evaluate his experiences in the light of a larger vision, nor is there any other character whose experiences would suggest a different scheme of values strong enough to challenge Oliver's.

Alys, in a rather ineffectual way, begins to question the meaning of experience:

> Alys Browne, the negative coefficient, cancelled out to provide what, for Happy Valley, is the solved equation. I have always been this, she felt... the negative coefficient in Oliver's equation... I cannot accept this, that Oliver should have given me a mind, that is part of Oliver's mind, the constant reminder... (pp.296-7).

This quotation reveals too the limitations of White's technique in his first novel. There is little to establish Alys's identity or individuality in these words, and the expressions used seem in no way characteristic of her. They can only be White's own interpretation of his theme. Her claim that Oliver has given her a mind, if, by 'mind', we mean some intelligent, rational thinking, is not borne out by the thoughts or conversations of either of them.

White wished to show the value and inevitability of suffering, and in his epigraph, he quotes from Ghandi:

> It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering, which is the one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone... the purer the suffering, the greater is the progress.

But his treatment of this theme is rather unconvincing. All his characters suffer, Vic and Ernest Moriarty just as much, or more, than Oliver and Alys. Hilda, too, suffers deeply. In what way, then, are we to understand "purer" suffering? Progress can only mean progress towards self-knowledge and humility, so we must deduce from a reading of Happy Valley, that a "purer" suffering is that undergone by more intelligent, and more sensitive individuals. This is a narrow view, and it is significant that Vic Moriarty's suffering is treated with a singular lack of compassion throughout, and even Ernest's, for the most part, is seen only through the eyes of another. Presumably, only the suffering of the intelligent is worthy of pity or understanding.

The value of suffering seems very slight indeed, if judged from its consequences here. The first part of the epigraph is more apt: Suffering is inevitable; but the inevitability appears to be a result of the author's manipulation of events, rather than of any natural and inevitable law. We are led to decide that the confused, deterministic views of his chief characters are also White's, and the general impression is that everyone is very unhappy indeed. R.F. Brissenden, in his lecture on Patrick White, comments:

> Suffering and loneliness have significance only if they result in self-knowledge, humility and serenity; and it is only through suffering and loneliness that these things in their purity can be obtained... In his first two books, Happy Valley and The Living and the Dead, White does not fully succeed in making the action of the novel reveal the theme - it seems rather that the theme has been imposed upon the story from above.[1]

White has tackled the problem of the meaning of life, or life's experiences, without having explored his characters sufficiently. There is only a superficial delineation of character, and he has not been successful in revealing their minds through the rather stilted and inhibited stream-of-consciousness technique which he occasionally uses. There is little real depth of penetration, and the dramatic intimacy of the book is vitiated by his habit of imposing on the reader his

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1 R.F. Brissenden, 'Patrick White', Meanjin, vol. XVIII, no. 4 (1959), p.419.

own rather slick summing-up of the characters, e.g.

> Mr. Furlow hadn't a mind, only a mutual understanding between a number of almost dormant instincts... (pp.83-4).

Epigrammatic comments such as this are quite often very witty and clever, but do not make for artistic success.

Happy Valley, then, is a novel of bleakness and inordinate suffering, in which the characters arrive at a limited stage of self-knowledge, and accept their unhappiness with a passive resignation.

In the Living and the Dead, the note of frustration deepens, and now there is not even any solace to be found in the memory of a satisfying relationship. The chief character, Elyot, has deliberately excluded life, has refused to take any part in the business of real living, which he sees others trying to do. A passage revealing his thoughts, in the very first chapter, introduces this note of futility. Elyot is thinking of the drunken man, whom he has failed to save:

> But the face drifted behind his own, its lips blowing outward on unshaped words, trying to resist the shapelessness. It was this after all that everyone of them had tried to do, his mother building her bright room, Eden taking the train to Europe, the Connie Tiarkses and the Joe Barnetts, each with a nervous but convinced contribution towards the business of living. Putting up a structure in the face of shapelessness, building, if not in brick or stone, a resistance to annihilation... (p.20).

Elyot himself is passionless and desiccated, a man who

sees clearly the motives and desires of others, but who is unwilling to enter into any intimate relationship with another.

There is a change of position in this book with regard to self-awareness. Elyot is 'aware', intelligent, understands himself, and tries to arrive at a satisfying understanding of life, but no longer lives. Joe Barnett is simple, and does not reason very well, but has a vitality for which Elyot envies him. Here White touches upon a question which he develops further in his later novels; that of the relation between intelligence and self-awareness. Both Joe and Julia are simple people, but they are alive, they exert some force, make some attempt to "resist the formlessness." Elyot classes himself with the dead, but he is without illusions, and has a very developed self-awareness. His refusal to participate in any real relationship is due partly to his character, and partly to the conviction that any effort of his would be meaningless. He is a defeatist.

> Sometimes he decided, in moments of uncomfortable honesty, that he began and ended with these positive lives, their presence or flight, that he had no actual life of his own... (p.16).

From the organization of the story, we are meant to understand that much of Elyot's withdrawal is due to early reactions against his mother's possessiveness, and to youthful traumatic memories of his father's quarrel and subsequent disappearance. Elyot's thoughts at his mother's death-bed are evidence of this:

> The silk was wet, she held too tight, the banging of a door against his head... (p.314).

But this is not particularly convincing. Elyot, like so many other people of the '30's, was suffering from the general 'malaise' of living; a disgust with life, and a disbelief in any real values. He feels only shame at the memory of his brief relationship with Hildegard, which "presented a picture of himself jigging wildly on the end of a rope" (p.141); nor does he desire any real intimacy with Connie Tiarks, "the possessive eiderdown," or Muriel Raphael, "brittle glass."

> (His mother's) enthusiasms often embarrassed him. He preferred to read... On the whole people bothered him, the effort, the having to commit yourself, and most of all emotionally... (p.141).

Reflecting on the reasons for Eden's departure, he comes to the conclusion that the only two ways of imposing some sort of meaning, of "arresting the formlessness," are

> by the process of self-destruction, or by what, by what, if not an intenser form of living... (p.331).

But what constitutes this "intenser form of living," we are not told, nor does White seem to know. We have only the existentialist conviction of the importance of being, and of the individual, but why or how he is to be important is not clear. We are dealing here with vague issues, and can come to grips with nothing.

Eden is the one who is credited with most vitality, but, unfortunately, White does not manage to convey this. The reaction of others, as well as her own words and actions, should convince us of Eden's positive, "intense" life, but she emerges

as little more than a petulant egotist, in spite of the author's descriptions of her. We are told that

> There was a singular, feverish sense of waste running through Eden's life. As if in her fear of an accusation of withholding, she was determined to give too much... (p.178).

But the impression of a vibrant, vital personality does not come through at all, since there is so little individuality about her conversation.

She strives to establish some identity, some sense of reality, and manages this (as does Oliver Halliday with Alys) through her contact with Joe Barnett. But this does not last; she feels that Joe has moved away from her into some remote personal world of his own, and that "there was no longer anything mutual." Joe himself is forced in spite of his simple nature and his love for Eden to consider issues outside his own personal world:

> Behind all this, the habit, the substantial detail there was much that he hadn't accounted for. You still had to reckon with a kind of shapeless force. It made you wonder. It was a force of opposition that showed itself in moments of pain, injustice and hunger. You resented the dictatorship of something you didn't understand, even if it hadn't yet touched you personally, even if it only showed itself around the corner in the next street. So that Joe Barnett in his more thoughtful, selfless moments considered a possible existence free from this abstract dictatorship. He could not formulate the details of his desired utopia. But he was conscious, inside him, of a strange, peaceable, physical sensation that persuaded him a state of rightness must exist, that rightness must predominate... (p.186).

His departure for Spain, in an effort to assume some

responsibility for the "sad, sick stinking world," and his subsequent death, is followed by Eden's departure, which is much less convincing. Many of her speeches are merely vehicles for White's own ideas, and are in no way characteristic of her personality as it has been presented to the reader. The following is an example of this, and is part of Eden's discussion with Joe:

> I can believe in right as passionately as I have it in me to believe. This is what I have to express, with you, anyone, with everyone who has the same conviction. But passionately, Joe - we were not born to indifference. Indifference denies all the evidence of life. This is what I want to believe. I want to unite those who have the capacity for living, in any circumstances, and make it the one circumstance. I want to oppose them to the destroyers, to the dealers in words, to the diseased, to the most fatally diseased - the indifferent... (pp.239-40).

And in answer to Elyot's hesitant objection to her sacrifice, and Joe's, she speaks of these sacrifices as "drops that fill the bucket." (p.331). But the whole explanation of this urge towards self-destruction as a means of opposing "the stultifying, the living dead," is too vague and unsatisfactory.

Mrs. Standish, as Kitty Goose, has more vitality than any of the other characters, and the force of her personality does come through in the beginning of the book. But this disappears, as her whole fabric of existence becomes more artificial. She tries deliberately to form her own personality, and to impose a pattern on those around her.

> Very seldom her devotion and determination failed her. Only sometimes she was faced with her own spuriousness, but that, after all, was a chef-d'oeuvre, her one and only, so much more elaborate than a child, so many more years of gestation, endless, endless... (p.205).

She is, in fact, proud of her own achievement, and values her independence more than the material comfort which a second marriage could have brought her. She prefers to be alone, unhampered by the demands of an intimate relationship, and, in this, we can see Elyot's strong resemblance to her:

> She liked to stretch in bed at eleven o'clock, her body distinct inside the nightgown, she liked to hold up her arms welcoming nothing but her own unseizable well-being... The mere existing inside your own sensual envelope was good. Something more permanent than the shared sensation... (p.133).

It is only at the end of her life, when she feels her vitality draining away, and is no longer able to make an impact on other lives, that she becomes quite desperate, and clutches at Wally, as at a last chance of life.

> It was the sense of stagnation that appalled Mrs. Standish, when mentally she still swirled, when she would still find in her mouth words from a conversation held only yesterday. She had great faith in herself, but the self that was a kind of composite abstract of Kitty Goose and Catherine Standish, that was a contradiction of time, and more especially the face that yawned at her out of a Sunday mirror, with its elaboration of emphatically copper curls and the tautness of an eyelid... (p.182).

The "living" characters, then, are those who oppose the

meaninglessness of life by an assertion of their own personality, but there is a futility about this attempt, of which Elyot is aware, and which prevents him from participating in it. And it is Elyot who is given the final vision in the book, although what this vision means is uncertain. He feels freed in the end from the desire to find any meaning in life at all. This is the final passage of the book:

> A bus received Elyot Standish. It was any bus. He was bound nowhere in particular. There were no reservations of time or place, no longer even the tyranny of a personal routine. It was enough to feel a darkness, a distance unfurling. There was no end to this in the bus, trundling down its dark tunnel, in which the faces smiled gravely out of sleep, the mouths almost spoke. If only to touch these almost sentient faces into life, to reach across the wastes of sleep and touch into recognition with your hand, to listen to the voices, like the voices of people who wake and find they have come to the end of the journey, saying: Then we are here, we have slept, but we have really got here at last.
>
> He yawned. He felt like someone who had been asleep, and had only just woken... (pp.334-5).

The "understanding" at which Elyot arrives is completely negative, and it is puzzling to know why he should wish to wake the other "sleepers" with whom he comes in contact, in order to make them realize this. In these final words of the book, it is apparent that White identifies himself with Elyot. Life to him, at this period of his writing, is without meaning and without reality. The "intenser form of living" of which Elyot speaks is not visualised either explicitly or implicitly, and we can

only conclude that it means a sharpened awareness of futility. There are no positive values in human existence, and each individual must remain locked inside his own personality.

The few critics who have commented on this book have little to say in its favour, and this is owing, I think, to the overall flatness of the prose, and to the absence of any real vitality in the characters. They all speak in the same tones, express themselves in almost identical phrases, and their speeches could be interchanged, so little individuality do they possess. Added to this, the narrative and commentary are indistinguishable from the dialogue. This evenness of tone could have been successful in a short story, because it catches precisely the tone of this grey world. But for a story of novel length, more differentiation and variety are needed, and greater interplay of personalities dramatically realized. There is a stylised tonelessness in this novel, and whereas White's vision in Happy Valley was a restricted one, here it has dwindled almost to nothing.

When we turn to The Aunt's Story, we find that Theodora's search for reality and self-fulfilment is doomed, too, to frustration. Theodora is so clear sighted and sensitive that she instinctively and finally reduces all illusions to what they are. Fanny's greed and possessiveness, her mother's hard egotism, Frank Parrott's stupidity, Violet Adam's sentimentality, Huntley's materialism; these are all detected one by one and

rejected by Theodora's innate sense of honesty. She is searching for some reality beyond all these personal illusions which she rejects, and is convinced that, stripped of everything, she will at last arrive at her "essential self."

However, there is a lack of detachment in White's treatment of Theodora which weakens the force of her 'tragic honesty.' It seems obvious that in his sympathy for her isolation, he has not reflected, nor is the reader expected to reflect, that Theodora's character is lacking in compassion and generosity towards those around her. She sees through all her associates, but does not attempt to treat their weaknesses with any sympathetic understanding, and this superficiality in her own character is exonerated, or perhaps even undetected, by White. The reader is expected to have an indiscriminating sympathy for someone who is, by any standard, a very limited personality.

But her clear-sightedness is also painful to her, for while she cannot accept the illusions of others, she still feels the need of love and companionship, and, at different times, as with Frank Parrott and Huntley, she is tempted to gain this at the cost of her honesty. But not for long. Occasionally, she has glimpses of people who seem to share her own love of truth, and who can accept her own vision of the hard realities of life. The Man Who was Given his Dinner is one of these, and challenges Theodora with his way of life. He tells her:

> "You'll see a lot of funny things, Theodora Goodman. You'll see them because you've eyes to see. And they'll break you. But perhaps you'll survive."

> And now Theodora began to think that perhaps the man was a little bit mad, but she loved him for his madness, even, for it made her warm... (p.45).

With this man, as with a few others, like Moraitis, Theodora glimpses a mental kinship, which attracts her unbearably, but she fails to make further contact with these people.

She rejects the 'comfort' which art, or music, or religion could afford her, since she looks on these as mere consolations, mere illusions. Here again, it is necessary to notice White's too-sympathetic treatment of Theodora, which is so unlike Flaubert's treatment of Madame Bovary, for instance. Whereas Flaubert makes the reader realize very clearly the limitations of Emma's mind, and her incapacity to understand or appreciate the higher values of life, White appears to present the limited reasoning of Theodora's mind as proof of her honesty.

None of these - art, music, religion, - has any objective value for Theodora, and there is no transcendent reality which could perhaps be revealed to her through them. They would be merely "comforts" for her, palliatives to which her truthful mind scorns to stoop. It is evident that the author's imaginative vision is still a limited one.

I have discussed in an earlier chapter Theodora's attitude to the objective world, and when we turn to her reactions to music, we find the same subjectivization:

> The 'cello rocked, she saw. She could read the music underneath his flesh.

> She was close. He could breathe into her mouth. He filled her mouth with long aching silences, between the deeper notes that reached down deep into her body. She felt the heavy eyelids on her eyes. The bones of her hands, folded like discreet fans on her dress, were no indication of exultation or distress, as the music fought and struggled under a low roof, the air thick with cold ash, and sleep, and desolation... (p.116).

Theodora merely relates the music to her own mood of desolation and her desire for a personal relationship which Moraitis has awakened in her.

What is the reason for her gradual loss of contact with any sense of reality? She has had it once, at Meroe, until the seeming-permanence of the rocks and stones crumbles, and she loses her childish sense of security in this seemingly indestructible world:

> As a child, she had resented the indestructibility of objects, before the great millenium of dissolution, the epoch of ideas. I shall know everything, said Theodora in the kitchen. Now at the approach of middle-age and knowledge, she regretted the closed stones, the fossil shells of Meroe... (p.174).

Theodora's 'awareness' of truth, and her ability to detect the pretences and self-interest in another's actions, is instinctive. She is born with this clear-sightedness, and her judgement of others is an intuitive rather than a logical one. She relies on her imaginative awareness to guide her actions, and to determine her ultimate grasp of truth. Her search for reality is on a purely natural plane, and the metaphysical quality

which absorbs White's attention in his later books is missing here. She does not appear to envisage any other than a naturalistic meaning in life, and must therefore remain enclosed within her own imaginative limitations. This is to say, of course, that they are White's own limitations at the time of his writing this book, since there is nothing in the organization of the book or his treatment of the theme to indicate that, in his opinion, Theodora could have found any transcendental answer to her search for an ultimate reality. But in fact, this truth that she seeks has no objective reality for her and she accepts no authority outside herself and her own imagination, everything being reduced to the dimensions of her own intellect.

Against Theodora's futile honesty are balanced only poor creatures who through weakness or shallowness of mind, have allowed illusions to take the place of a truth which they probably could not even recognize. They could not face the "essential self," stripped of illusions, as Theodora does, so that in her search for reality, she is forced to separate herself from this alien world. She is able to envisage a life which is freer and truer than the conventional one lived by those around her. The hawk is for her a symbol of this:

> But the act of the hawk, which she watched,
> hawk-like, was a moment of shrill beauty
> that rose above the endlessness of bones.
> The red eye spoke of worlds that were brief
> and fierce... (p.33).

And she can sympathize with the man who spoke to her of the freedom of his roving life.

> "Yes," said the man, "it's as good a way of passing your life. So long as it passes. Put it in a house and it stops, it stands still. That's why some take to the mountains, and the others say they're crazy.
> ..."And perhaps they're right. Though who's crazy and who isn't?"... (pp.44-5).

There is a rather ruthless detachment about White's treatment of the lesser beings, who wrap themselves in illusions. In this book he has no eye or understanding for the ordinary virtues and his characters become types, with little real individuality. Fanny is nothing but selfishness and possessiveness; Frank nothing but stupidity. Here begins White's regrettable tendency to reduce the characters of whom he disapproves to mere caricatures and objects of scorn. We shall have much occasion to examine this aspect of his work in a later chapter.

Contact with others is very necessary if one is to establish an awareness of one's own identity, but since Theodora fails to establish any satisfactory contact with people, or even with the physical world outside herself, she has no way of retaining this sense of identity. In the second part of the book, White presents us with a dramatic account of the complete disintegration of her character. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, he is so successful in portraying the confusion of images, and tenuous relationships of her dream world that the reader loses all impression of her as a personality. There is no distancing provided by the author, or by the more objective or lucid reactions of other people, and we enter so

fully into Theodora's insane world that there is no escape from it. But we cannot identify ourselves with Theodora, we cannot recognize any of our human traits in her. She has become the personification of negative qualities, if that is possible.

There is too, something false about the treatment of Theodora in this second part of the story. After the sensitive depiction of a lonely, frustrated spinister in Part One, and her gradual loss of any sense of security and permanence, there is a break of a few months, until she arrives at the Hotel du Midi. Her imaginative life here has nothing of the inevitable about it; we cannot really enter into her world, simply because it is entirely unpredictable. Her imaginary conversations, and even her actual contacts and actions have an arbitrariness and a contrived artistic effect which does not seem to be justified by the theme of the story, nor sufficiently prepared for by the presentation of her character in Meroe.

We are certainly given a glimpse into her state of mind, and her imaginative attempts to wrestle with the problems of human relationships, love and reality, but there is no sense in which we can say that these thoughts are characteristic of her. We do not really see into Theodora's mind. The stealing of the nautilus, which is preceded by the long conversation with the general, has significance in the working out of White's symbolic overtones, but is so little related to any of Theodora's previous conduct that the whole episode appears rather artificial and contrived.

White's method is not a sensitive rendering of a character's mind from the inside at all. It is an artistic, expressionistic method which he uses to achieve an over-all effect. Images are juxtaposed upon images, scenes upon scenes, with constant shifting of perspective to give a final impression of Theodora's mind which is far from the stream-of-consciousness method of Woolf or Joyce.

