FOUR NOVELS OF PATRICK WHITE

by

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ABSTRACT

The intention of this thesis is to remedy the lack of serious critical attention given to the Australian novelist Patrick White. In Australia critical reaction has been tepid if not openly hostile, while in Britain and America only a small number of critics have dissociated White from his regional background and endeavoured to place him in a wider context. It is the purpose of the thesis to define this context, and to demonstrate that White is a highly original novelist in his own right.

Of White's total output to the present time of six novels, only four are discussed here—*The Aunt's Story* (1948), *The Tree of Man* (1955), *Voss* (1957), and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961). As an introduction to these four novels the first chapter attempts to define White's place in the 'Australian tradition', to give an account of his local critical reception, and to discuss in brief the nature of his central preoccupations as an artist and the forms in which they are manifested.

An examination of the four novels reveals the development of White's thought from the time when his artistic maturity became fully evident. From *The Aunt's Story* to *Riders in the Chariot* White is concerned above all with the besetting prob-
lems of the present time: the dilemma of the individual when faced with the break-down of traditional modes of thought, the possibility of meaningful communication, the problem of identity in a world of inner and outer chaos, and the origin and nature of evil in the world.

From a subjective view of the world seen through the isolated consciousness of Theodora Goodman in The Aunt's Story, to the massive fourfold vision of Riders in the Chariot, White has demonstrated an ever-increasing range of tone and subject matter. He records with deadly accuracy the Australian 'comedy of manners', and in this respect he can be said to be the first genuine Australian satirist. At the other extreme, White is capable of rendering the profoundest mystical experience.

Whether satirist or mystic, or mere observer and recorder of the world around him, White has at his disposal a lucid and poetic style which, though often startling in its unorthodoxy, is capable of conveying and enlarging upon the subtlest nuance of thought and image. In his style, and in his broadness of vision, lie White's chief claims to excellence. This study of the four novels, in chronological order, endeavours to demonstrate that underlying them is a constantly expanding vision, and that Patrick White is a significant and powerful novelist, and worthy of the closest critical attention.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

To state that Patrick White is an Australian novelist is, perhaps unconsciously, sufficient to raise before critic and reader alike the whole question of regionalism in literature, to a degree rarely encountered when the writer under consideration is, say, English or French or American. The appellation in the latter case signifies that, however much of a maverick he may be, the individual writer is nevertheless working within a body of literature which by common consent has gained its respectability, has justified itself on its own literary grounds, without recourse to any special pleading, or any narrowing of the critical eye. Whatever it may be that goes into the making of such a fully-fledged literary tradition, and the whole matter is infinitely complex, the question must be asked: to what extent should criticism of a writer who does not work out of any consolidated tradition differ from criticism of his English, French or American counterpart? To answer this question is in reality to define the function of criticism.

It has been thought up till fairly recent times that the distinction between scientific and aesthetic 'laws' lay in the nature of the realities each sought to define: science, at least in its 'pure' form, was concerned with the nature of
physical reality and the laws of cause and effect which, when discovered, could be adapted by man and used to control his environment; aesthetics dealt with no physical or tangible reality as such, but with the nature of beauty, its perception and expression through created forms. More recently, however, it is as though the aesthetic and scientific disciplines had somewhat perversely attempted to invade each other's territories. Hume's eighteenth century scepticism as to the 'discoverability' of any universal physical laws has been vindicated by recent discoveries that the nature of physical phenomena changes with the observation of them. Meanwhile, and the paradox is appealing, the formulators of aesthetic laws, in their awareness of the intangible nature of the creative act, have sought to put their definitions on an increasingly 'scientific' basis.

The main trends of literary criticism which have emerged in this century are alike only in their sidestepping of the creative act itself. Historical criticism, with its focus on the 'tradition', has emphasized in its approach to individual works of literature the total inherited body of literary achievement, and its genesis in the historical realities of the time. Archetypal criticism stresses the formal objectification in the work of various aspects of universal myth, and regards the writer as the medium through which the myth is perpetuated. Textual criticism seeks to discover the laws which are set up within the individual work itself, the sustaining tensions of the work
which find their embodiment in the inner structure. A considerable amount of criticism utilizes all of these methods in elucidating and assessing the individual achievement, but all too frequently it neglects to take into account the origins and ends of the creative act. Only in the light of these origins and ends can discussion of, first, background and influences, and second, the inner structure of the work itself, lead to a genuine understanding of the individual writer.

With these considerations in mind, it becomes obvious that to employ different standards of criticism for the Australian writer and for the European or American writer, is to attempt to limit arbitrarily the creative act. The truism that 'art knows no boundaries' can be better stated by saying that the fundamental experience of the artist is not limited by the various modes in which it may be disguised—modes of nationality, language, religion, cultural and social background, physical environment, etc. As these factors serve to describe and convey experience, are in fact localizations of experience, so do their embodiments in the various art forms serve ideally as the vehicle for the re-creation through the medium of art of a totality of experience. As no artist can encompass a totality of experience, so is the ideal unattainable; but any assessment of the worth and achievement of the artist must ultimately depend on the felt extent of the experience he re-creates. If the experience conveyed in the work itself is no more than a re-
presentation of one of the 'modes' of experience described above, then the significance of the work will be limited, no matter what refinements of technique may have been brought to bear. The effect which great art achieves in the perceiver, the release from contingency and the widening of experience, is not achieved when the vehicle or the means is held to be an end in itself.

It might be felt that the writer who lives and works in a country cut off from the mainstream of cultural development and trying hard to cultivate its own, will feel the need to come to terms with the demands of a new and as yet uninterpreted environment before venturing to extract from it a wider significance. In a country where Christmas is celebrated in midsummer and Easter in autumn, it might appear that even Christianity has declared itself inapplicable. At a less exalted level, it is often thought that the English language must be handled in a new and unprecedented fashion.

...mates, six o'clock closing, off-course betting—these words, each of them, hold attitudes and knowledges that are peculiar to Australia. The Australian writer attempting to see himself in relation to the world around him must refer to them and must count on his audience understanding their real, accustomed meanings. He needs an audience of fellows, peers—mates.1

Underlying this statement is the assumption that the European or American writer has already been given a terminology capable of expressing the profoundest problems he might wish to investigate, while the Australian writer, deprived from the start of
European culture and its American offshoot, must somehow battle along on his own, shunning the void outside and talking to his immediate circle of friends in a private terminology somehow reminiscent of the secret codes and nonsense languages of childhood. These are, of course, precisely the characteristics of hack writing in any