The following passage is, I think, typical of White's style:

> They had, in fact, arrived. Henriette threw open again Theodora's chambre modeste.
>
> It was perhaps plus modeste, but recognizable, from the objects she had put there in the morning as a safeguard, the darning egg, the dictionary, and the superfluous leather writing case. Hearing the fainter slippers of Henriette, listening to her own silence form in the small room, Theodora loved her sponge. There are moments, she admitted, when it is necessary to return to the boxes for which we were made. And now the small room was a box with paper roses pasted on the sides... I am preparing for bed, she saw. But in performing this act for the first time, she knew she did not really control her bones, and that the curtain of her flesh must blow, like walls which are no longer walls. She took off one shoe, with its steel buckle and its rather long vamp. Standing with it in her hand, her identity became uncertain. She looked with sadness at the little hitherto safe microcosm of the darning egg and waited for the rose wall to fall.
>
> It began to palpitate, the paper mouths of roses wetting their lips, either voice or wall putting on flesh. She was almost indecently close to what was happening, but sometimes one is. Sometimes the paper has arms and thighs... (p.206).

One critic has remarked that it is surprising that the tragedy of Theodora is not more moving.[1] I must confess that I have not found it moving at all. White hardly seems to have made any real attempt to enter into Theodora's mind and feelings in a natural way. We are given long-perspective views, as in the first and third parts of the book, and in the middle, a whole part which can only be described as a picture, and which must be seen as a whole. There is no logical sequence, and no logic about Theodora's world or actions. And White, as I have noted in an earlier chapter, is making his imagery serve a double symbolic purpose, which is confusing.

In Part Three, the perspective shifts, and we again see Theodora at a distance and in the main, objectively. She has now arrived at an understanding, namely, that there is no reconciliation between opposites, and becomes content to accept this truth. She is convinced now, of the unreality and impermanence of even tangible and supposedly real objects, and her final understanding is that life is meaningless, and that no answer to its ambiguities can be found. This is the same conclusion at which Elyot arrived, in the previous book. Holstius, who is an illusion of her own mind, and a combination of her father and The Man who was Given His Dinner - people with whom she has made contact - expresses her conclusions at the end of her long search:

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1 M. Barnard, 'The Novels of Patrick White', Meanjin, vol. XV, no. 2 (1956), p.165.

> "I expect you to accept the two irreconcilable halves.
>
> You cannot reconcile joy and sorrow... Or flesh and marble, or illusion and reality, or life and death. For this reason, Theodora Goodman, you must accept. And you have already found that one constantly deludes the other into taking fresh shapes, so that there is sometimes little to choose between the reality of illusion and the illusion of reality. Each of your several lives is evidence of this... (p.293).

So Theodora comes finally to the realization that the mystery of life is impenetrable, but that one must accept this truth, rather than construct a more comfortable world built on illusion.

> There was nothing that she did not know, only this had to be laid bare painfully... (p.299).

Although The Aunt's Story is greatly superior to The Living and the Dead, the author's attitude towards his characters' search for reality is the same, and the values are no less negative ones. The state of "awareness" amounts to a recognition of meaninglessness and futility, and the only weapons are those of courage and honesty. Suffering, isolation and frustration are inevitable, and there are no transcendental values which could transform these or give them new meaning.

If these three books were the only contribution White had made to literature and the problem of modern man's search for truth, we could only be left disappointed by his restricted and limited vision. But as we shall see with The Tree of Man, there is a sudden and remarkable development towards a wider

view of life, and a more positive attitude, which can have resulted only from a radical change in the author's own understanding and experiences.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SEARCH FOR REALITY AND MEANING IN LIFE (ii)

In his apologia for his return to Australia, White writes:

> All through the War in the Middle East there persisted a longing to return to the scenes of childhood, which is, after all, the purest well from which the creative artist draws.[1]

This return "to the stimulus of time remembered," as he calls it, seems to have brought with it a change in his whole attitude towards the values of life. The note of frustration and futility disappears from his work, and in its place we can detect an optimism, and a reaching towards more positive values. Of his next novel, he writes in the same article:

> 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 poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people, and incidentally, my own life since my return... (p.39).

For his chief character, White has chosen a simple, inarticulate man; a man who is to live and die without attracting attention from those around him, because he lacks any particular qualities or qualifications, which can set him apart from others. What can be worth noticing about this man, who is without talents education, or social standing? Even his passions are ordinary,

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1 P. White, 'The Prodigal Son', Australian Letters, vol. I, no. 3 (1958), p.38.

exciting him to no unusual actions or decisions.

But beneath this rather uninteresting exterior, White is concerned to show us the real drama of Stan Parker's life; the drama of a man who is striving towards an integrated life, trying to establish satisfactory relations with his wife, and to understand and adjust himself to the meaning and the demands of his existence. Inarticulate, lacking in imagination and intellectual power, Stan Parker may be, says the author in effect, but he has nevertheless an individual personality, and there is hidden within his life, a certain "mystery and poetry." His life is made up of a round of unimportant events, disappointments, misunderstandings, bewilderment, failure. He searches until his death for an illumination which will make clear to him the meaning of his life, and it is only at the very end that he achieves some realization of this.

What can there possibly be of interest in the life and death of a man as ordinary as Stan Parker, whose every action seems so commonplace? White has tried to answer this question by revealing the inner spiritual life of Stan, and his movement towards God. For the search for reality and self-fulfilment becomes now, in this fourth novel, a search for the ultimate Reality, a search for God Himself. This change of direction is rather surprising, since in none of the earlier novels have his characters evinced any interest in God or even been aware that a search for a final reality may indeed involve this. White has added another dimension in this book, and is to continue to develop it in

his two following works. From now on, his books assume a definite religious significance, and the 'individual experience' of his characters becomes a religious experience. They become aware of issues larger than those contained within their own personal experience, and the novels take on a wider and more universal significance.

For it is this life of the spirit which becomes all-important, and which gradually takes precedence over all other interests or ambitions in Stan's life. To Lola's question,

> "And what do you, anyways, know about God?"

he replies humbly,

> "Not much... But I hope that in the end I shall know something. What else is there that would be any use to learn?"... (p.457).

Yet at the beginning, he did not feel like this:

> He had been brought up in a reverence for religion, but he had not yet needed God. He rejected, in his stiff clothes, the potentialities of prayer. He was strong still... He loved, and strongly, too, but it was still the strength and love of substances... (p.30).

What is it that undermines this self sufficiency, and brings him to a realization of his need for God? There is no blinding conversion, no sudden turning towards God. There is only the gradual realization of the meaning of life, of suffering, loneliness, disappointment, and the impermanence of possession. His progress towards self-knowledge is a long and painful one, for he must learn to recognize and accept his

own limitations, and live with his own failures. For Stan Parker, this is not an easy thing to do, for he has only his own limited experience and intelligence to guide him, and he is more isolated than most from contact with a larger society and the benefit of others' experience.

White has used the ordinary incidents of Stan's life as the outward symbols of the change or deepening of understanding in Stan's spiritual life. They have little significance on their own account; the drama is all within:

> And for the casual speculator there was no obvious sign that his soul too might not harden in the end into the neat, self-contained shape it is desirable souls should take... (p.38).

Why did it not then? What is there in Stan Parker that has prevented this "hardening"? Like Theodora, it is the honesty and sincerity of his mind, which carries him beyond the surface appearance of events and people, to their "essential selves."

> He had not learned to think far, and in what progress he had made had reached the conclusion he was a prisoner in his human mind, as in the mystery of the natural world. Only sometimes the touch of hands, the lifting of a silence, the sudden shape of tree or presence of a first star, hinted at eventual release... (p.46).

He comes gradually to distrust his early sense of complacency, and to be more aware of the mystery of life in which he is so intimately involved:

> If Stan Parker's vision was less positive than before, it was because there were so many bits of himself that he did not know how to unravel... (p.51).

In his relations with Amy, Stan grows less assured, and more diffident, as he comes to reflect on the "gulf" between human personalities. What he had at first accepted unthinkingly becomes now "a mystery of possession," which he fails to understand. He begins to pray regularly, although with difficulty:

> At times, though, peace did descend, in a champing of horses' bits at a fence outside, in some word that suddenly lit, in birds bringing straws to build nests under the eaves, in words bearing promises, which could perhaps have been the grace of God... (p.64).

This description of Stan's peace in prayer, coming so early in the story, is a presage of what his final realization is to be; that the God he has been seeking all his life is to be found in the natural world of birds and animals in which he is so deeply rooted.

The flood awakes in him a realization of a world beyond himself and his own unimportant affairs. It is itself the cause of the awakening, and the symbol not only of a larger world, but of the impermanence that Stan is beginning to sense in all human affairs:

> But in the dissolved world of flowing water, under the drifitng trees, it was obvious that solidity is not... (p.71).

The fire, too, has a double symbolism, being the image of

a fuller, more exciting life than Stan has ever lived, and the purging of these romantic illusions.

> All that he had never done, all that he had never seen, appeared to be contained in this house, and it was opening to him. Till his head began to reel with fiery splendours of its own... (p.178).

Madeleine, the personification for both Stan and Amy of this idealised, romantic life which has never opened for them, is robbed of all her beauty in the fire, and this makes a deep impression on Stan, causing him to realize the illusory quality of his fantasies.[1]

His impressions during the war years deepen Stan's feeling of impermanence, although the treatment in this section of the book is disappointingly weak, and almost wholly unsuccessful in interpreting Stan's experiences. His life as a soldier is passed over in two or three pages of detached, "poetic" description and semi-farcical letter-writing, neither of which succeeds in conveying Stan's inner feelings during this period. It is a pity that the experience of war, which should have had the deepest effect on Stan's inward life, is passed over so cursorily, but the reader is made aware of a change in Stan by the fact that he cannot pray:

> As he went, the man thought with increased longing of a God that reached down, supposedly, and lifted up. But he could not pray now. His stock of prayers, even his chunks of improvisation, no longer fitted circumstance... (p.204).

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1 Cf. V. Buckley, 'Patrick White and His Epic', Twentieth Century, vol. XII, no. 3 (1959), p.245.

> In that peace time he was still diffident of accepting anything as solid, factual, or what is called permanent. Much had to be proved. Only he could prove it... (p.217).

And thus, throughout the book, we are shown the fluctuations in Stan's belief, his gradual loss of confidence in the things which had once made him confident; his physical strength, his possessions, his relations with his wife. His yearnings to express himself in prayers, and to communicate with others are frustrated by his very impotence and inarticulateness:

> ... He would long to express himself by some formal act of recognition, give a shape to his knowledge, or express the great simplicities in simple luminous words for people to see. But of course he could not... (p.225).

One of Stan's bitterest disappointments is his failure to communicate with his son, Ray, and on the latter's disappearance, when Stan goes to Sydney in a fruitless attempt to find him, he feels the weight of his own helplessness:

> I am lost by all this, he realized. He continued to walk, fumbling through the shapeless, ineffectual state in which his life had ended. Although he had acquired the habit of saying simple prayers, and did sincerely believe in God, he was not yet sufficiently confident in himself to believe in the efficacy of the one or the extent of the other. His simplicity had not yet received that final clarity and strength which can acknowledge the immensity of belief... (p.282).

He torments himself with his possible guilt in the reasons for Ray's failure. This, and his remorse for keeping silence about the old man in the tree during the flood signify his

sense of responsibility towards others; towards those nearest to him, and towards society as a whole.

Then comes the appalling discovery of Amy's infidelity, and for a time Stan loses all touch with his previous life and relationships, and all belief in God:

> There was a paper sky, quite flat, and white, and Godless. He spat at the absent God then, mumbling till it ran down his chin... (p.333).

But even this discovery he learns to accept, and to live with, since

> It was not ordained just then that he should take strange paths. Two people do not lose themselves at the identical moment, or else they might find each other and be saved. It is not as simple as that... (p.367).

The slightly cryptic note in this passage, and the comment which is obviously the author's own judgement are not really characteristic of The Tree of Man, but in his later novels, White develops this mannerism, as we shall see.

White shows us Stan Parker drifting into a state of stagnation and old age, and allowing himself to be managed by his daughter Thelma because of his growing state of complete detachment from all possessions, and his increasing inwardness:

> He could give up as she suggested, more even, land even, even his life, simply because it was not his to keep. It had become blindingly obvious...
>
> After she had gone Stan Parker walked about his property, slowly, and with all the appearance of aimlessness, which is the impression that spiritual activity frequently gives, while all the time this communion of soul and scene was taking place,

> the landscape moving in on him with increased passion and intensity, trees surrounding him, clouds flocking close above him with tenderness such as he had never experienced. He could have touched the clouds... (pp.411-12).

In his complete sincerity, Stan Parker continues to search for an answer to the mystery of his existence, and participates in the Communion service at Church, waiting and hoping for some final revelation which will dispel his ignorance.

> It is not possible, he considered, that I shall not eventually receive a glimpse... (p.432).

In the end, just before his death, Stan does reach a final understanding:

> He was illuminated.
> He pointed with his stick at the gob of spittle.
> "That is God," he said... (p.495).

> ... I believe, he said, in the cracks in the path. On which ants were massing, struggling up over an escarpment. But struggling. Like the painful sun in the icy sky. Whirling and whirling. But struggling. But joyful. So much so, he was trembling. The sky was blurred now. As he stood waiting for the flesh to be loosened on him, he prayed for greater clarity, and it became obvious as a hand. It was clear that One, and no other figure, is the answer to all sums... (p.497).

Vincent Buckley, in his review of the novel, questions the justification for this ending:

> We can have no clue to the significance of this reconciliation with the actual, because it is put in gratuitously.[1]

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1 V. Buckley, 'Patrick White and His Epic', Twentieth Century, vol. XII, no. 3 (1958), p.251.

On the contrary, I feel that White's imagination here has not been at fault and that this resolution is fundamentally sound. Parker's final recognition of God is the only possible one for him to arrive at, and his "illumination" has nothing mystical or mysterious about it which is extraneous to his development as a whole. It is, rather, a response of all that Stan has become over the years, the totality of his life's experience. He finds God at last where, for him, He has always been; in the ordinary things and events of his own quiet life. He has always enjoyed a harmony with his natural surroundings, and it is at times of deepest peace with these that he has come nearest to happiness. But he does not realize until the end of his life that God is to be found in these simple things, and in the expression of the continuity of life. He arrives at a clear realization that God has always been with him, in the natural world in which he is so firmly rooted.

Nevertheless it may be conceded that there is a certain artificiality about the actual circumstances of Stan's revelation which detract somewhat from its effect. The coming of the young man, and the brief discussion between them are scarcely sufficient to evoke Stan's experience. There is evidence though, that he had arrived at his illumination before the advent of the evangelist and that the latter's visit was an interruption of, rather than the stimulus to his final illumination.

This realization of the Divinity which Stan enjoys at the

last, is incommunicable because he cannot share the totality of his life's experience with another. Even Amy would have been incapable of sharing or appreciating it, since her whole understanding of life, and her personal experience of it is on a different level.

But if the resolution of Stan's search is artistically justified, as I think it is, there are nevertheless weaknesses in White's treatment of his major character which detract greatly from the strength of the novel. In his attempt to portray the inner life of an ordinary, inarticulate man, White has erred perhaps, in making Stan Parker too colourless to be really interesting. In Stan, there are no strong passions of any kind, of love, or anger, or jealousy, or greed. I feel therefore, that there is an absence of motivation in Stan's life which robs him of any real interest. He acts in the way he does because he feels that he cannot act differently, and his whole life is governed by this fatalistic derterminism. ("It was not ordained just then.").

White's presentation of Stan's fluctuations in belief, his doubts and bewilderment, his striving after a greater certainty is sensitive and often very moving. But in the final analysis, I do not think that it is entirely successful. Since Parker does not act very much, and since he cannot express his thoughts at all adequately, the author must supply the major part of the dramatization and analysis, and this is

not a very happy method. It is worth noting that, of the numerous quotations I have used from the story, all but two are descriptive, and even in the two which include some of Stan's conversation, the words are not particularly individualistic.

White has not handled speech rhythms and colloquialisms successfully in this book, and on the whole, Stan and Amy speak in a curiously formal, stilted fashion, which does not help to reveal their characters, and the reader is made continually aware of the author-inspiration behind their conversations. When, on occasions, Stan lapses into uneducated speech, it sounds distinctly out of place. This is a serious defect in characterization and dramatic quality which mars the significance of the story.

The following passage is a fairly typical example of the author's tendency to describe, analyse and assess the experiences and relationships of the characters, and it is noticeable that the actual speech of the Parkers in no way verifies this treatment:

> One day as Amy Parker was walking between the cabbages, as was her custom now, she was trying to remember something. Some restlessness had begun to possess her, of association. Then it was her youth that began to come back in the world of cabbages. She heard the dray come up with the mound of blue cabbages, and the snap of the straps in the frost, as putting her shoulders through the window she spoke to her husband. She was remembering all mornings. And the little ears of cabbage seedlings that

he stuck into the earth, into the holes that he had made with a shovel handle. She remembered the arms of her husband as they worked in the sunlight, the little hairs on the forearms and the veins at the wrists. It seemed to her suddenly as if she would not see him again.

So she hurried along the rows of cabbages, they were big, green, bursting ones, unlike those evanescent plants that shimmer in the field of memory, she hurried to be with her husband, who was never far from her, they could not have escaped from each other had they wished.

"Why don't we sell some of these cabbages?" she asked irritably when she had come to where he was digging a few potatoes for their tea. "There are more than we can use. We shall be sick of blessed cabbage."

"It will not be worth the trouble," said Stan Parker. "For a few bob. And the business of carting them to market."

"Then what are we to do with them?" she asked, kicking one of these bright and rubbery vegetables.

She was standing lost among the cabbages, and intended perhaps that he should become lost too.

"We shall eat some," he said, looking down, because she had at least deterred him. "And give some. The cow could eat a fair few. We shall think of other ways," he said.

Then they were standing there, and what had been bright jewels in the field of the past and present were ludicrous lumps of cynical rubber.

"You get worked up over nothing," he said tautly.

To explain it that way.

"I like to know the reason for things," she said, looking at and unravelling a frayed bit of the old cardigan that she wore.

But he could not explain their continued existence in that same plot of cabbages, and magpies came over, and jolly peewits, and little anonymous birds, descending and picking in the moist earth, as if the man and woman had not been there... (pp.412-13).

It is true that the delicate tissue of memories, half-

submerged motives, desires and antipathies is presented in an extremely sensitive manner. But the subtle exposition of their minds is all supplied in the commentary, and the sentence "and (she) intended perhaps that he should become lost, too," is unsatisfactory, since it seems that even the author's interpretation is tentative.

Amy is a much more interesting character than Stan, because she has stronger feelings which prompt her to more positive action, and because, in a way, she is a more complex character than he is. The latter seems to lack the normal amount of evil tendencies of the average human being, but not so Amy. She is jealous, suspicious and possessive, absorbed in her selfish relations with Stan, and later with her children. She reacts passionately against her sense of futility and dissatisfaction in middle age, and her sense of failure at the end of her life comes because she has not succeeded in finally possessing anyone. Her interests are material ones, and "she did not believe in what she had not made, whether cakes or habits." Nor does she suffer any agony of mind, as Stan does, in his search for an ultimate reality, and a meaning in life. Her rather mechanical prayers do not mean much to her:

> Suspicion of people who maintained a relationship with God sometimes entered her. Of course, she said her prayers, and would continue to do so, but conscious not so much of the words as of the hands behind which she was breathing, and of many familiar objects that she saw in the darkness. Only when she suspected that her husband had

> received the grace of God, and that even he, a simple enough man, was wrapping it in mystery, then she began to fret... (pp.425-6).

As a young wife, she could feel fulfilment and peace in physical contact with her husband, and the knowledge of his love, and religion was a remote abstraction for her:

> But she did not receive the Grace of God, of which it had been spoken under coloured glass. When she was alone, she was alone. Or else there was lightning in the sky that warned her of her transitoriness. The sad Christ was an old man with a beard, who spat death from full cheeks. But the mercy of God was the sound of wheels at the end of market day. And the love of God was a kiss full in the mouth... (p.28).

White himself, as commentator, passes a final judgement on her character, when he says... "she was a superficial and sensual woman, when the last confessions are made." (p.485). But we are able to overlook this rather regrettable summing-up of Amy, in the spontaneity of many of her actions, and in her undeniable vitality. A more satisfying interpretation of her personality is found in her musings in church, where her materialistic and unambitious attempt at prayer contrasts so strongly with Stan's intense desire for communication with God:

> The old woman would have liked to enjoy the crimson light falling from the glass hem of Christ onto the floor, lying on the floor in little checkers, in the dust, but crimsonly. Jewels glittered in her own eyes as she followed the male words of the service with the slight motion of her head that had become habit. She would have embraced a religion of her own needs, and mounted quite high. But her husband would not let her. What is God to Stan? she wondered, at his shoulder, I do

> not know God, Stan will not let me. She liked to blame other people for herself, and was almost persuaded. Now she went grumbling, mumbling, through the words. He has made me like this, she said, relaxing on the cushions of her own triviality. She began to think about a pudding that she would make that day, for the first time, with bottled quinces and a suet crust... (p.429).

The passage catches very precisely the mind of Amy Parker, and her comfortable familiarity with her own physical and tangible world.

In The Tree of Man, then, we can discern a definite turning away from the rather vague, nihilistic philosophy of the first books, with their tone of futility and frustration, to a more positive and optimistic attitude. White affirms in this book that it is possible for man to find a satisfying resolution to his search for reality, within the compass of his own intelligence and experience.

In his next novel, Voss, he turns his attention from the ordinary individual, in whom he has shown that there are hidden depths, and presents the story of an eccentric personality who is to find fulfilment in a manner very different from Stan Parker's way. The history of Voss is not the story of a man's search for God, but the account of a man who believes that he has within himself the infinite powers of a Divinity, and who is determined to prove these powers by undergoing a trial which will test his physical, mental and spiritual faculties to the

utmost limits. It is the story of a man who thinks that he is God. For Voss is pride incarnate; he believes that he is "reserved for a special destiny."

> All that was external to himself he mistrusted, and was happiest in silence, which is immeasurable, like distance and the potentialities of self... (p.24).

In his firm belief in his own power and self-sufficiency,

> he had no more need for sentimental admiration than he had for love. He was complete... (p.45).

He is obsessed by his desire to penetrate this country

> of which he had become possessed by implicit right... Knowing so much, I shall know everything... (p.30).

He has no understanding of nor sympathy with Christianity nor the Christian virtues of love, nor, more particularly, humility.

> I detest humility. (he says to Palfreyman). Is man so ignoble that he must lie in the dust, like worms? If this is repentance, sin is less ugly... (p.161).

And the Moravian brother tells him that

> You have a contempt of God, because He is not in your own image... (p.54).

The whole story of Voss's journey is the account of his gradual realization of his limitations, and the falsity of his ambition to reject all human needs and the ordinary consolations of life. But in the beginning, his followers almost believe in this divinity, as does Voss himself:

> It had become quite clear from the man's face that he accepted his own divinity.

> If it was less clear, he was equally convinced that all others must accept. After he had submitted himself to further trial, and, if necessary, immolation... (p.154).
>
> (The men) could expect anything of Voss. Or of God, for that matter. In their confused state it was difficult to distinguish act from act, motive from motive, or to question why the supreme power should be divided in two... (p.286).

He contemptuously dismisses the possibility of happiness in a contented domestic life, which is portrayed at the Sandersons', and the pleasures of sensuality which he meets at Jildra. These evidences of human weakness are not for him. He is determined to be entirely self-sufficient and resents not only the attractions of normal society which threaten to seduce him from his resolve, but anyone who could challenge his supremacy. So he fears Judd, as a possible rival, and since recognition of Christ is a threat to himself, forbears to mention the fact that the next day is Christmas "by some instinct for self-preservation." (p.208).

Voss is scarcely a human personality, and I do not think that White has really attempted to make him one. He is rather an allegorical figure, with a life of his own, certainly, but with a larger-than-human stature which places him above the level of an ordinary character. In his rejection of all the traits of kindliness, humility, justice, and so on, which go to make up the ordinary person, he has become almost completely abstracted. Through his gradual return to the status of a human being, he does resume some of these qualities, but the

over-all impression is not that of a credible human personality. To emphasize this effect, White has used a formal, and in parts, ritualistic style, which removes Voss even further above the plane of the merely human.

How does this seemingly indestructible pride eventually become humbled? The "search for human status" (p.418) is achieved painfully, and the strongest influence is the force of Laura's love, which he at first tries to reject, ("to what extent would he be weakened? He could not help but wonder, fear, and finally resent" p.192); but which he gradually comes to appreciate and need.

Frank le Mesurier, who has accepted Voss's leadership, and also, for a time, his claim to divinity, or at least super-humanity, comes to realize that Voss is after all only human, and in his fever, forces Voss, too, to admit to this.

> "Of course, we are both failures..."

and Voss replies:

> "You will not remember anything of what you have said. For that reason, ... I will agree that it could be true... (p.290).

This confession shakes Voss's self-confidence, since he realizes that Frank has lost faith in him, and his complacency is still further weakened after the death of Palfreyman, whom up to this time he has merely despised. He is being forced to realize that there may be higher values than his own, and that the virtues of humility and self-sacrifice which he has so

contemptuously dismissed may be greater than those of self-sufficiency and spiritual isolation, but he refuses to admit defeat.

> There remained his will, and that was
> a royal instrument... (p.317),

he thinks, after reading Frank's poems, and discovering Frank's disillusionment in him.

When, after the mutiny and return of the other three members of the party, Voss, Frank and Harry are threatened with death by the natives, Frank asks:

> "What is your plan, then?"
> "I have no plan," replied Voss, "but will
> trust to God." He spoke wryly, for the words
> had been put into his mouth.
> Le Mesurier was blasted by their leader's
> admission, although he had known it, of
> course, always in his heart and dreams, and
> had confessed it even in those poor, but
> bleeding poems that he had torn out and
> put on paper.
> Now he sat, looking in the direction of
> the man who was not God... (pp.403-4).

After the death of Frank and Harry, and kept a prisoner by the blacks through the treachery of Jackie, Voss is alone, and humbled, with his dream of sovereignty dwindled to nothing.

> Only he was left, only he could endure it,
> and that because at last he was truly humbled.
> So saints acquire sanctity who are only bones... (p.414).

In this state, he realizes clearly the extent of his weakness and helplessness.

> He himself, he realized, had always been most
> abominably frightened, even at the height of
> his divine power, a frail god upon a rickety
> throne, afraid of opening letters, of making

> decisions, afraid of the instinctive knowledge in the eyes of mules, of the innocent eyes of good men, of the elastic nature of the passions, even of the devotion he had received from some men, and one woman, and dogs.
>
> Now, at least, reduced to the bones of manhood, he could admit to all this and listen to his teeth rattling in the darkness.
>
> ' O Jesus', he cried, 'rette mich nur! Du lieber!'
>
> Of this too, mortally frightened, of the arms, or sticks, reaching down from the eternal tree, and tears of blood, and candlewax. Of the great legend becoming truth... (pp.414-5).

So Voss at last comes to the realization that he is not God, not self-sufficient nor invulnerable, and honesty forces him to admit his weakness. He comes near, too, to accepting Christianity, and the humility of Christ. He calls upon Christ to save him, thus admitting his dependence on God. So he finds God at last in humility and truth. Or at least, it seems that he comes as close to finding God as it is possible for one of his nature to do. For the ending of this story is ambiguous. Stan Parker, in his final grasp of Reality, is quite alone; he has outgrown the need for communication, and his experience of God is an intimate, personal one, which cannot be shared by anyone. In The Tree of Man, it is not difficult to interpret White's meaning. But Voss's last conscious moments are absorbed in his relationship with Laura. He has been humbled, has admitted his weakness, and in one almost despairing utterance, has called upon Christ to save him, but his final strength appears to come, not from his dependence on God, but from the realization of Laura's love and faith. This is described in ritualistic,

sacramental language.

> But of greater importance were his own words of love that he was able at last to put into her mouth. So great was her faith, she received these white wafers without surprise... (p.418).

This shifting of relationship from God to Laura leaves the question of Voss's final stage of self-knowledge largely unanswered. Voss is refreshed by his dream of Laura, and

> His faculties promised support, and he felt that he was ready to meet the supreme emergency with strength and resignation... (p.418).

It appears from this, then, that Voss derives his final strength to meet death, from a human, rather than a divine source. This, in one sense is to be expected, since it is only by a realization and acceptance of the human virtues of love and confidence in another that Voss is to become human again. But there is an ambiguity, nonetheless, that remains unresolved. In this story, so much of which is couched in almost ritualistic language, giving the impression of some great mystery that is being celebrated, the end after all, instead of being the climax to a 'mystery' of faith, a fitting conclusion to a religious drama, is instead on a much lower, humanistic plane. We can only assume, from Laura's words, that Voss does arrive at a knowledge of God:

> 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... (p.411).

This appears to be a deliberate evasion of the major issue of his book, and greatly weakens its integrity as a work of art.

There seems no adequate explanation for the fact that the reader is left in doubt as to Voss's last sentiments. There is no uncertainty about Frank le Mesurier, who has followed Voss in the belief that he is a superior being, and has given his soul into his keeping. Frank commits suicide in disillusionment and despair:

> There was the crowned King, such as he had worshipped before his always anticipated abdication. There was Man deposed in the very beginning. Gold, gold, gold, tarnishing into baser metals... (p.405).

Le Mesurier too, has spurned the idea of humility and acknowledgement of man's weakness, but he is able to see sooner than Voss that he has made the greatest mistake, and Palfreyman's death convinces him that he has given himself into the hands of one who would not only fail him, but could teach him only "to expect damnation."

> Then, we are truly damned, Frank Le Mesurier knew... (p.364).

It is difficult to discern White's real intentions or convictions in this story. He causes Palfreyman to die a Christ-like death, and to impress the others with their memories of the Christian sacrifice:

> All remembered the face of Christ that they had seen at some point in their lives, either in churches or visions, before retreating from what they had not understood, the paradox of man in Christ, and Christ in man... (p.364).

But Palfreyman is not an admirable character, being more of a pathetic figure, and an example of "negative virtues," which are inspired as much by his timidity and physical weakness,

as by his Christian ideals. Yet White grants him an heroic death, and in the last thoughts of Palfreyman, there is evidence of true moral courage.

But of Voss himself, the reader cannot be certain. Right up until the time Jackie enters the shelter where Voss is lying, the latter's mind has been revealed. But suddenly there is a shift of focus, and the actual death is described from the viewpoint of Jackie:

> He could just see that the pale eyes of the white man were looking, whether at him or through him, he did not attempt to discover, but quickly stabbed with his knife and his breath between the windpipe and the muscular part of the throat... (p.419).

That this obliquity is intentional is certain, but I do not believe that it is justified. The reader is given, instead of Voss's thoughts, the corresponding mental state of Laura at this moment. But why does White deliberately refuse to reveal Voss's final state of mind, since the deaths of the other members of the party are described in close perspective, and since, too, this failure involves an evasion of what should be the climax of the story? The two most obvious reasons are that either he was unwilling to commit himself to any final resolution of his theme, or that, artistically, any decisive finality here would endanger the delicately realized evocation of moods and images throughout the story. But neither explanation seems satisfactory, and I am forced to conclude that through an error

of judgement, White has marred the integrity of his novel.

It is possible to interpret this chapter in such a way that we understand Voss's last cry to Christ to have quite a different significance. His cry for help, and his fear of "the great legend becoming truth," could be taken to mean that Voss imagines himself to be another Christ. The previous statement "Only he could endure it," would also perhaps support this view, and at least two critics have suggested this. R.F. Brissenden comments:

> Among other things Voss is a Christ-figure, and the stages of his spiritual and physical progress are rich in religious overtones and implications. Jackie, the black boy who finally kills him, is a Judas-figure; just as Judd, the sanest member of the expedition and the most faithful, is the one who betrays him, and like Peter survives to spread his gospel.[1]

And Ian Turner has interpreted Voss's journey in a similar way:

> For the legend of Voss is the legend of a man who believed himself to be a Christ; and indeed sometimes it seemed in this book that Patrick White was seeking an allegory for the historical Christ.
>
> The parallels are so many ... Voss has his disciples, his persecutors, his betrayer; his agony and his reconciliation; his stigmata and his crucifixion. He is the divinity who humbles himself before the least of his servants. And he troubles the mind of men, and they record his legend.[2]

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1 R.F. Brissenden, 'Patrick White', Meanjin, vol. XVIII, no. 4 (1959), p.423.

2 Ian Turner, 'Parable of Voss', Overland, no. 12 (1958), p.36.

But I am extremely doubtful whether Laura's words and the final scene of Voss's death can support this interpretation. McAuley sums up the reader's general uneasiness with the equivocal attitude of the author when he remarks:

> Nevertheless the analogy with Christ's passion and death is frustrated, apparently lapsing into confusion and inconsequence, so that one suspects that the author's real intentions are not what they seem. It is at least clear enough that the re-enactment in which the book culminates is by no means Christian in its implications, but rather the opposite.[1]

Laura's predominance in the last section of the novel is also puzzling. After Voss's death, we are shown the influence that his life and personality have had on those who knew him. But this shift to the social world of Sydney, and the descriptions of Laura as a schoolmistress are a disappointing denouement. We see Laura now only from the outside, as others see her, and have practically no clue to her inner life, except that

> Laura was, and continued, content. The vows were rigorous that she imposed upon herself, to the exclusion of all personal life, certainly of introspection, however great her longing for those delights of hell. The gaunt man, her husband, would not tempt her in. If he still possessed her in her sleep, those who were most refreshed by the fruits of her passion were, with herself, unconscious of the source... (p.430).

So that now, Laura, who has been for Voss the source and inspiration of all that is human and lovable, becomes a shadowy, remote person, sternly repressing those thoughts which had changed Voss's entire understanding of life. Is White now

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1 James McAuley, Quadrant, no. 22 (1962), p. 79.

denying the value of these qualities, or is he suggesting that in the everyday world of ordinary existence, they are of little account?

All the loose ends of the story are tied up. We are shown the final sufferings of the other two men, the insanity of Jackie, the search for the lost party, and the return of Judd. But all this is rather in the manner of the slow processions at the end of Elizabethan plays, when the members of the cast and the properties must be finally gathered up and removed from the view of the audience.

An ambivalence of intention is discernible in the novel as a whole, and the reader cannot be quite certain where the real emphasis should lie. If, as I believe, it is in the spiritual journey of Voss, then the final part of the book is unnecessary, and considerably weakens its force. If, on the other hand, White intended to give a dramatic account of a fatal expedition, with some exploration of the motives governing the action of the leader, then the dream sequences, and the other passages which treat exclusively of Voss's inner life are superfluous and irritating. I think White actually attempted to combine both themes, and the result is only partially successful.

The whole structure of the Laura-Voss telepathic communication only becomes intelligible from a view-point above and beyond the account of an explorer and his sufferings.

The weakness in this structural device arises mainly from an inexpert handling of it, rather than from the use of the device itself. The substitution of a spatial for a temporal form in the novel has been made by many others before White, and the most skilful of them e.g. Proust, Joyce, Woolf, have been successful in rendering a unified apprehension of reality through this extra-temporal perspective. But in Voss, most of the story is presented in an ordinary, chronological sequence of events, so that the passing from Voss to Laura, instead of being an almost imperceptible movement within a moment of 'pure time', has only the effect of a dislocation. The fact that White has been criticized for 'interrupting' the story of Voss to pass to Laura's world is evidence that the primary method is the description of a causal sequence of events.

The dream-sequences are not wholly successful, either, for much the same reason. White has attempted to make Voss live on two planes simultaneously, but has not been able to maintain more than an uneasy balance between them. The formal, even ritualistic prose style which he has adopted for this novel, is used indiscriminately for factual incident, and for Voss's spiritual experiences, and this, while perhaps giving authenticity to the latter, serves in the end, to weaken the effect of both.

Before passing to an examination of the religious experience in White's latest novel, it will be worthwhile to glance

at another aspect of Voss's spiritual journey, and his relations with the Divine. Although God is mentioned throughout the novel, it seems that for White, the idea of a personal God, or the possibility of a close communication or union with a Divine Person is not entertained at all. At the end of Voss's journey, he has been humbled, he accepts his limitations and weaknesses, but does not approach any nearer than this. Instead, having acquired this necessary mental attitude, he turns to Laura for comfort and inspiration. When we consider the final religious experience of both Stan Parker and Voss, we find that neither achieves any personal or intimate union with God which could in any sense be called mystical. I make this point, because the 'mystical element' has been so often remarked upon in White's work.[1]

In neither case would we be justified in concluding that the 'experience' is other than a natural one, and the result of their imagination and intuition. This is a point which must be taken up again in the examination of the search for reality in Riders in the Chariot.

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1 See, for instance, the comments made by the following critics of White's novels:

D. Stewart, Bulletin, March 5th 1958.

R. Fry, 'Voss', Australian Letters, vol. I, no. 3 (1958).

D. Bradley, 'Australia Through the Looking-Glass', Overland, no. 23 (1962).

CHAPTER SIX

THE SEARCH FOR REALITY AND MEANING IN LIFE (iii)

The theme of Riders in the Chariot can still be described as a search; a search for knowledge of the Divine and for some ultimate perfection of existence. In this book, though, White's vision has widened to include a larger field of experience, and he treats for the first time the relations of man with a society which impinges on, and influences his personal life. But the interpretation of the significance of these experiences is a spiritual one.

Each of the four main characters is more sensitive than his fellow men, and with a clearer vision, and a deeper understanding of life than most, seeks for a closer relationship with the Divine element in the world and in himself, and for a better understanding of the meaning of divine love.

They share a vision of the chariot, symbol of the divine mysteries which they glimpse occasionally, and towards which they constantly yearn. The symbol itself is made to refer not only to the Prophet Ezekial's Chariot, the description of which White quotes on pp.348-9, but, in Dubbo's case, to the Chariot of Apollo, and, in the case of Miss Hare, and Mrs. Godbold, to a vaguer symbol, which appears to be a product of their own imagination. Blake's description of the Four Living Creatures, with its reference to the divine element in humanity, seems

distinctly allied to White's concept of the Chariot, and Dubbo's painting bears more resemblance to this, than it does to Ezekial's description:

> The Four Living Creatures, Chariots of Humanity Divine Incomprehensible,
> In beautiful Paradises expand. These are the Four Rivers of Paradise
> And the Four Faces of Humanity, fronting the Four Cardinal Points
> Of Heaven, going forward, forward irresistible from Eternity to Eternity.[1]

James McAuley, in reviewing this novel, finds that "there is no doctrine of redemption advanced or implied,"[2] but while it is true that the resolution of the book is to some extent enigmatic and ambiguous, nevertheless it is just this question of redemption which is central to the meaning of Riders in the Chariot. The Chariot is, for White, the Chariot of Redemption, and this recurs like a leit-motif throughout the book. It is Himmelfarb who is expected to redeem his people, and it is a question which he discusses with his wife, Reha, who is seeking an answer, and with Miss Hare, whom he asks

> Will you not admit the possibility of Redemption?... (p.173).

The "riders" are those who will be saved, and Himmelfarb is obsessed with the desire to know who these will be.. The word "saved" recurs frequently, and Miss Hare, too, asks

> Oh, dear, what will save us?... (p.344).

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1 W. Blake, 'Jerusalem: iv', Poetry and Prose, ed. G. Keynes, London, 1941, p.566.

2 J. McAuley, Review of 'Riders in the Chariot', Quadrant, no. 22 (1962), p.81.

It seems clear that White has intended to present a dramatic conflict between the forces of good and evil, and to show how the essential goodness of his main characters is, in the end, triumphant. It is realized gradually by each of the four illuminates that only love can overcome the evil in the world, and that this love must have the special qualities of humility, self-sacrifice and pure devotion. His four main characters share the same vision, which is the symbol of a divine reality, and are linked together by the knowledge of this insight into another world.

White is concerned with the religious experience in the life of modern man and with the possiblility of a redemption from the mediocrity and materialism which threaten to stifle his awareness of spiritual values. He says, in effect, that man can be saved only by a clear vision which sees beyond the material preoccupations of ordinary living, and by humility, suffering and love for his fellows. Social position, race and religion, matter little; it is the essential rightness of heart, and adherence to truth as the individual understands it, that alone are important. This doctrine is neither new, nor revolutionary. It is in fact, the prerequisite attitude to almost any understanding of religion, but it is on this abstract theme that White has constructed his novel. He has tried to present this belief dramatically, by realizing it in the lives of the characters, and in the organization of the fable.

I have used the word 'fable' deliberately, since the whole story has for its basis the mutual recognition of an arbitrary symbol. The reader, for the purposes of the story, must accept the improbability that each of the four characters sees the same vision, the Chariot, recognizes its significance, and intuitively understands the experiences of his fellow-illuminates. From this, it can be seen that White has left the plane of realism for some region of fable or fantasy. The form is not new of course, and has been used with success by any number of writers. The weakness, if any, will come from the author's treatment of the form, and it is in just this aspect that Riders in the Chariot reveals very definite limitations.

Owing perhaps to the fact that his story is based on an abstract 'truth', it tends to lack any genuine organic unity, and his art does not quite achieve that inner movement of life which transcends abstractions. The life-histories of the four initiates are told in excellent naturalistic prose, but after their stories have been given, they gradually tend to lose their individuality. At first genuinely life-like, and motivated by their own intellect and passions, they dwindle and disappear behind the emerging symbolic significance of their lives, which is used to illustrate the theme, and to signify the triumph of love and goodness over the evil of the modern world.

Before we can interpret and evaluate the experiences of the four main characters, it will be necessary to decide how

far they can be said to have any reality within the framework of the fable. The author has taken considerable care to establish the identity and individuality of his characters, and in his treatment of their early lives, his style shows a maturity and assurance superior to the standard of his previous novels. In the accounts of Miss Hare and Himmelfarb particularly, the very texture of the prose is expressive of the experiences and consciousness of each, and there is an extremely subtle change of style, involving the social, intellectual and physical imagery of each. Himmelfarb's story is told in a language which is more intellectual, redolent of a wider culture, graver, and more experienced than that of Miss Hare, which has the simplicity that is characteristic of herself. No single quotation can do justice to these differences in style, which affect the texture of the entire early life-story of each. By the time Miss Hare and Himmelfarb part from each other under the old tree in the orchard, they have been firmly established as convincing and exceptionally interesting individuals whose actions may be expected to play an important part in the working-out of the story.

But excellent as has been the early presentation of Miss Hare, there are certain inconsistencies in her later character and actions which become disconcertingly obvious. Ostensibly almost sub-human, and non-rational, she is so only in the author's analysis and description. A close study reveals that this madwoman, who finds it 'impossible to like human beings,'

and who understands only plants and animals, has a very surprising and intelligent perception of life. Her character is an extremely contradictory one. Obviously, White wished to present a simple soul, who lives close to nature and is despised by her fellow men, but who nevertheless has a clarity of perception and depth of understanding which surpasses most. She is to be like the 'seer' of the middle-ages, and this is how White describes her, and others treat her. She cannot understand or sympathize with Christianity, but understands the Divine in nature:

> She would recognize the Hand in every veined leaf, and would bundle with the bee into the divine Mouth... (p.67).

She is anxious to discover whether her close communion with nature can count as her "contribution," and says

> Perhaps somebody will tell me. And show me at the same time how to distinguish with certainty between good and evil... (p.89).

But character emerges as the result of relationships with others, and Miss Hare, apart from brief contacts with Mrs. Godbold and Himmelfarb is shown only in her relationship with Mrs. Jolley. This, though, is scarcely a genuine relationship, since Mrs. Jolley is the embodiment of Evil, while Miss Hare is the personification of all that is good, simple, and innocent. This bears a strong resemblance to the old mystery plays, where recognizable types, not characters, were the creations of the stage, and no real interchange of action or development of character was possible.

Miss Hare's words, refined and acutely perceptive, are actually at variance with what we are asked to believe about her. It is just possible to imagine a human being such as Miss Hare, but whether in fact such a person could exist outside the pages of White's book is not the point at issue. She is unconvincing in terms of the story itself, in spite of the fact that there is a certain fascination about White's description of her; her terrible hat, blotchy features, ugly, squat hands. Only too often, though, she becomes merely the vehicle of the author's own beliefs, since her strange, seer's mind gives him every opportunity to invest her remarks with cryptic meaning. e.g.

> "Do you see everything at once?" (she asks the Jew). "My own house is full of things waiting to be seen." Even quite common objects are shown to us only when it is time for them to be... (p.173).
>
> Of course, truth took many forms, Miss Hare suspected. Or was couched in the formlessness that she herself best knew: of wind and rain, the falling of a leaf, the whirling of the white sky... In the end, if not always, truth was a stillness and a light... (pp.473-4).

And yet White, two pages after this revelation of her extraordinary mind, refers to her "animal self."

Miss Hare is seeking some explanation of good and evil, and some final revelation of the pattern of the universe, which will make all things clear. Her visions of the Chariot are breathtaking, and usually result in her physical collapse. But she does not appear to understand their significance in any Christian or Jewish sense. To her they are in some way a

contact with the Divinity which she knows and recognizes in nature. To others, they are the accompaniment of her epileptic fits.

In the end, through her love for Himmelfarb, she does come to understand the meaning of divine love. At Himmelfarb's deathbed,

> Miss Hare had, in fact, entered that state of complete union which her nature had never yet achieved. The softest matter her memory could muster - the fallen breast-feathers, tufts of fur torn in courtship, the downy, brown crooks of bracken - was what she now willed upon the spirit of her love. Their most private union she hid in sheets of silence, such as she had learnt from the approach of early light, or from holding her ear to stone, or walking on thicknesses of rotted leaves. So she wrapped and cherished the heavenly spirit which had entered her, quite simply and painlessly, as Peg had suggested it might.
> ... And the stones of Xanadu could crumble, and she would touch its kinder dust. She herself would embrace the dust, the spirit of which she was able to understand at last... (pp.491-2).

What part, then, does this extraordinary character play in White's modern drama of redemption? She is a pre-moral creature, who does not "understand what people mean by sin" (p.172), and who cannot understand or accept any traditional religion, but worships God in nature. This contradictory character, who may be said indeed to be no character at all, but a symbol of primitive nature-worship, bears a name which has been associated throughout antiquity with sacrifice. The Jew tells her this when she mentions her name:

> "The sacrificial animal."
> "What is that?" she asked, or panted.
> "In some parts of the world, they believe
> the hare offers itself for sacrifice."... (p.104).

But Miss Hare rejects this idea, only, in the end, to become an actual sacrifice in love and devotion to Himmelfarb. She is a sacrifice to the evil of this materialistic society, and her love for the suffering world (particularised in Himmelfarb) earns for her, at last, perfect understanding of Divine love. Love has redeemed her, or saved her from the evil and the malice of the world.

The establishing of the characters of Mrs. Godbold and Dubbo is a more difficult task, since both are inarticulate. Mrs. Godbold suffers from the dominance of the more colourful Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson, and emerges as a solid, but rather featureless character, although the reader is made aware of more positive qualities when she is shown in her relationship with Tom. She is the simple Christian woman, compassionate, honest, and generous. She is a much more credible character than Miss Hare, but not a very functional one. Her characteristic attitude towards life is given in the following passage:

> So Ruth Joyner left, and was married that
> afternoon, and went to live in a shed,
> temporary-like, at Sarsparilla, and began
> to bear children and take in washing. And
> praised God. For was not the simplest act
> explicit, unalterable, even glorious in the
> light of Him? ... (p.303).

She is the eternal woman, and her changelessness is part of her very nature. She is rooted in the love of God and in

compassion for all men:

> Then Mrs. Godbold was overwhelmed by that compassion which all suffering roused in her... (p.482).

Mrs. Robinson, reminiscing at the end, sums up her qualities of simple goodness. To Mrs. Wolfson's question,

> "In what way, Mrs. Robinson, did this maid of yours show she is a saint?"

she replies

> ... "It is difficult to explain - exactly." she began. "By <u>being</u>, I suppose. She was so stupid, so trusting. But her trustfulness could have been her strength... She was a rock to which we clung." ... (p.545).

> (Mrs. Godbold) had her own vision of the Chariot. Even now, at the thought of it, her very centre was touched by the wings of love and charity. So that she closed her eyes for a moment as she walked, and put her arms around her own body, tight, for fear that the melting marrow might spill out of it... (p.549).

Her understanding of life and human suffering comes at the end, not so much as a result of her search, but as a deepening of her previous knowledge:

> Time had broken into a mosaic much that had seemed complete, obsessive, actual, painful. Now she could approach her work of living, as an artist, after an interval, will approach and judge his work of art. So, at last, the figure of her Lord and Saviour would stand before her in the chancel, looking down at her from beneath the yellow eyelids, along the strong, but gentle beak of a nose. She was content to leave then, since all converged finally upon the Risen Christ, and her own eyes had confirmed that the wounds were healed... (p.551).

She is a character who, as Mrs. Robinson said, shows her perfection simply by "being." Her deeds, not her words are

important, but unfortunately, here too, White exceeds artistic limits when he uses Mrs. Godbold to proclaim what is in fact his own belief about religion. That it is his own is evident from the entire treatment and organization of his story.

"It is the same," she says, to Rosetree's protest that Himmelfarb was a Jew:

> Men are the same before they are born. They are the same at birth, perhaps you will agree. It is only the coat they are told to put on that makes them all that different. There are some, of course, who feel they are not suited. They think they will change their coat. But remain the same, in themselves. Only at the end, when everything is taken from them, it seems there was never any need. There are the poor souls, at rest, and all naked again, as they were in the beginning. 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.500).

Mrs. Godbold alone, of the four illuminates, lives on, and her continuity is intended to be an affirmation of the continuity of human existence:

> Finally the woman sitting alone in front of the deserted shed would sense how she had shot her six arrows at the face of darkness, and halted it. And wherever her arrows struck, she saw other arrows breed. And out of those arrows, others still would split off, from the straight white shafts.
>
> So her arrows would continue to be aimed at the forms of darkness, and she herself was, in fact, the infinite quiver... (p.549).

Unfortunately, it can be seen that there is little imaginative power in these reflections, and the imagery used seems quite uncharacteristic of Mrs. Godbold, so that it becomes

difficult to accept the final resolution of her discovery, if it can be called this.

It is noticeable that, in contrast to the stories of Miss Hare, and Himmelfarb, a considerable part of the account of Dubbo's early life is interpretative, rather than dramatic, as the author has felt the need to explain and analyse the half-caste's artistic, but inarticulate genius. The vitality comes more from White's presentation of other characters who have relationships with Dubbo, and who are both more colourful, and more articulate than he is. The Reverend Calderon, Mrs. Pask, Mrs. Spice, and Hannah are more vividly presented than is Dubbo himself, and often the author's attempt to interpret his character's actions involves the use of language which results in a too-obvious author-participation, which is reminiscent of The Tree of Man:

> Alf Dubbo now went bush, figuratively at least, and as far as other human beings were concerned. Never communicative, he retired into the scrub of half-thoughts, amongst the cruel rocks of obsession. Later he learned to prefer the city, that most savage and impenetrable terrain, for the opportunities it gave him of confusing anyone who might attempt to track him down in his personal hinterland... (p.383).

On the whole, in spite of some excellent passages of descriptive writing, there seems to be a certain lack of realism, even a touch of sentimentality about White's treatment of Dubbo. The half-caste has been "corrupted" by the white man's

civilization, and although he cannot accept or understand the Christian religion, he has become afflicted with a false conscience because of this:

> Since his guardians had taught him to entertain a conscience, he would often suffer guilt with some part of him, particularly on those occasions when his diseased body took control, in spite of the reproaches of his pastor-mind... (p.387).

The inference is that Dubbo has been perverted from a natural goodness and innocence by contact with civilization:

> Sometimes in his wanderings through Sarsparilla, the painter had pushed deep into his own true nature, which men had failed to contaminate... (p.487).

This Rousseau-like touch is at variance with the greater part of White's treatment of him though, and he does emerge as a solitary individual, unable to understand life other than through the medium of experience and colour, and possessed with an insatiable desire for new experiences.

> At no time in his life was Alf Dubbo able to resist what must happen. He had, at least, to begin, for he was hypnotized by the many mysteries which his instinct sensed... (p.372).

Dubbo's only contact with the Divine is through his art, his 'secret gift', which he feels he must keep from the eyes of the world, and which will, in the end, be his vindication.

> Such faith as he had, lay in his own hands. Through them he might still redeem what Mr. Calderon would have

> referred to as the soul, and which remained in his imagining something between a material shape and an infinite desire... (p.416).

Dubbo has his own vision of the Chariot, but it is one composed of movement and light and colour. He is unable to understand or appreciate the teachings of Christianity:

> 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.417).

He is not convinced by the love and charity of the Gospels, since

> all was pale, pale, washed in love and charity, but pale... (p.386).

It is only after he has seen Himmelfarb tied to the tree, that he comes to understand the love which is part of the redemptive sacrifice.

> 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... (p.463).

Dubbo's inspiration for his understanding of Christianity comes, surprisingly enough, from a reading of the prophets, and of St. John's Gospel. It is surprising because Dubbo has little understanding of abstract ideas. He has tried to read,

> But reading did not come easily; an abstraction of ideas expressed less than the abstraction of forms and the synthesis of colours... (p.385).

Yet the reading of St. John's Gospel (I wonder if White is confusing this with the Apocalypse?) and the prophets of the Old Testament have a most extraordinary effect on him.

> He opened the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple. Then his throat did hurt fearfully. It burned... (p.386).

and

> The voices of the Prophets intoxicated him as he had never been in life, and soon he was laying on the grave splendour of their words with the colours of his mind... (p.397).

One cannot avoid the suspicion that White has again used his character to illustrate his theme of love and redemption. Certainly, Dubbo is a complex of contradictions, which we must believe are a result of race, upbringing and artistic temperament. But it is difficult for the reader to accept the statement that this half-educated native, who is totally unable to comprehend the abstraction of words, should become intoxicated with the writings of St. John and the ancient prophets.

After his discovery of the real meaning of love, Dubbo uses his last strength to paint two pictures which are, of course, the embodiment of the whole Redemptive theme; a modern version of the Christian sacrifice, and of the Chariot of Redemption.

But Alf Dubbo is a shadowy character; he is, rather, an

imaginative figure, who comes to life only a few times in acts of passion and violence, but who at other times, and especially towards the end of the novel, is no more than a symbol. He is the symbol of all those who are outcast, degraded, beyond the pale of any respectable society, yet who can achieve a contact with the Divine through suffering and the exercise of imaginative vision. He learns to understand the meaning of real love through witnessing that of Himmelfarb, Mrs. Godbold, and Miss Hare, and expresses it in the only way of which he is capable; through his artistic genius. After observing so many perversions and travesties of love, he comes at last to understand its real meaning.

> Then he began to cry as he stood propped against the basin... There were days when the blood would not stop.
>
> The blood ran down the hands, along the bones of the fingers. The pain was opening again in his side.
>
> In his agony, on his knees, Dubbo saw that he was remembering his Lord Jesus. His own guilt was breaking him. He began to crack his finger-joints, of the fingers that had failed to unknot the ropes; which had tied the body to the tree.
>
> He had not borne witness. But did not love the less. It came pouring out of him, like blood, or paint... (pp.486-7).

> His secret gift... would bear witness to his faith, in the man they had crucified, as well as in the risen Lord... (p.488).

In his art, he

> was driven again to give expression to the love he had witnessed, and which, inwardly, he had always known must exist... (p.509).

This then, constitutes Dubbo's 'experience', but so much in the account of his search is contrived and artistically unacceptable, that the final impression is less forceful than would be expected. One of the weakest scenes is his meeting with Mrs. Godbold in the brothel, where his behaviour seems quite at variance with his character as the reader knows it, and where the conversation of the two initiates appears very strained and unnatural.

But of the four 'chosen souls', it is the character of Himmelfarb which dominates the novel. Because of the compelling interest of the narration of the Jew's early life, of the bitter experiences of the war years, and the tragic background of the sufferings of the Jewish race, there is a very real danger that the role of the other three initiates will be overlooked by the reader. I do not think that White has altogether succeeded in overcoming this, but the experiences of the other three initiates do finally converge on an event of which Himmelfarb is the focal point.

In Himmelfarb, White has created a character who slowly and painfully arrives at an understanding of the Divine mysteries, and who is inspired through this understanding to offer his life as a sacrifice for the good of other men. In his youth, arrogant and self-sufficient, he turns away from the practice of his Jewish religion, although at no time does he lose his faith in God.

> The presence of that God amongst the walnut furniture of the sumptuous house ... was ... taken for

> granted by the little boy, even by the confident young man whom the latter eventually became, and who turned sceptical, not of his religion, rather, of his own need for it... (p.112).

Through a series of painful events, he is finally led back to a realization of his shortcomings and his need for God. His father's apostasy from the Jewish faith, and his mother's death, shake his confidence in his hitherto stable world:

> It did seem for the first time that his own brilliantly inviolable destiny was threatened, by an increased shrivelling of the spirit in himself, as well as by the actions of those whom he had considered almost as statues in a familiar park... (p.129).

But in his contact with Reha and her family, he is "again furnished with his faith"... (p.139). The realization of his common humanity is forced upon him, and with this realization comes a sense of responsibility for the sins of humanity, and in particular of his own people. He becomes aware that in some special way he is expected to expiate the sins of the Jewish race. Reha intimates this to him, and the dyer repeats it, when they meet again at Himmelfarb's wedding.

> "I did not doubt you would see what was indicated, ... And know you will justify our expectations. Because your heart has been touched and changed." ... (p.142).

It is at this meeting with the dyer that Himmelfarb finally realizes clearly his moral responsibility for the souls of others:

> As his self-appointed guide was sucked back into the crowd and lost, Himmelfarb accepted that the crippled dyer... was one from whom he would never escape. He had learnt the

> shape of the unshapely body, the texture of the unchanging coat; mirrors had taught him, long before their meeting, the expression of the eyes. Now, in the moment of perception, all the inklings were married together: the dyer's image was with him for always, like his new wife, or his own fate. Now he was committed. So he continued to answer distractedly the questions of the wedding guests, while trying to reconcile in his mind what his wife had taught him of love, with what had hitherto been the disgust he had felt for the dyer. In the light of the one, he must discover and gather up the sparks of love hidden in the other. Or deny his own purpose, as well as the existence of the race... (p.143).

After this understanding, Himmelfarb never returns to the self-sufficiency of his former life. His sense of the Divine mysteries of his faith deepens, as does his feeling of responsibility for the souls of others. In his desire to know more about God, and to penetrate more deeply into His mysteries, Himmelfarb goes to old Jewish manuscripts and attempts to unravel their secrets. He uses his intellect in an attempt to approach the Divine by means of the old Kabbalistic mysteries, but the attempt ends in failure. In a very cryptic passage, White describes Himmelfarb's attempts:

> Mostly he remained at a level where, it seemed, he was inacceptable as a vessel of experience, and would fall asleep, and wake at cockcrow. But once he was roused from sleep, during the leaden hours, to identify a face. And got to his feet, to receive the messenger of light, or resist the dark dissembler. When he was transfixed by his own horror. Of his own image, but fluctuating, as though in fire or water. So that the long-awaited moment was reduced to a reflection of the self... (p.152).

From this time, he does not attempt to use his considerable intellectual powers to come nearer to God, but is content to approach Him through humility and love, and an abandonment to His designs. When Reha asks him:

> "You do not believe it possible to arrive at truth through revelation?"

he replies

> "On the contrary... But I no longer believe in tampering with what is above and what is below. It is a form of egotism... And can lead to disorders of the mind." ... (p.158).

He gradually becomes conscious of the role for which he feels himself to be destined; that he is to suffer for the sins of his people, but feels that he is "inadequately equipped."

> ... For he was racked by his persistent longing to exceed the bounds of reason: to gather up the sparks, visible intermittently inside the thick shells of human faces; to break through to the sparks of light imprisoned in the forms of wood and stone. Imperfection in himself had enabled him to recognize the fragmentary nature of things, but at the same time restrained him from undertaking the immense labour of reconstruction. So this imperfect man had remained necessarily tentative. He was for ever peering into bushes, or windows, or the holes of eyes, or with his stick, testing the thickness of stone, as if in search of further evidence, when he should have been gathering up the infinitesimal kernels of sparks, which he already knew to exist, and planting them again in the bosom of divine fire, from which they had been let fall in the beginning... (p.157).

He becomes convinced of the necessity to remain as a passive instrument, to await the role which is to be revealed

to him. In this spirit of humility and submission, he resists his natural impulse to save himself and his wife by fleeing from Germany while there is still time to do so.

> ... Mordecai had received no indication of what his personal role might be, of how long he must suspend the will that was not his to use. Determined not to fear whatever might be in store for his creature flesh, nor even that anguish of spirit which he would probably be called upon to bear, he might have resigned himself indefinitely, if it had not been for the perpetual torment of his wife's image... (p.161).

He refuses a colleague's offer to assist him in leaving the country, saying:

> "The sins of Israel have given Sammael the legs on which he now stands. It is my duty, in some way, to expiate what are, you see, my own sins." ... (p.161).

But on the evening of a threatened purge of the Jews, succumbing to an uncontrollable terror, Himmelfarb deserts his wife, Reha, and his remorse for this failure remains with him for the rest of his life:

> "... It is always at the back of my mind. Because a moment can become eternity, depending on what it contains... When all of them had put their trust in me. It was I, you know, on whom they were depending to redeem their sins." ... (p.172).

The ideas of the Chariot of Redemption, and of his own role as redeemer become even more closely linked in his mind:

> During several walks, ... he continued his search for a solution to the problem of atonement... (p.176).

The strength of his feeling of loving-kindness brings him closer than ever before to his concept of the Chariot, and

> ... In fact, there were evenings when he thought he had succeeded in distinguishing its form... (p.176).

In his compassion, he "embraced the children of the dyer"... (p.193), and after regaining his freedom, he still seeks to carry out his role of redeemer which he is convinced that God has destined for him. He tells Ari, his brother-in-law:

> "... 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." ... (p.215).

It is in a spirit of dedication that he sets out for Australia, and it is with full knowledge and full acceptance that he prepares himself for his suffering at the hands of the factory workers. He offers himself as a sacrifice for the sins of his race, and out of love for them. But this offering of Himmelfarb's life, we are told, is not accepted.

> So Himmelfarb was raised too soon from the dead, by the kindness and consideration of those who had never ceased to be his mates. So he must remember not to doubt, or long for a solution that he had never been intended to provide... (p.468).

> Very quietly Himmelfarb left the factory in which it had not been accorded to him to expiate the sins of the world... (p.469).

But after this final failure, Himmelfarb begins to see the rightness of things. He comes closest now to understanding his

own father, who had been a failure, and his wife Reha.

> He could now see the rightness and inevitability of all that his wife Reha had been allowed in her simplicity to understand, and which she had attempted to convey, not so much by words, for which she had no gift, but by the light of her conviction. It seemed to him as though the mystery of failure might be pierced only by those of extreme simplicity of soul, or else by one who was about to doff the outgrown garment of the body... (p.480).

There is an echo here of Frank le Mesurier's words to Voss:

> My whole life has been a failure, lived at a most humiliating level, always purposeless, frequently degrading. Until I became aware of my power. The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming... (p.289 Voss).

Having offered his life as a sacrifice for the redemption of souls, he feels now that there is nothing to prevent his return to God, and prepares peacefully for this last journey:

> He was received, as seldom. Of course there had been other occasions when he might have allowed himself: the hills of Zion, spreading their brown pillows in the evening light, had almost opened; the silence of his last and humblest house had promised frequent ladders of escape; as he knelt on the stones, in his blindness, the flames of Friedensdorf had offered certain release. But the rope-end of dedication had always driven him on... (pp.482-3).

In his last hours of suffering and failure, Himmelfarb experiences a deep peace and understanding which he has never enjoyed before.

> He knew all the possible permutations and combinations. Whereas, at Bienenstadt, his green and supple soul had been forced to struggle for release, the scarred and leathery object which it had become would now stand forth with very little effort. So, too, he had only to touch tongues, including his own, and they would speak. ... The strange part was: he knew, he knew. The cliffs of rock were his scroll. He had only to open the flesh of their leaves to identify himself with the souls of plants... (p.491).

This tremendous sense of moral responsibility is a new theme in White's novels, and there is a marked difference between Voss's final position and that of Himmelfarb. His desire for union with God, and his compassion and loving-kindness towards all men are inextricably linked, and it is in the moments of most intense compassion and dedication that he glimpses the Chariot of Redemption.

The humble admission of his failures and limitations, and the austerity of his life is directed towards a clearer vision of God, and a purer expression of loving-kindness. As his life draws to a close, he realizes that he at last understands the meaning of this loving-kindness, of compassion for all men, and is the means of enabling the other three initiates to understand and appreciate the true meaning of love.

But White, in his manipulation of the events which culminated in the Crucifixion scene has marred what could otherwise have been a superb character study. The early passages relating to Himmelfarb present him in most convincing language, and

perhaps the best parts of the story are those relating to him. But he, too, becomes in the end, only a vehicle for White's shadowy symbol of suffering and love, and is no more credible at the conclusion than are Miss Hare and Dubbo.

Each of the illuminates, then, is made to arrive in the end at a consummation or a perfecting of his desire for a closer union with the Divine. Setting aside the contrived nature of the plot, we can see that their different ways of achieving contact with the Infinite are natural to themselves; each finds God in the manner most fitting to his intellect and understanding, and in a perfection of his own peculiar talents. The final perfection of understanding is arrived at through suffering and love, and through an exercise of that imaginative vision which sets them apart from others.

It is a pity that the total imaginative effect of the book is largely unconvincing, and that the force of the final resolution is not as strong as White must have intended. His organization of his theme has involved an attempt to work on two different planes, that of realism and symbolism. But instead of allowing the symbolism to emerge out of the factual story, as, for instance, Melville has done in Moby Dick, he has tried to give, towards the end of the book, a realistic presentation of a purely symbolic content. The excellent realistic building-up of character in the first part of the book is frustrated by the reduction of these characters to the status of symbols. Something has been

imposed on the story from without, and the reader is understandably confused by this treatment. Is this a fable, or a realistic story which has in some way changed into a fable half-way through?

The unsatisfactory attempt to combine both forms of the novel has finally resulted only in depriving the characters of any autonomous life within the story. While we can appreciate White's intentions, we can only regret that in the effort to ensure that his characters arrive at last at a satisfying vision of Reality, White should have caused them to lose their own identity.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MAN AND SOCIETY

In the earlier novels, the question of man's relationship with society is to a large extent ignored, and the interest is focussed on the individual and his personal problems and experiences, and this has perhaps tended to accentuate the effect of his isolation and loneliness. But in Riders in the Chariot, White has introduced a more comprehensive view of man, adding the further dimension of social relationships to his characters' hitherto rather restricted field of experience.

In this novel, he has been concerned to present the struggle between the forces of good and evil in the world, and to establish dramatically his conviction that evil can eventually be overcome by the spiritual forces of love and an imaginative awareness of the Divine. In this conflict, the good must in some way be saved from the corrupting influences of the greater part of society, and it becomes apparent early in the story that his chief concern is not so much with the individual's interaction with, and responsibility towards the world outside his own immediate circle, but with his necessary alienation from it. For the author seems convinced that it is only by separating himself from the vulgar multitude, that man can hope for a personal redemption. In a country where, as he has said

elsewhere, "the mind is the least of possessions,"[1] the individual must resist the pressures of a crassly materialistic and insensitive society, and assert, if only in his own personal life, the values of a more spiritual existence. "The marsh which threatened to engulf" Miss Hare and Himmelfarb is society, part at least of which is actively malevolent. He tends indeed to think of "society" as having some separate existence of its own, and not as being composed of an aggregation of separate individuals, each with a personal life of his own.

But this conception is unrealistic, and it is surprising that a writer who is concerned primarily with the importance of the individual personality should have made such a fundamental mistake as to dismiss large sections of the community as quite unworthy of consideration, and incapable of any kind of spiritual rehabilitation. But he sees these groups of people only from the outside, and as a target for the expression of his indignation against what he considers to be the debased values of contemporary society. This attitude is open to grave criticism, and is a major weakness in the novel, since, through the author's contemptuous and superficial treatment of society en masse, it is deprived of any genuine artistic life. Nor has society the positive force of an active evil, which could make for real dramatic value. Even the individuals who are wholly malevolent,

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1 P. White, 'The Prodigal Son', Australian Letters, vol. I, no. 3 (1958), p.38.

like Mrs. Jolley, Mrs. Flack, and Blue, lack the stature and credibility of the four well-realized major characters. The whole tone, lacking in compassion and understanding as it often is, is at variance with the doctrine of loving-kindness which forms the central theme of the story, and whose meaning is thereby considerably weakened.

Here, for example, is a description of 'society' after the war:

> In that outer and parallel existence, which never altogether convinced him (Dubbo), the war was drawing to a close. The spray-painting of aeroplanes had fizzled out, except on paper. A two-up school was booming in one of the big packing-cases; the hangars were chock-full of stuff for anyone who felt inclined to shake it. Many did feel inclined. In fact, all the maggots on all the carcasses began to wriggle, if anything, a bit harder, suspecting that the feast was almost finished. In a few instances, the conscience was felt to stir, as human features returned to the blunt maggot-faces, and it was realized that the true self, whatever metamorphoses it might have undergone, was still horridly present, and hinting at rehabilitation... (p.407).

The savage phrasing of this passage is typical of many in the novel, and it is to be noticed that there is no attempt to assimilate into the story as an organic unity what is undisguisedly the author's own commentary. This artistically indefensible practice persists throughout the book, and though these passages are often both clever and amusing in themselves, results only in a lessening of the essential vitality of the story.

As early as his first book, Happy Valley, White shows his indignation towards the small-mindedness of society as a whole, in this case that of a small country town. Oliver Halliday thinks of the town's reaction to his affair with Alys:

> And now they were beginning to hate, the people you passed, you could feel it. There is something relentless about the hatred induced by human contacts in a small town. At times it seems to have a kind of superhuman organization, like the passions in a Greek tragedy, but there is seldom any nobility about the passions of a small town, the undercurrent of hatred that had begun to flow about Alys Browne, or that poor wretch Moriarty. This had an unhealthy subterranean intensity... (p.191).

It is obvious, too, that in The Aunt's Story and Voss, White is on the side of Theodora and Voss against the materialistic values of the society in which they find themselves, and this attitude is even more pronounced in Riders in the Chariot, where his commentary on suburban life is particularly scathing:

> Round the homes, the dahlias lolled. Who could have told whose were the biggest? Who could have told who was who? Not the plastic ladies, many of whom, as they waited to shove chops in front of men, exchanged statements over fences, or sat drooping over magazines, looking for the answers to the questions... (p.430).

> Filled with such certainty, or an evening feed of steak, the bellies of stockbrokers had risen like gasometers. As the stockbrokers stood, pressing their thumbs over the nozzles of hoses, to make the water squirt better, they discussed the rival merits of thuya orientalis and retinospera pisifera plumosa. All the gardens of

> Paradise East were planned for posterity. All the homes were architect-planned. From one window, certainly, a voice had begun to scream, strangled, it seemed, by its boa of roses, and so unexpected, the noise could have carried from some more likely suburb... (p.439).

Even earlier, in The Tree of Man, White has shown his disgust for the modern homes which in his opinion stand for all the cheapness and tawdriness of contemporary life, the "destructive animus of banality," as he calls it.

> If the souls of these old cottages disturbed, any uneasiness can almost be excluded from the brick villas simply by closing windows and doors and turning on the radio. The brick homes were in possession all right. Deep purple, clinker blue, oxblood, and public lavatory. Here the rites of domesticity were practised, it had been forgotten why, but with passionate, regular orthodoxy, and once a sacrifice was offered up, by electrocution, by vacuum cleaner, on a hot morning, when the lantana hedges were smelling of cat... (pp.408-9).

In his latest novel, the tone is even more condemnatory of the empty materialism of suburbia:

> When Xanadu had been shaved right down to a bald, red, rudimentary hill, they began to erect the fibro homes. Two or three days, or so it seemed, and there were the combs of homes clinging to the bare earth. The rotary clothes-lines had risen, together with the Iceland poppies, and after them the glads. The privies were never so private that it was not possible to listen to the drone of someone else's blowflies. The wafer-walls of the new homes would rub together at night, and sleepers might have been encouraged to enter into one another's dreams, if these had not been similar. Sometimes the rats of anxiety could be heard gnawing already at bakelite, or

> plastic, or recalcitrant maidenhead. So that, in the circumstances, it was not unusual for people to run outside and jump into their cars. All of a Sunday they would visit, or be visited, though sometimes they would cross one another, midway, while remaining unaware of it. Then, on finding nothing at the end, they would drive around, or around... (pp.545-6).

In the last denunciation of urban life which I wish to quote, the indignation of the author has risen to a pitch of excitement where the cadences and rhythms change the prose into an impassioned hymn of hate:

> The train was easing through the city which knives had sliced open to serve up with all the juices running - red, and green, and purple. All the syrups of the sundaes oozing into the streets to sweeten. The neon syrup coloured the pools of vomit and the sailors' piss. By that light, the eyes of the younger, gaberdine men were a blinding, blinder blue, when not actually burnt out. The blue-haired grannies had purpled from the roots of their hair down to the ankles of their pants, not from shame, but neon, as their breasts chafed to escape, from shammy-leather back to youth, or else roundly asserted themselves, like chamber-pots in concrete. As for the young women, they were necessary. As they swung along, or hung around a corner, or on an arm, they were the embodiment of thoughts and melons. As if the thoughts of the gaberdine men had risen from the ashes behind their fused eyeballs, and put on flesh at last, of purple, and red, and undulating green. There were the kiddies, too. The kiddies would continue to suck at their slabs of neon, until they had learnt to tell the time, until it was time to mouth other sweets: ... As the darkness spat sparks, and asphalt sinews ran with salt sweat, the fuddled trams would be tunnelling farther into the furry air, over the bottle-tops, through the smell of squashed pennies, and not omitting from

> time to time to tear an arm out of its screeching socket. But would arrive at last under the frangipani, the breezes sucking with mouths of sponges. Sodom had not been softer, silkier at night than the sea gardens of Sydney. The streets of Nineveh had not clanged with such metal. The waters of Babylon had not sounded sadder than the sea, ending on a crumpled beach, in a scum of French-letters... (pp.440-1).

There is a certain irresponsibility in White's lyrical satirisation which is very apparent in this passage. In fact, it is extremely doubtful whether his treatment of society can accurately be regarded as satire at all, since the question repeatedly arises as to whether he has any real positive values with which to offset this caricature of modern living. For not only does he inveigh against the emptiness and superficiality of such an existence, but he includes in his contempt the entire material organization of urban life. His moral indignation extends to the "texture-brick houses," the neon signs, and the "fuddled trams," but one wonders what a more sensitive suburban-dweller could possibly substitute for these. There is no suggestion that economic necessity, rather than utter debasement of any aesthetic sense, may be the cause of a great deal of urban shoddiness. It is most noticeable, indeed, that financial concerns do not appear to be taken into account at all, unless to show up the sordid self-seeking of a character, and this ignoring of what after all, forms the very basis of our present society is a grave omission in White's presentation of modern life.

His contempt for even the innocent occupation of tending shrubs is evidence that his animosity towards all aspects of a middle-class existence has clouded the main issue for him.

We are presented with a picture of society which is wholly vulgar and completely insensitive to any higher aesthetic or moral ideals. There is an absence of reasoned judgement here, and a failure of psychological penetration which serves only to make suspect the validity of White's vision of man in this novel. In view of his treatment of society as a whole, it is doubtful, too, whether, as true satire, it is grounded in a deep regard for the worth and dignity of humanity as a whole. Yet genuine satire, I think requires this fundamental attitude. As I have said, the only explanation on the grounds of artistry could be that White wished to set his four illuminates against a background of evil, and this evil is apparent today not in the more spectacular aspects of brutality and violence, but in the meannesses and ignoble qualities of modern suburbia. But his presentation lacks the detachment of a truly artistic vision, and the reader is made uncomfortably aware of White's own personal animosities.

When he turns from these abstractions of modern life to portray a group of workers his attitude becomes even more merciless. The entire episode with the factory workers is presented with a cold, indifferent detachment which is more deadly than indignation, since in the telling, the workers are

gradually stripped of all decency or humanity. Australian traditions of humour and mateship are travestied and ridiculed. Mr. Theobalds, the foreman, tells the rescued Himmelfarb:

> 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, ... we have a sense of humour, and when the boys start to horse around, it is that that is gettin' the better of 'em. They can't resist a joke. Even when a man is full of beer, you will find the old sense of humour hard at work underneath. It has to play a joke. See? No offence can be taken where a joke is intended... (p.468).

White uses the incident of Himmelfarb's crucifixion for, among other purposes, a bitter attack on Australian tradition. The traditions of humour, of mateship, of friendly drinking, of casualness are all cleverly destroyed in this episode where the true motives of the workers' actions are shown to be a combination of sadism, a barely suppressed bestiality, an unhealthy conscience, and the effect of mass hysteria.

He does not hesitate here to caricature Australian speech, when this will help to explode the myth of mateship and to emphasize the Australian lack of culture, although at other times, even his uneducated people speak with surprising refinement. Here, Ernie Theobalds is speaking to Himmelfarb:

> "Yeah, that's all right," he strained, and sweated, "I don't say we ain't got a pretty dinkum set-up. But a man stands a better

> chance of a fair go if he's got a mate.
> That's all I'm saying'. See?"
> Himmelfarb laughed again - the morning
> had made him rash - and replied:
> "I shall take Providence as my mate."
> Mr. Theobalds was horrified. He hated
> any sort of educated talk. The little
> beads of moisture were tingling on the
> tufts of his armpits.
> "Okay," he said. "Skip it!"
> And went away as if he had been treading
> on eggs... (pp.346-7).

Blue, in his capacity of ring-leader in the crucifying of the Jew,

> could not lose sight of the convention which
> demanded that cruelty, at least amongst mates,
> must be kept at the level of a joke.
> ... The others were not sure they were going
> to approve. Some of them felt, in fact, they
> could have attempted heights of tragedy, they
> could have made blood run redder and more
> copiously than ever before. However, the
> majority were pacified by the prospect of
> becoming involved in some episode that would
> degrade them lower than they had known yet;
> the heights were not for them... (p.461).

But this is a very superficial commentary on the thoughts and motives of the workers, and it would be safe to say that for most readers, it must remain entirely unconvincing.

Even more unreal than the account of the crucifixion is his description of the burning of Himmelfarb's house, and the behaviour of the idlers who come to enjoy the spectacle of the fire.

> A number of persons had come down to watch,
> or trail hoses for which taps had never been
> provided...
> "But if there is a man inside!" Miss Hare
> protested.
> Although that was not known for certain,
> there were those who would have dearly
> loved to know... (p.474).

This inhuman unconcern is in no way true to life or convincing, and only succeeds in casting an aura of complete unreality over the entire scene. It is to be regretted that White should have allowed his zeal for the higher spiritual values to have so narrowed and obscured his vision.

As with other accepted traditions, so with the traditions of religious observance, he shows only contempt for their empty sincerity:

> All along the road women and girls were entering the brick churches for preliminary Easter services. Without altogether believing they had consented to a murder, the sand-coloured faces saw it would not harm them to be cleared in public. They had dressed themselves nicely for the hearing, all in blameless, pale colours, hats, and so forth. Some of them were wearing jewels of glass... (p.487).

And again,

> That way Rosetrees spent their Easter, while for other, less disordered families, Jesus Christ was taken down, and put away, and resurrected, with customary efficiency and varying taste. Outside the churches every-one was smiling to find they had finished with it; they had done their duty, and might continue on their unimpeded way... (p.496).

The implication here, as with society in general, is that there is no longer any sincerity; the majority of men have become so steeped in materialism that they are no longer motivated by any higher ideals. All genuine love and kindliness have disappeared, submerged by self-interest, and banality.

When we come to examine the treatment of individual characters, we find that this style is still used for nearly

all of them except his chosen illuminates. In many cases, a superficial summing-up, or a mere caricature takes the place of a genuine imaginative treatment. They are presented to the reader already judged in the light of White's own convictions, and there is a distressing unreality about those characters who are not permitted to reveal themselves or develop naturally. The Rosetrees, Mrs. Jolley, Mrs. Flack, Ernie Theobalds, Blue, are all caricatures, rather than living persons. The presentation of Mrs. Jolley is typical of this superficial analysis:

> Mrs. Jolley was a lady, as she never tired of pointing out. She would repeat the articles of her faith for anybody her instinct caught doubting. She would not touch an onion, she insisted; not for love. But was partial to a fluffy sponge, or butter sandwich, with non-parelles. A lady could never go wrong with pastel shades. Or Iceland poppies. Or chenille. She liked a good yarn, though, with another lady, at the bus stop, or over the fence. She liked a drive in a family car, to nowhere in particular, but looking out, in a nice hat, at faces on a lower level. Then the mechanism with which her superior station fitted her, would cause her head to move ever so slightly, to convey her disbelief... (p.48).

To say that this is an entirely superficial and unsatisfactory delineation of character is not, of course, to deny White's exceptional talent for catching the exact tone and cadences of Mrs. Jolley's voice, and his wicked humour in so presenting the tenets of her creed of lady-likeness. But the real character recedes behind the author's witty assessment of her, and the reader is conscious only of the author's clever and

cynical intelligence.

Mrs. Flack, as the arch-fiend, is hardly a character at all; certainly, very little attempt has been made to present her as even human.

> Mrs. Flack began to move her head, from side to side, like a pendulum. Mrs. Jolley was reassured. Inwardly, she crouched before the tripod... (p.251).

> Although a considerable pythoness herself, it might have been that she (Mrs. Flack) felt the need for invocation before encounter with superior powers... (p.444).

The evil of both their minds and the insincerity of their practice of religion are revealed in the scene where they watch Himmelfarb talking to Mrs. Godbold and suspect the worst:

> Why, dreadful, dreadful! Now the whirlwinds were rising in honest breasts, that honest corsets were striving to contain... (p.239).

They are "deterred momentarily from hating" by the sound of the laughter of the other two, but are soon "again fully clothed in their right minds."

> "See you at church!" hissed Mrs. Jolley.
> "See you at church!" repeated Mrs. Flack.
> Their eyes flickered for a moment over the Christ who would rise to the surface of Sunday morning... (pp.239-40).

We are assuredly meant to take these two as the very personification of hate, and they do not have any more reality than did the "humours" of the old morality plays.

The Rosenbaums, the Jewish pair who have rejected their religion and race for the chance of security and material comfort,

are more credible characters, but the author has little sympathy to spare for this pathetic couple. Harry Rosenbaum is described as "a small, soft man";

> But confronted with the bones of a situation, as in the last few days, the juices had run out of him... (p.497).

As the Pilate-Judas figure, he becomes after the crucifixion of Himmelfarb too much of a symbol, and a vehicle for the expounding of the author's ideas on religion, so that his suicide seems to lack real motivation. Shirl, his wife, is the personification of vulgar materialism, and no attempt is made to present anything more than a superficial view of this character.

It is necessary, too, to question the representative quality of society as it is portrayed in Riders in the Chariot. At first sight the varied social milieus seem all-comprehensive, and the reader is impressed with the glimpses of what seems to be an entire 'world' within which the chief characters live. But it becomes evident on closer inspection that this breadth of canvas is more apparent than real, and that, despite its wealth of minor characters, the novel deals with only a very small section of humanity. Apart from the Jewish communities of Himmelfarb's early life, and the caricatures of suburban life, there is no portrayal of ordinary, middleclass people who, after all, form the major section of the Australian community. There is no intellectual world in evidence at all, nor is the world of business represented, except for the dubious picture of

Rosetree's factory.

This real restriction of society, in spite of a facade of breadth of treatment, is sufficient to make us wary of accepting the novel as a commentary on Life. In presenting a limited number of eccentric and uncharacteristic lives as Life itself White succeeds only in reducing it, and, within these narrow limits, a true vision of life is not revealed.

His four illuminates are solitaries who really have little communication or relations with others. They are on a different plane of existence from those with whom they live and work, and remain largely untouched by the world which moves past them, and around them. Dubbo remains aloof from "that outer and parallel existence, which never altogether convinced him," and, to a slightly less degree, the same may be said of the other three. They are remote and separated from the rest of men by their greater imagination and sensibility, and by their sense of dedication to a "secret mission".

The author's tendency to discuss and evaluate his characters is even more marked in this novel, in spite of the many passages of excellent dialogue. Instead of allowing the characters to reveal themselves through their words and actions, and to participate fully in the relationships within their society, he has presented instead his own judgements and ideas, with the result that the novel lacks any actual, organic life of its own.

The result of this is that their world as a living organism

hardly comes into existence, and such vitality as the story possesses is due largely to the sharpness and wit of the author's own intelligence. Often the scenes of greatest vitality, as for instance, the brothel scene which is pure comedy, do not arise naturally out of either character or situation and serve only to weaken the artistic unity of the book. The same may be said of the farcical element provided by the O'Dowds in The Tree of Man, which, though undoubtedly hilarious, is nevertheless extraneous to the story.

The sense of reality is further weakened by the author's all-pervasive, ironical commentary. This, although largely withheld from his major characters, serves to render unreal the entire world of his novel. Numerous examples could be given of this, but in addition to the quotations already given his comment on Mrs. Jolley is a typical one:

> The mere sight of a bus passing through a built-up area restored a person's circulation, as rounds of beef and honeycombs of tripe fed the spirit, and ironmongery touched the heart... (p.80).

The witty, malicious caricatures in this "comedy of humours" are the work of an author who has seen through these individuals, but has not succeeded in creating them imaginatively as characters in their own right. Their very existence seems to depend upon the arbitrary caprice of their creator.

What actual drama does take place between the characters is shot through with enigmatic comment, and shrouded in a

mysterious aura of symbolism, which gives an air of unreality to their actions. In the end, owing to this, and to the manipulation of plot, they have lost any personal identity which they may have possessed, or which the reader was willing to concede to them. Instead, they have become shadowy symbols of the author's theme, and do not enjoy their own separate existence which even allegorical figures possess.

In spite of the greater variety of characters in Riders in the Chariot, and the larger world in which the chief characters move and live, the actual experiences of the latter are just as personally restricted and individualistic as in Voss.

White's attempt to show man in his relationship with society has not been really successful, since his vision of society itself is, I am afraid, a very limited and prejudiced one.

CHAPTER EIGHT

REASON AND INTUITION

White's characters strive for, and, in varying degrees, attain to some integrated, satisfying vision of life. Theodora achieves "complete understanding"; Stan Parker in the end is "illuminated"; Voss arrives, through suffering and an acquired humility at a certain realization of Christ and the Christian religion; Laura "suddenly understood"; and each of the four illuminates arrives at a clearer perception of the meaning of life, and each enjoys his own personal vision of the Divinity. It is only through suffering and humility that they reach this understanding, but the experience when it does come is sudden, and often almost overwhelming.

This illumination is not the result of a logical, discursive process of reasoning; White's characters are not metaphysicians, and their searching for truth is not the searching of the philosopher. Even their thinking is translated into the physical terms of visual and kinetic imagery, as we saw in Theodora's meditations in the Jardin Exotique. Their understanding is intuitive, not logical, and consists of a special kind of imaginative vision. In fact, the meaning and significance of White's treatment of the "individual experience" rests on an appreciation of the part played by imagination and intuition in the individual consciousness of his characters.

The word "illumination" is perhaps a misleading one, although White uses it repeatedly himself, in that it suggests something impinging upon the mind from without. "Intuition", or "intuitive understanding", words which he also uses to describe this experience, are more significant, since intuition is itself a faculty of the intellect, and resides within.

There seems to be a marked similarity between what Maritain, in his lectures on Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry, calls the "poetic experience," and White's "illumination", as can be seen from the following passages where Maritain discusses the nature of intuition:

> ... There is not only logical reason, but, also, and prior to it, intuitive reason... and any discovery which really reveals a new aspect of being is born in a flash of intuitivity before being discursively tested and justified. But when it comes to poetry, the part of intuitive reason becomes absolutely predominant. Then... we are confronted with an intuition of emotive origin, and we enter the nocturnal empire of a primeval activity of the intellect which, far beyond concepts or logic, exercises itself in vital connection with imagination and emotion. We have quit logical reason, and even conceptual reason, yet we have to do more than ever with intuitive reason - functioning in a non-rational way... (pp.75-6).
>
> By Poetry I mean... that intercommunication between the inner being of things and the human Self which is a kind of divination... Poetry has it source in the preconceptual life of the intellect... (pp.3-4).
>
> ... There is no Muse outside the soul; there

> is poetic experience and poetic intuition within the soul, coming to the poet from above conceptual reason... (p.242).[1]

The insistence on the 'pre-conceptual' nature of intuition, and of its predominance and superiority over logical reason is an excellent statement of what are undoubtedly White's own views on this subject. But he is by no means as clear about it as is Maritain, for in his two latest books, it seems that he has confused, and even perhaps, debased the function of the intuitive faculty.

For Maritain, this experience must of necessity be individual, and incommunicable, unless it can be expressed in some art form (as one of White's characters, Alf Dubbo, is able to do). But for the ordinary person, who lacks creative talent, his flashes of 'divination', of inter-communication between his own inner being, and the inner being of things must remain locked within himself. This is the experience of most men, and it is this frustration, this helpless inability to share one's most intense and intimate experiences which is at the root of all loneliness of spirit. This is Theodora's fate, and the "complete understanding" which she reaches is quite unintelligible to the rest of the world. Stan Parker, too, is unable to share his experience, and long before his final illumination, he has arrived at the

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1 J. Maritain, Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry, London, 1954.

conviction that he is quite unable to communicate his inner vision to Amy, or to any other person in his world.

As long as the experience remains an individual one, White's use of intuition as a source of illumination and understanding of truth and reality is unexceptionable. But in Voss, where Laura's and Voss's relationship is based on a logically inexplicable communication, White goes much further than this. Their "intuitive understanding" of each other, and their mysterious telepathic communication cannot be said to have any explanation other than a vaguely 'psychic' one. But if the reader imagined that the Laura-Voss relationship meant no more to White than an ingenious structural device requiring a suspension of disbelief, in the interest of the allegory, he was proved wrong, on the appearance of Riders in the Chariot, where the immediate and mutual recognition of the illuminates can only be explained by a further use of the term "intuition." This recognition seems now to be part of a powerful imaginative vision, a kind of sixth sense which is only possessed by a few privileged minds, and there seems, particularly in the case of Miss Hare, to be very little difference between the terms "instinctive" and "intuitive." The possession of this faculty by a small number of unusual people, and the mysterious nature of it, raise serious doubts as to the possible universality of these characters.

In spite of the realism of much of White's writing, his

complete acceptance of the superiority and importance of the Imagination points to his affinity with the Romantics of the last century, in particular with Blake, whose influence is apparent in the philosophy of Riders in the Chariot. In Blake's own words,

> Imagination or the Human Eternal Body in Every Man... Imagination is the Divine Body in every man... Man is all Imagination. God is Man and exists in us and we in him.[1]

Bowra, in his commentary on the Romantics, says that

> For Blake, God and the imagination are one; that is, God is the creative and spiritual power in man, and apart from man, the idea of God has no meaning.[2]

This seems true, too, of White's conception of the superiority of the imagination since there is little evidence that God exists for his characters outside their own imagination. On one vital point, though, White differs a great deal from the Romantics, for whereas they, by the power of their imagination, often succeed in giving the reader a glimpse of their world, the vision of White's characters does not achieve this effect. However much the inner vision may excite the character, as for instance it does to Stan Parker, or Miss Hare, or Alf Dubbo, this vision is not communicated to the reader. His visionaries, from the reader's point of view, are earth-bound, and White's world is really a 'closed universe.' His idea of Divinity does

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1 W. Blake, Annotations to Berkeley's Siris, Poetry and Prose, ed. G. Keynes, London, 1941, pp. 818; 820.

2 C.M. Bowra, The Romantic Imagination, Oxford, 1950, p. 34.

not appear to transcend the natural plane, and even his illuminates (with the possible exception of Himmelfarb) find their vision of ultimate reality through a powerful exercise of their imagination. In spite of the Chariot symbolism, it cannot be said that there is any supernatural level in Riders in the Chariot, although there is an emphasis on the spiritual life. Man succeeds in arriving at an intuitive grasp of the Divine, not only through his imagination, but in it.

This belief in the power of the imagination is a powerful influence not only on White's choice of characters, and the nature of their experiences, but on his method of presentation. His technique differs from Joyce's "stream-of-consciousness", in which the whole texture of thought is woven in the idiom of the particular character. But the thought-sequences of White's characters are not an imaginative presentation of their individual consciousness; they are a further remove from this. White transcribes their thoughts through a series of images, presented usually in a stylised, remote manner, whose total significance must be perceived and appreciated by the reader in much the same way as a painting exists for the observer. It is the consciousness of the writer, rather than of the particular character, which is more in evidence. This explains the enigmatic, cryptic effect of many of these passages; the reader is aware of the mind of the author, who is refining the

experiences of his characters, and investing these image-patterns with a symbolic significance.

Abstract concepts are rendered in physical terms, and by sharp, visual imagery, as in the following passage, where Himmelfarb is thinking of all those human beings who need to be rescued "from the rubble of their own ideas."

> So the souls were crying, and combing their smoked-out hair. They were already exhausted by the bells, prayers, orders, and curses of the many fires at which, in the course of their tormented lives, it had been their misfortune to assist... (p.345).

This illustrates White's imaginative technique, which relies heavily on the intuitive understanding of the reader for its interpretation. Emotions, too, are often described in 'painterly' language, and we are told that

> Miss Hare was red rage itself. She could not see for the sense of injustice which was rising green out of her. Towering in the perpendicular, it burst into a flower of sparks, like some obscene firework released from the dark of memory... (p.331).

Highly imaginative though this technique is, it seems more suitable for certain types of poetry than for the novel. The style requires such close and persevering attention on the part of the reader, that its demands seem too heavy for the form of the novel, particularly when this runs to well over five hundred pages, as does Riders in the Chariot. It results, too, in a static quality, which is unsuitable to a form of literature which depends for its vitality on the active inter-relationships

among characters.

On the whole, this stylised presentation of mental states is more successful in Voss, where the tone of the novel is maintained at a grave, formal level, and is in keeping with the ritualistic overtones of the allegory. But the continuation of the same style in parts of Riders in the Chariot is much less successful, because much less genuinely organic. The movement of these passages is not the movement in time which is usually regarded as necessary to prose fiction. Some novelists, in particular Proust, Joyce and Woolf have developed a successful technique where spatial, rather than temporal movement prevails. But White has attempted to combine both methods; the smooth flow of the narrative is, as it were, interrupted by a different style, one in which time ceases to exist, and the previous objectivity of the story is changed to a dream-like subjective quality, which requires a different approach for understanding and appreciation.

It is just this subtle merging and transforming of styles which gives the slightly unreal effect to White's last two novels. The reader is required to inhabit two different worlds; one, that of objective reality, where the ordinary laws of time and motion and causality are taken for granted, and one where these laws are suspended and the movement focussed within the mind of the character.

In his attempt to achieve a synthesis of the physical and

metaphysical planes, White has developed also a certain obliquity in his style, which, while it accentuates the symbolic meaning, rather than the factual importance of the incident, has nevertheless the effect of robbing the latter of dramatic intensity or intimacy. The death of Ruth Joyner's brother, for instance, is inserted almost casually within the paragraph (pp.266-7), and Miss Hare's terrible discovery of the death of her goat is recounted with a remote detachment:

> Even on the morning of the mistress's severest trial, the abstraction of a goat's mask continued to communicate. Even though the goat itself had become a skull and shred of hide in the ruins of the black and smoking shed... (pp.56-7).

But this muted and oblique presentation, while it effects a subordination of the purely factual element, results, too, in a certain distancing of the characters, and the impersonal tone often detracts from the vitality of the story. The reader becomes uncomfortably aware of the author who is too obviously evaluating the experience and investing it with a more subtle significance. He has moved outside the consciousness of his characters to adopt an impersonal and detached Olympian attitude, and his characters thereby lose a little of their own identity.

He is not always successful, either, in his methods of communicating these intuitive experiences to the reader. It is, of course, extremely difficult to describe an experience which is, of its very nature, pre-conceptual. The flash of intuition must be experienced; it is almost impossible to explain, except by analogy, or by a description of its effects

on the imagination. White has used both these methods in an attempt to communicate the experience to the reader. There are the image-sequences, which are a type of analogical description, and, in the case of the other characters, there is a dramatization of the elation and excitement that this intuitive discovery brings with it.

> I believe in this leaf, he laughed, stabbing at it with his stick. The winter dog's dusty plume of a tail dragged after the old man, who walked slowly, looking at the incredible objects of the earth, or at the intangible blaze of sunlight. It was in his eyes now. ... I believe, he said, in the cracks of the path. On which ants were massing, struggling up the escarpment. But struggling. Like the painful sun in the icy sky. Whirling and whirling. But struggling. But joyful. So much so, he was trembling. The sky was blurred now. As he stood waiting for the flesh to be loosened on him, he prayed for greater clarity, and it became obvious as a hand. It was clear that One, and no other figure, is the answer to all sums... (pp.496-7).
>
> The Tree of Man.

Mrs. Godbold, at the thought of the vision of the Chariot,

> ... was touched by the wings of love and charity. So that she closed her eyes for a moment as she walked, and put her arms around her own body, tight, for fear that the melting marrow might spill out of it... (p.549).
>
> Riders in the Chariot.

But has not White here described, rather than communicated this experience? Can his "poetic experience" be communicated successfully through the medium of prose? I do not think so.

White has come closer to it in the other passages I have quoted, where his technique is more nearly that of the artist and poet, but the fact remains that prose is not the most suitable vehicle for the communication of an imaginative experience such as White's characters enjoy, and in so far as this experience fails to be shared by the reader, the technique is unsuccessful.

There is a further question to be considered with regard to White's treatment of the intelligence and the imagination. In man's search for knowledge and self-fulfilment, has the rational intelligence any part to play at all, or is it to be completely subordinated to the imaginative and intuitive powers of the mind? This is a problem which must have occurred to any reader of these novels, and one which must without doubt affect their final significance and value.

Even as early as 1941, when The Living and the Dead was published, White has shown a distrust of the rational intellect, and has tended to associate the intellectual life with sterility. Elyot, in his dissatisfaction with life, "had taken refuge behind what people told him was a scholarly mind," and, in becoming a student, "a raker of dust, a rattler of bones," (p.170) had withdrawn as much as possible from life.

Muriel Raphael, too, is an example of those people whose life is governed by reason:

> She had realized, tested, why, she had
> proved the superiority of the objective,
> the intellectual approach...
> To know what you wanted, and to achieve

> it, this was desirable, just as to desire the unattainable was not to be encouraged ... She took great pleasure in realizing the rightness of her behaviour, the behaviour of a rational being. She glowed with this rightness, walking in the street, breathing at the window, eating her raw salads. Beyond the circle of this right existence other people moved in a maze of unco-ordinated instinct, lost in the tangle of their self-encouraged loves and hates... (p.275).

Both Elyot and Muriel are extreme examples of "the rational being," but the very exaggeration of their characterization indicates White's attitude towards a type which he describes in an article as "that most sterile of beings, a London intellectual."[1] In The Aunt's Story, Theodora maintains her clarity of vision by keeping aloof from the "reasonable world," and expects that the "ultimate moment of clear vision" will eat into "the hard, resisting barriers of reason." (p.290). Holstius tells her that she must submit to those who have come to take her away:

> "... But you will submit. It is part of the deference one pays to those who prescribe the reasonable life. They are admirable people really, though limited"... (p.299).

It is to be noticed here that there is a sense of superiority, of slightly contemptuous tolerance for those whose lives are not governed by a larger imaginative vision, and this tone reappears in Riders in the Chariot, where White's distaste for the ordered, rational existence is expressed clearly in his caricature of Mrs. Jolley.

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1 P. White, 'The Prodigal Son', Australian Letters, vol. I no. 3 (1958), p.38.

> Nobody would have thought to accuse Mrs. Jolley of not being rational at every pore... (p.57).

The only character in the novel who can in any way be described as an intellectual is the Jewish professor, Himmelfarb, but he repudiates the rational life, and declares that "the intellect has failed us." It is important to discover what this means. Himmelfarb's life has been a search for God, and a striving to reach a closer and more satisfying union with Him. Even in his early youth, after he has given in to physical debauchery, and has lost touch with his Jewish faith, he still wants desperately to reach God.

> Now he would have prayed, but could not. He was suffering and indeed continued to suffer from a kind of spiritual amnesia... (p.125).

Later, after he has moved to Bienenstadt, and has been received into the Liebmann's family, he is "again furnished with his faith" (p.139). But he desires more than this, and in an effort to approach closer to God, he begins tentatively to practise the occult mysteries of the old Kabbalistic books.

> For, by now, Himmelfarb had taken the path of inwardness. He could not resist silence... But he did, at last, unknown, it was to be hoped, to his rational self, begin fitfully to combine and permute the Letters, even to contemplate the Names.
> It was, however, the driest, the most cerebral approach when spiritually he longed for the ascent into an ecstasy so cool and green that his own desert would drink the heavenly moisture... Mostly he remained at a level where, it seemed, he was inacceptable as a vessel of experience... (p.152).

It is clear from this passage that Himmelfarb has tried to approach God, not by logical, discursive reasoning, the approach of philosophy, but by the old method of gnosticism. He is endeavouring to enter the realms of the supernatural by the practise of an occult form of knowledge, and this, it is to be noted, is not mysticism but magic.[1] In a passage which has already been quoted in a previous chapter, the author indicates, in cryptic terms, that Himmelfarb fails in this approach, and is confronted instead with the image of his own self-conceit (p.152). After such an experience, he renounces entirely this means of seeking after knowledge, and leaves the Kabbalistic volumes in Bienenstadt when he goes.

This tentative advance into the field of magic is then, what constitutes his use of the 'intellect' in the search for truth. But at no time is there evidence that Himmelfarb is significantly different from Theodora, or Voss, or the other illuminates whose searchings are carried out with the help of a powerful imaginative vision, and rewarded by intuitive flashes of understanding. Himmelfarb is not, in fact, an intellectual at all, so that his assertion that "the intellect has failed us," and his words to Miss Hare:

> I agree that intellect can be a serious handicap. There are moments when I like to imagine I have overcome it... (p.340).

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1 Cf. Appendix A at the end of Chapter Nine.

are statements made by a person whose search for God has never been made along the paths of logical and reasoned processes of thought. He, too, has always relied on his imagination rather than on his rational intellect to arrive at his goal.

White's distrust of the rational intellect may have arisen from a number of causes. It is reasonable to assume that he shared in the general feeling of revolt against rationalism, which was current in English and European thought, particularly after the first World War. The trend of intellectual and artistic thought moved away from ordered reason towards a more imaginative and abstract world. Extreme subjectivism, and the indulgence in an arbitrary, personal symbolism are characteristic of the writers and artists of this period, and since White was living abroad at this time he was probably much influenced by these trends.

The influence of Blake, too, cannot be overlooked, since so much of the philosophy of Riders in the Chariot has a close affinity with this poet's ideas. According to Blake,

> The spectre is the Reasoning Power in man, & when separated
> From Imagination and closing itself as in steel in a Ratio
> Of the Things of Memory, It thence frames Laws & Moralities
> To destroy Imagination, the Divine Body, by Martyrdoms & Wars.[1]

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1 W. Blake, 'Jerusalem III', Poetry and Prose, (p.533).

It appears, too, from a study of Riders in the Chariot, that White connects intellectualism with an arrogance of mind, incompatible with the humility which he considers to be so necessary in the journey towards self-knowledge. In the author's own voice, the rational life is dismissed, when, in commenting on Miss Hare, he remarks:

> She was quite mad, quite contemptible, of course, by standards of human reason, but what have those proved to be? Reason finally holds a gun at its head and does not always miss... (p.40).

And Himmelfarb, in explaining his work at the drill to Miss Hare, says:

> It is a discipline, ... without which my mind might take its own authority for granted. As it did, in fact, in the days when it was allowed freedom. And grew arrogant. And in that arrogance was guilty of omissions... (p.337).

Laura, as she is described in the following passage from Voss, may be considered as typical of all White's main characters:

> She would prepare her mind, shall we say, to receive revelations. This preoccupation, which was also quasi-physical, persisted at all times... The body, she was finally convinced, must sense the only true solution... Voss, (p.171).

A further explanation of this distrust of the rational intellect, and the insistence on the supremacy of the imagination, must lie in White's own temperament and capacity for character

creation. In spite of his belief in the superiority of this particular type of character, it seems to indicate a certain limitation in his imaginative power which detracts from the significance of his novels as a study of man. For White, it seems, is telling us that only the simple, unintellectual person can be genuinely sensitive and imaginative, and only such as these can approach to an understanding of God. Since, for him, understanding depends on the imagination and the intuitive power, this seems the only conclusion.

"Clever people are the victims of words," says Miss Hare, (p.340), and Himmelfarb agrees. Are we to conclude then, that in order to arrive at any understanding of ultimate truth, we must renounce the exercise of our rational intellect, and be guided solely by the inspiration which will arise from our imagination? No intellectual assent seems to be required; rather, logical conclusions are to be distrusted and ignored.

This interpretation seems to be the only one it is possible to draw from White's treatment of his theme, and it is doubtful whether many of his readers would consider it to be an adequate explanation of man's arrival at truth. He apparently does not consider the possibility of a harmony between the rational intellect and the imagination, where both are united in the search for a final vision of reality.

CHAPTER NINE

WHITE AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

As we have seen, White has concerned himself in his last three novels with man's search for God, and with the spiritual experiences of his characters. Although the latter have been presented to a large extent in the familiar terms of Christian imagery and symbolism, particularly in the case of Voss, where a Christian framework has been used in depicting Voss's and Laura's spiritual and emotional states, it becomes evident that the meaning and interpretation of religious belief and experience of these books are often widely divergent from, and sometimes quite alien to those of orthodox Christianity. In this chapter, I shall attempt to examine some of the chief aspects of the religious experience as presented by White, and so try to determine whether, notwithstanding his use of Christian symbolism, they can be found to bear a genuinely Christian significance, or whether they yield only a private interpretation.

One of the first points to be considered is the alleged mysticism of much of his work. This word is often used rather loosely to describe some experience or event which obviously diverges from the plane of naturalism, but within the Christian tradition, the essence of mysticism is the experience of direct personal communion of the soul with a personal God. On the whole, it does not seem that the "illumination" of The Tree of Man,

of Voss, or of Riders in the Chariot is of this type. Stan Parker's final moments in no way approach this union, and it might be well to recall his experience in order to be convinced of this:

> As he stood waiting for the flesh to be
> loosened on him, he prayed for greater
> clarity, and it became obvious as a hand.
> It was clear that One, and no other figure,
> is the answer to all sums... (p.497).

Here there is no sense of personal relationship between Stan Parker and God, nor is there any understanding of a personal God, "the One" being a vague, indeterminate name for the Divinity of Parker's experience.

As we have seen earlier, there is nothing, either, in the experiences of Voss or Laura which could properly be called mysticism, although there is much that is mysterious. Laura's delirium, which parallels the suffering and death of Voss, can only be explained, if at all, in psychic terms, and her prayers at this time read more like a commentary on Voss's and her own progress towards self-knowledge than like any mystical union:

> When she opened her eyes and said:
> "How important it is to understand the
> three stages. Of God into Man. Man.
> And man returning into God. Do you
> find, Doctor, there are certain beliefs
> a clergyman may explain to one from
> childhood onward, without one's under-
> standing, except in theory, until
> suddenly, almost in spite of reason,
> they are made clear. Here, suddenly,
> in this room, of which I imagined I
> knew all the corners, I understand!

> ... "Dear God," she cried, gasping for breath, 'it is so easy.' ... (p.411).

This corresponds to the illuminative experience of the other characters which, as we have already established, is an imaginative and intuitive one, arising from within the mind, rather than a revelation from without. And there is no evidence of any more personal relationship with God than this.

There remain, then, only the four illuminati of The Riders in the Chariot and of these, White himself says that all share "a vision of that world of which the Chariot is a symbol." But this vision cannot in the traditional Christian sense be termed mystical since such phenomena as ecstasies, visions and the like are not in any way the essential part of mysticism, which is the union with God, and they could just as well be absent.[1] They are acknowledged to be manifestations often accompanying mysticism, but are not necessarily connected with it. And it is just this personal union with God which seems to be missing in all except one of these characters.

Miss Hare's vision of the Chariot is, in so far as we can ascertain, a product of her own imagination:

> "Look!"
> And was shading her eyes from the dazzle of gold. "It was at this time of evening," her mouth gasped, and worked at words, "that I would sometimes feel afraid of the consequences. I would fall down in a fit while the wheels were still approaching. It was

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1 see Appendix A, at the end of this chapter, for E. Underhill's distinction between mysticism and magic.

> too much for anyone so weak. And lie sometimes for hours. I think I could not bear to look at it."
> "There is no reason why you should not look now," Himmelfarb made an effort. "It is an unusually fine sunset." ... (p.344).

She has no understanding of a personal God, and can "achieve the ecstasy of complete, annihilating liberation" (p.12), through her contact with the trees and rocks and water which she knows so intimately. In this pantheistic religious spirit, she loses herself completely in nature, and her individuality is dissolved into the larger world around her. This "annihilation" of personality is perhaps a characteristic of some forms of oriental mysticism, but is quite alien to the Christian mind.

Mrs. Godbold "had her own vision of the Chariot," but we are not told what this is, and have no reason to suppose, from a study of her character, that it could have any genuine mystical significance. And Dubbo's vision is an artistic, rather than a specifically religious one. Of the painting of Apollo,

> He realized how differently he saw this painting since his first acquaintance with it, and how he would now transcribe the Frenchman's limited composition into his own terms of motion, and forms partly transcendental, partly evolved from his struggle with daily becoming, and experience of suffering... (p.385).

> Shambling and fluctuating in the glass, he lay down at last on the bed, and, where other men might have prayed for grace, he proceeded to stare at what could be his only proof of an Absolute,

> at the same time, in its soaring blues and commentary of blacks, his act of faith... (p.387).

For Dubbo, his art and his religious experience are one and the same thing, and White has created a character who expresses his inner vision of reality through the medium of paint, but here again, there is no hint of any intimate union with a personal God. He does come to an understanding of Christianity through seeing Himmelfarb's suffering; he realizes for the first time the suffering of Christ, and what perfect love can be:

> So he understood the concept of the blood, which was sometimes the sick brown stain on his own pillow, sometimes the clear crimson of redemption. He was blinded now... (pp.463-4).

This knowledge, however, seems to have little influence on his mind, or on his relationship with God, other than to allow him to express this understanding in his artistic creations, which constitute for him a religious fulfilment.

Himmelfarb is the only one whose communication with the Divine in any way resembles mysticism. After his arrival in Australia, and his refusal to return to a life more suited to his intellectual attainments, he enjoys a solitary existence in his little home at Sarsparilla, and finds peace in the observance of his Jewish religion. White describes his attitude at prayer:

> By the time night had fallen, dissolving chair and bed in the fragile box in which they had stood, the man himself was so

> dispersed by his devotions, only the Word remained as testimony of substance... (p.220). Never before, it seemed, as he stood exposed to the gentle morning, was he carried deeper into the bosom of his God... (p.246).
>
> As he stood, reciting the Sh'ma and Benedictions, from behind closed lids, from the innermost part of him, the face began again to appear in the divine likeness, in the clouds of the little mirror, offering itself for an approval that might always remain withheld... and the shawl fell back from his shoulders in the moment of complete union... (p.448-9).
>
> But (Himmelfarb) did pray for a sign... 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.464).

This contemplative prayer, although it is presented in rather vague descriptive phrases, may have been intended to indicate a form of mysticism, since there is here a union of the soul with a personal God. White's earlier descriptions of Himmelfarb's search for a deeper religious experience suggest the occult, rather than the mystical, and apart from the passages quoted above, there is little to suggest that Himmelfarb is a mystic. He is a sincere, devout Jew, with a deep awareness of his dependence on God's will, and of his responsibility to atone for his own sins and for those of his fellow-Jews. His whole later life is lived in a spirit of dedication, and he is convinced, as he tells Ari, that "spiritual faith is also an actual force" (p.214). If anything, Himmelfarb's affinity lies rather with the ancient Jewish prophets, than with

the Christian mystics.

The religious experiences of White's characters have a vaguer, perhaps more archetypal significance which places them outside the mystical traditions of orthodox Christianity. The senses play a major part in these experiences, and the author seems to emphasize their importance when he chooses for his epigraph to Riders in the Chariot a passage from Blake in which Isaiah says

> "I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception, but my senses discovered the infinite in everything..."

This is an excellent exposition of the illuminates' and Stan Parker's approach to God, but it is in no way mystical, since, as Evelyn Underhill says,

> In mysticism the will is united with the emotions in an impassioned desire to transcend the sense-world, in order that the self may be joined by love to the one eternal and ultimate Object of love.[1]

White's presentation of his characters' sensitive and imaginative approach to Divine things is an experience which in Oriental religions may perhaps be considered a mystical one, but which cannot be considered so in the light of Christian tradition.

But White's divergence from ways of Christian thought and tradition is seen even more clearly in his handling of the

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1 E. Underhill, Mysticism, 4th Edition, London, 1912, p.84.

central teachings of Christianity in his two latest books. At first glance, the story of Voss appears to have been written from the viewpoint of orthodox Christianity, and Voss's return from his dream of self-glorification is brought about by his recognition of the Christian virtues of love and humility. The frequent references to the mysteries of Christ's suffering and death, of His humility and love for men, and the recurring Christian symbolism, seem to have been used as a method of evaluating Voss's inordinate self-sufficiency and pride. But there are certain elements in the treatment of this theme that lead us to suspect that the full implications of Christianity are either insufficiently understood, or only partially assented to by White.

The first of these, and one which I have discussed previously, is the uncertain quality of Voss's final understanding. The shift of focus leaves the issue of his journey towards self-knowledge and self-fulfilment unresolved, and this may be a reflection of the author's own hesitations.

But apart from this important point, there is something about the insistence on suffering and humility, and in their quality, that is not in accordance with Christian thought. Suffering as an end in itself, and in particular, self-inflicted suffering as a means of testing one's own powers of endurance, has never been part of the Christian practice of asceticism. Yet so much of Voss's experience seems to be of this nature,

and there is a strong element of masochism in his actions which is quite contrary to Christian thought. This is brought out clearly in the two following quotations:

When he refuses the hospitality of the Sandersons,

> his eyes shone with bitter pleasure... He had been wrong to surrender to sensuous delights, and must now suffer accordingly.
>
> ... Voss's jaws were straining under the hurt he had done to the others, and, more exquisitely, to himself... (pp.138-9).

And there is the same motive of self-inflicted suffering in Voss's shooting of the sheep dog, Gyp.

> Voss was grinning painfully.
> "I would like very much to be in a position to enjoy the luxury of sentiment," he said. Accordingly, when they made the midday halt, the German called to his dog, and she followed him a short way. When he had spoken a few words to her, and was looking into the eyes of love, he pulled the trigger. He was cold with sweat. He could have shot off his own jaw. Yet he had done right, he convinced himself through his pain, and would do better to subject himself to further drastic discipline... (p.284).

Humility, too, is given an inordinate importance in Voss's progress towards self-knowledge. It is undeniably a pre-requisite for man's approach to God, but in the Christian tradition it is a foundation for the more positive virtues of faith, hope and love. Nor is the acknowledgement of man's insufficiency the whole of it, for this must be balanced by the recognition of the omnipotence of God, and of man's dependence on Him. But Voss stops short of the movement towards God which

is the only thing that can give meaning and value to the virtue of humility.

> Only he was left, only he could endure it,
> and that because at last he was truly
> humbled.
> So the saints acquire sanctity who are only
> bones.
> He laughed.
> It was both easy and difficult. For he was
> still a man, bound by the threads of his fate.
> A whole knot of it... (p.414).

From the Christian point of view, humility such as this, as an end in itself, is meaningless.

As I mentioned earlier, Voss's last revealed thoughts before his death are absorbed in his relationship with Laura, not with God. And yet to describe this relationship, the author has used Christian symbols:

> But of greater importance were his own words
> of love that he was able at last to put into
> her mouth. So great was her faith, she
> received these white wafers without surprise... (p.418).

This obvious reference to the Communion service, which is used to describe Voss's relationship, not with God, but with Laura, results in a certain distortion of meaning, and has the effect of narrowing the significance of the Christian symbolism. There has been a tendency to do this throughout the story, and in spite of Voss's assertion in one place that he loves all men, he feels no responsibility for the sufferings and death of the members of his party. His understanding of the Christian doctrine of love does not appear to develop further than in a

deepening of his love for Laura, which has little of the supernatural about it.

It is difficult to know how far these inconsistencies in Voss were deliberate, but with Riders in the Chariot, there is no doubt at all that White has moved away altogether from the Christian tradition. Although the central theme of the story is unquestionably that of salvation, or redemption, it is not Redemption in the Christian meaning of ther term. The riders in the Chariot of Redemption are discovered to be those who have reached an understanding of the true meaning of love. It is love, and an acceptance of their own suffering and failure, which will save them in the end, which will ward off the evil threatening them, and enable them to attain to some final vision of the Divinity.

This doctrine bears little resemblance to the Christian belief in Christ, Who, by His suffering and death, redeems the entire human race. The illuminates redeem only themselves, although Himmelfarb, with his sense of responsibility towards his people, does make an attempt to atone for their sins, but realizes that it has "not been accorded to him to expiate the sins of the world." (p.469). But the overwhelming majority of men are to be left unredeemed, since they are incapable of rising above their materialism and mediocrity, and these White treats with unsparing contempt. It is only the few who have the vision and the sensitivity to understand what real love

means, and these few will arrive in the end at a wholly satisfactory understanding of the Divine.

One of the most puzzling aspects of this redemptive doctrine is that nobody apparently has the ability to change. The good are born into this category, and their clearer vision and capacity for understanding spiritual truths are wholly natural to them. Of the rest, there are some who are naturally evil, and the greater number who are merely indifferent, but both kinds are incapable of changing their natures, or of improving. They are unredeemable. J. McAuley says of the characters in this novel:

> Between the divisions of mankind there seems to be no prospect of any crossing of the lines. All are what they are, and act from their natures...[1]

It is extraordinary, too, how little the characters are aware of evil within themselves. There are certain exceptions to this, notably Himmelfarb, who has had to struggle against his own evil tendencies, and has become painfully aware of his failures, particularly his desertion of his wife.

> "I am afraid... I may have been guilty tonight of something for which I can never atone." ... (p.168).

> As he sat endlessly at his drill, it pained him to recall certain attitudes and episodes of his former life, which hitherto he had accepted as natural... Most often he remembered those people he had failed; his wife Reha, the dreadful dyer, the Lady from Czernowitz, to name a few... (p.229).

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1 J. McAuley, Review of 'Riders in the Chariot', Quadrant, no. 22, 1962.

And Miss Hare recognizes occasionally the perversity in her own nature:

> ... And Miss Hare was half ashamed for her own powers of emulating the cruelty of human beings.
> "It is I who am bad," she sighed half aloud... (p.92).

But the emphasis is for the most part on evil external to themselves. Miss Hare says to Himmelfarb:

> "I think you mentioned... that we were links in some chain. I am convinced myself that there are two chains. Matched against each other. If Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack were the only two links in theirs, then, of course, we should have nothing to fear. But." ... (p.343).

This division of the human race into the good, and the unredeemable, while it has found some acceptance among certain sects, as in Calvanism, runs counter to traditional Christian thought.

Of Christ, as Redeemer, White appears to have little real understanding, and this is more than apparent in the analogy he makes between Christ's suffering and death, and the crucifixion of the Jew, Himmelfarb. There is a close parallelling of all the events of Godd Friday; we have the betrayal by Rosetree, who is a combination of Pilate and Judas, the denial by Dubbo, and later, a deposition, in which Mrs. Godbold and Miss Hare play the part of Christ's mother and Mary Magdalen. Apart from the inartistic and too-obvious manipulation of these scenes, which can provide only a factitious climax, there must exist

for most readers, and certainly for the critics who have commented upon it, uncertainty as to White's implications.

It seems that he is making a close comparison between the failure of Christ and that of Himmelfarb; and there is, for White, some peculiar efficacy in failure, which is evident also in his other novels. Frank le Mesurier, in Voss, says

> The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming... (p.289).

Himmelfarb, at the end of his life, feels himself to be a failure, and Miss Hare, Mrs. Godbold, and Dubbo are regarded as such in the eyes of the rest of the world.

Christ suffered and died for love of men; Himmelfarb also offered his life out of love; both were failures, in that the world did not recognize or take advantage of their love. Only a few "chosen" individuals who see further than others, are able to penetrate the secret depths of this love, and to be affected by it. Miss Hare and Dubbo, after witnessing Himmelfarb's suffering and death are brought to a perfection of understanding.

For both Christ and Himmelfarb, the acceptance of their failure, and the love which they have shown for others, have a redemptive value. But this, while attempting to explain the analogy between them, does not justify White's distortion of the true significance of the Redemption. He does not appear to realize that Christ's death achieved anything more than a manifestation of love, and so sees no incongruity in parallelling

this death with that of Himmelfarb. But this is to deny the central belief of Christianity; that Jesus Christ, who is both God and man, suffered and died on the Cross, so redeeming mankind from the punishment due to their sins. Here, White has used traditional symbols which are capable of yielding in this context only an arbitrary interpretation.

There seems, though, to be a further purpose in all the elaborate parellelling of the Christian mysteries. In his choice of a devout Jew as the crucified, and of the non-Christian people who take the part of the other actors in the Passion, White is implying that the Christian religion, in so far as it is distinct from other religions, is unimportant. True religion is the religion of the heart, and loving-kindness and an imaginative vision are the only genuine essentials. One would have thought that this point could be made without the necessity of introducing a modern crucifixion, and the only explanation seems to be that White has attempted a synthesis of all beliefs; Jewish, Christian, Pantheistic, artistic. By introducing these characters with such widely divergent beliefs, and such differences of temperament, he has tried to show that they can all be united in the more perfect religion of humility and love.

It is a theme which is reiterated many times throughout the novel. Himmelfarb, in his re-enactment of the last supper, eats from "identical shank-bones;" one provided by himself in conformity with Jewish observance, and the other given to him

by Mrs. Godbold, in celebration of the Christian Easter. Mrs. Godbold, who, up to this time, could have been taken as an example of a believing, orthodox Christian, denies any value to the tenets of Christianity in her speech to Rosetree, which is worth quoting again in full:

> It is the same... Men are the same before they are born. They are the same at birth, perhaps you will agree. It is only the coat they are told to put on that makes them all that different. There are some, of course, who feel they are not suited. They think they will change their coat. But remain the same, in themselves. Only at the end, when everything is taken from them, it seems there was never any need. There are the poor souls, at rest, and all naked again, as they were in the beginning. 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.500).

At the end of his life, Himmelfarb, too, comes to the conclusion that there is no difference between religions, and that, basically, they are the same. At least, this seems to be the meaning of the following lines from his reverie before his death:

> Sometimes the faces were those of Jews, sometimes they were Gentile faces, but no matter; the change could be effected from one to the other simply by twitching a little shutter... (p.491).

This insistence on the unimportance of specifically Christian dogma and observance is reinforced by the treatment given to those of the minor characters who are practising

Christians. The Rosetree's daughter, the Reverend Calderon and his sister, Constable McFaggott, are all shown up in varying degrees as hypocrites, or victims of false piety. And Mrs. Jolley, who "attended the C. of E. ever since she was a kiddy" (p.64), is the most imfamous example of them all. It seems that, for White, the tenets of orthodox Christianity are largely superfluous, and its practice engenders hypocrisy, since one can arrive at a knowledge of God in a more direct way, through a perfecting of one's own peculiar talent and understanding. Dubbo replies to Mrs. Godbold's question,

> "Are you a Christian?"
> "No," he replied. "I was educated up to it. But gave it away. Pretty early on, in fact. When I found I could do better, I mean," he mumbled, "a man must make use of what he has. There is no point in putting on a pair of boots to walk to town, if you can do it better in your bare feet." She smiled at that. It was true, though, and of her own clumsy tongue, as opposed to her skill in passing the iron over the long strips of fresh, fuming, glistening sheets... (pp.319-20).

Besides his personal and arbitrary interpretation of the Christian story of redemption, and his rejection of orthodoxy, White reveals his separation from Christian thought in an implicit disbelief in immortality, and in his conception of God. It is a curious fact that in none of his books does an understanding of religion include any mention of a future life. White does not, of course, specifically deny the possibility, but, not only is it never mentioned, but no thought of it appears to have the slightest influence on the religious

experiences or the actions of his characters.

There is a finality about the dismissal of the minor characters which does not accord with any genuine consideration of a future life. Of Norbert Hare, he writes:

> Long after her father was dead, and disposed of under the paspalum at Sarsparilla... (p.40).

Of Tom Godbold:

> Mrs. Godbold left Tom embedded in the centre of the great, square building which a recent coat of shiny paint caused to glimmer, appropriately, like a block of ice... (p.322).

And Stan and Amy, after Mrs. O'Dowd's death,

> dared to think of the dead woman as she would mingle with the sandy soil down at the cemetery. It was fantastic. Mrs. O'Dowd, if they dared, in a narrow trench... (The Tree of Man, p.479).

The description of Voss's death is an even stronger implicit denial of any immortality of the soul:

> As for the head-thing, it knocked against a few stones, and lay like any melon. How much was left of the man it no longer represented? His dreams fled into the air, his blood ran out upon the dry earth, which drank it up immediately. Whether dreams breed, or the earth responds to a pint of blood, the instant of death does not tell. (Voss, p.419).

Miss Hare, as is to be expected, merely "disappears"; absorbed into the world of nature which she has so loved:

> In the friable white light, she too was crumbling, it seemed, shambling as always, but no longer held in check by the many purposes which direct animal, or human life. She might have reasoned that she had fulfilled her purpose, if she had not always mistrusted reason. Her instinct suggested,

> rather, that she was being dispersed, but that in so experiencing, she was entering the final ecstasy. Walking and walking through the unresistant thorns and twigs. Ploughing through the soft opalescent remnants of night. Never actually arriving, but that was to be expected, since she had become all-pervasive: scent, sound, the steely dew, the blue glare of white light off rocks. She was all but identified... (p.493).

That the "spirit" is not to be identified with the immortal human soul seems clear from the references made after the death of Dubbo and Miss Hare:

> The body of Alf Dubbo was quickly and easily disposed of... The dead man's spirit was more of a problem: the oil paintings became a source of embarrassment to Mrs. Noonan... (p.517).

> Though the matter was never, never discussed amongst (the Godbold children), they knew that Miss Hare was somewhere closer, and would not leave those parts, perhaps in poor, crumpled, disintegrated flesh, but never more than temporarily in spirit... (p.520).

And in Voss, the "spirit" is identified with "memory":

> "Voss did not die," Miss Trevelyan replied, "He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be. His legend will be written down, eventually, by those who have been troubled by it." ... (pp.477-8).

Of the four illuminates, only Himmelfarb's preparation for death could possibly be interpreted as an approach to another life, but even here, there is an enigmatic, even evasive quality in the language used to describe it:

> His ankles were wreathed with little anklets of joyous fire. He had passed, he noticed, the two date-palms of smoking plumes. By that light, even the most pitiable or monstrous incidents experienced by human

> understanding were justified, it seemed,
> as their statuary stood grouped together
> on the plain he was about to leave... (p.492).

I do not believe that White himself was fully aware of this contradiction in his novels; it may even be that he intended his characters to have a belief in a future existence, although the evidence of his writing is against this. But to a Christian mind, it seems puzzling that an author could make the problem of salvation the major theme of his novel, and yet have his characters evince no belief in a life after death. It could be that for reasons of delicacy or subtlety, the belief is not made explicit, but it is almost incredible that it would not be made evident in the actions and words of the characters. The idea of a future life of happiness does not seem to influence them in any way, and Himmelfarb is the only one who can be said, even in the widest terms, to desire a union with God after death.

The idea of God which the characters appear to entertain is not that of a personal God, a Supreme Being, separate from and infinitely superior to His creation. As I have said earlier, a case may be made out for Himmelfarb, as the possible exception, but it is evident from the description of Himmelfarb's death that this interpretation is not consistent. Does the author understand God to be a separate Being, or a state of mind? His characters all have a different conception of the Divine, according to the capacity of their minds, and their natural instincts, but for each, their understanding of God is in the

nature of an imaginative vision. In this, White is very close to the philosophy of Blake, and Bowra's words on the latter's understanding of the Divine in man make this clear:

> For Blake, God and the imagination are one; that is, God is the creative and spiritual power in man, and apart from man, the idea of God has no meaning. When Blake speaks of the divine, it is with reference to this power (of the imagination), and not to any external or independent Godhead. So when his songs tell of God's love and care, we must think of them as qualities which men themselves display, and in so doing, realize their full, divine nature... For Blake, God is the divine essence which exists potentially in every man and woman... He knew that by itself, love may become selfish and possessive, and needs to be redeemed by other generous qualities. It is in the combination of these that man is God.[1]

The affinity between the two writers is unmistakable. In this philosophy, each individual can find perfection in the use of his own powers of imagination and intuitive understanding, and can arrive at a perception of the Divine in his own nature. In spite of an appearance of Theocentricity, these novels are essentially humanistic. Man is the final evaluator of his own religious experiences, and Truth is not Absolute, but relative.

The ending of each of the novels serves only to strengthen this opinion, for they are a positive affirmation of the importance of this present life, and of man's unquenchable spirit and indomitable life-force. The emphasis is on the

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1 C.M. Bowra, The Romantic Imagination, Oxford, 1950, pp.34-6.

continuance of this life, "so that in the end, there was no "end" (The Tree of Man, p.499.), and Mrs. Godbold knew that "her arrows would continue to be aimed at the forms of darkness, and she herself was, in fact, the infinite quiver." (Riders in the Chariot, p.549). Laura, after her illness and suffering during Voss's journey, does not refer again to her belief in God, nor does such a belief appear to have any influence on her subsequent life. There is no explicit denial, but there is an undeniable return to purely human values, which contrasts strangely with the earlier part of the book.

It is important to notice that the final resolution of each of these novels negates the religious sense, and raises the problem of the real significance of the characters' painful progress towards a knowledge of divine things. What is the import of Stan's groping, his long journey towards God, and what value can his final "illumination" have, if his life ends with the disintegration of his body? The same question may justifiably be asked of the other two novels.

Does White, in point of fact, deal with the supernatural at all, that is, with something above, and superior to any state pertaining to the natural man? In spite of his use of religious terms, of God, of salvation, of Christian symbolism, there is little real evidence of the truly supernatural in his writings. Since man can redeem himself by his own powers of imagination and loving-kindness, there is no need for revelation,

or grace, or any special help from God. There is, in fact, an absence of any real sense of God, as He is known and loved by Christians.

Blake's words on the supremacy of the imagination, and its superiority to all forms of traditional and established religion and morality could well serve for White's own epigraph to Riders in the Chariot:

> I know of no other Christianity and of no other Gospel than the liberty both of body & mind to exercise the Divine Arts of Imagination, Imagination, the real and eternal World of which this Vegetable Universe is but a faint shadow, & in which we shall live in our Eternal or Imaginative Bodies when these Vegetable Mortal Bodies are no more. The Apostles knew of no other Gospel. What were all their spiritual gifts? What is the Divine Spirit? Is the Holy Ghost any other than an Intellectual Fountain? What is the Harvest of the Gospel & its Labours? What is that Talent which it is a curse to hide? What are the Treasures of Heaven which we are to lay up for ourselves, are they any other than Mental Studies & Performances?[1]

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1 W. Blake, 'Jerusalem: iv', Poetry and Prose, p.535.

APPENDIX A

Mysticism, by Evelyn Underhill

In Mysticism the will is united with the emotions in an impassioned desire to transcend the sense-world, in order that the self may be joined by love to the one eternal and ultimate Object of love; whose existence is intuitively perceived by that which we used to call the soul, but now find it easier to refer to as the "Cosmic" or "transcendental" sense. This is the poetic and religious temperament acting upon the plane of reality. In magic, the will unites with the intellect in an impassioned desire for supersensible knowledge. This is the intellectual, aggressive, and scientific temperament trying to extend its field of consciousness, until it includes the supersensual world: obviously the antithesis of mysticism, though often adopting its title and style.

... We may class broadly as magic all forms of self-seeking transcendentalism... The object of the thing is always the same: the deliberate exaltation of the will, till it transcends its usual limitations and obtains for the self or group of selves something which it or they did not previously possess. It is an individualistic and acquisitive science: in all its forms an activity of the intellect, seeking Reality for its own purposes, or for those of humanity at large.

Mysticism, whose great name is too often given to these

supersensual activities, has nothing in common with this. It is non-individualistic. It implies, indeed, the abolition of individuality; of that hard separateness, that "I, Me, Mine" which makes of man a finite isolated thing. It is essentially a movement of the heart, seeking to transcend the limitations of the individual standpoint and to surrender itself to ultimate Reality; for no personal gain, to satisfy no transcendental curiosity, to obtain no other-worldly joys, but purely from an instinct of love... The mystic is "in love with the Absolute" not in any idle or sentimental manner, but in that vital sense which presses forward at all costs and through all dangers towards union with the object beloved.

We at once see that these two activities correspond to the two eternal passions of the self, the desire of love and the desire of knowledge: severally representing the hunger of the heart and intellect for ultimate truth...

Chapter IV. 'The Characteristics of Mysticism',
(pp.83-5).

E. Underhill, Mysticism.
(London, 1911).

CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION

During the twenty two years which separate the publication of Happy Valley from that of Riders in the Chariot, White's understanding and treatment of his central theme of man's self-discovery and fulfilment have undergone considerable development. From the apathetic passivity and defeatism of his first novel, he has moved towards a far more positive and assured acceptance of the human situation, and of man's ability to achieve a satisfactory relationship with his fellow men. However, it is only with his latest novel that White seems to have arrived at a solution to the difficulties of isolation and self-discovery which had remained largely unresolved in his earlier work.

Man, in his striving towards an answer to the problems of existence, and for some sure grasp of reality, is able to arrive at a satisfying experience of the inner spiritual reality through the exercise of his imaginative vision. By this, and by the way of suffering, humility and the practice of loving-kindness, he is able to save himself from the material preoccupations and trivialities which threaten to engulf him. His firm faith in the force of the spiritual life will enable him to triumph over the mediocrity and positive evil of his world. Although the enjoyment of this inner vision makes him largely independent of the need for communication with others, he nevertheless shares

this experience with a few other people whose affinity with himself he recognizes by an immediate, intuitive flash of understanding.

This fulfilment of the spirit is arrived at only by those who are gifted with an unusually sensitive awareness of non-material things, and who enjoy a special type of imaginative vision. Their experience of the Divine involves their senses, emotions, and the powerful exercise of their imagination. For White appears to associate the illumination of his characters with poetic experience, since it is brought about by a special exercise of the faculty of intuition.

But there are a number of observations which must be made about White's solution to his central problem. It is to be noted that the religious experience which his characters enjoy is an essentially individual one, having a subjective value only, with no basis in objectivity. Since any common bond of traditional thought and belief is largely absent from the modern world, this is not surprising, but, as with all such experiences, it raises the question of objective validity and possible relevancy to others. This individual experience constitutes White's only positive answer to the evils of modern living, and as such, it might be expected to have a wider and more universal significance than in fact it is found to possess. If the Truth which is discovered and enjoyed by his characters is not Absolute, but relative to their own condition, how far can it be shared by the

ordinary man, or communicated to the reader? It seems that White still holds the existentialist view of life, whose relation to the present discussion is summed up by Herbert Read in the following extract from his book on The Philosophy of Modern Art:

> We have now reached a stage of relativism in philosophy where it is possible to affirm that reality is in fact subjectivity, which means that the individual has no choice but to construct his own reality, however arbitrary and even 'absurd' that may seem. This is the position reached by the Existentialists, and to it corresponds a position in the world of art that requires a similar decision. The interpretation (or even the "imitation") of reality was a valid function for the artist so long as it was agreed that a general and basic reality existed and was only waiting for revelation. Once this sense of security is removed (that is to say, destroyed by scientific analysis) then philosophy and art are public auctions in which the most acceptable reality commands the highest price.[1]

What criteria, then, are to be used for the evaluation of these private experiences? There is no objective criterion of judgement, and although it can hardly be denied that the life of the spirit is unquestionably superior to a more materialistic existence, is the reader persuaded that the illuminates are actually any happier than the contemned suburbanites, placidly watering their monstera deliciosa, and enjoying the comfort of their texture-brick homes? And further, have we any certainty

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1 H. Read, The Philosophy of Modern Art, London, 1951, p.21

that these members of the imaginative elite have not merely substituted one form of illusion for another, more exalted form? There is such an extremely subjective quality about their experiences which prompts the question as to whether a White character actually finds God, or whether he is merely travelling in a circle, bounded by the confines of his own imagination, where he finds only himself again. As I myself am convinced of the possibility of arriving at an objective Truth, and am a believer in Absolute values, this hesitation may perhaps be dismissed as a purely personal reaction to White's presentation of religious experience, but I am sure that there are many readers who would have serious misgivings as to how a life based solely on an interior intuition of reality can have any ultimate value.

His insistence, too, on the complete supremacy of the imagination over ordered reason must be questioned. The importance of the imagination as the source of inspiration cannot be denied, but he seems to dismiss the necessity for the use of the rational intellect in the task of organization and execution. There does seem to be an illusory quality about the sole efficacy of the intuitive faculty, and of the imagination, which is hardly satisfactory in a study of man. The final result is one of constriction, rather than of liberation, since the individual is confined within the limits of his own imagination, and seems unable to establish any real contact

with a wider world.

Since the favoured characters who are presented in White's last two novels are extraordinary persons, endowed with rare insight and appreciation of spiritual values, it seems that the experience which they enjoy must be limited to this type of human being, one possessed of greater sensitivity and spiritual awareness than that possessed by the ordinary man. These individuals possess this inner vision of Reality, and can attain an assurance of salvation and Truth because they are naturally capable of appreciating spiritual things; the majority of men do not, and have no hope of arriving at it. White has narrowed his field to include only those who belong to what A.A. Phillips calls "the aristocracy of the especially sensitive",[1] and this seems a pity, since it greatly restricts the possible universality of their experience.

But having lost his faith in humanity en masse, he has hope only in a spiritual coterie of chosen souls, who alone are capable of attaining some measure of understanding. These few, having detached themselves from society, remain aloof from it, and their pity for the maladies of our time is largely an abstract one. They live a purely private existence, and it is only the author who interprets the struggle between them and the debased values of society. Their isolation is a result of their character, and their need for communication and a sharing

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1 A.A. Phillips, 'The Literary Heritage Re-assessed', Meanjin, vol. XXI, no. 2 (1962), p.179.

of experience disappears as their satisfying inner vision develops. They know little of the ordinary day-to-day companionship, which is the foundation of social relations, and their intuitive, immediate and mutual recognition of one another as fellow-initiates is not by any means a very common or a normal method of communication. White seems to have solved the difficulty of man's isolation in a way which is highly individualistic, and which can really have little validity for the ordinary person.

These characters are untypical in their rather unreal simplicity of mind, and in their rejection of the usual way of life, they do not provide a satisfactory answer to the materialism which White so deplores. Their course of action seems to be an escape from it, rather than a coming to terms with it. White cannot apparently envisage self-fulfilment as a complex state of being, but only as a state of utter simplicity. Too many issues are avoided in this solution to make it a typical, or deeply satisfying answer to the materialism of our age. Everything is worked out rather too easily, and instead of a dramatic conflict of warring impulses within the individual, and an attempt to come to terms with the world outside himself, there is only a withdrawal, and the enjoyment of a private and incommunicable experience. In his latest novel, particularly, by his too-facile solutions he tends to ignore the real difficulties inherent in human nature, and in the human situation.

White's preoccupation with the theme of man's search for self-knowledge and self-fulfilment, witnesses to a real need in modern life, although his suggested solution to the problem is on the whole not a very satisfying one. His contribution, and it is no small one, consists in having made this theme articulate in Australian fiction, and in establishing another dimension to the hitherto almost purely naturalistic writing of our previous novelists. In this, and in his use of the symbolic and allegorical modes, he has opened the way for other Australian writers to explore and develop further the theme of man's spiritual experiences, and his contact with the Divine.

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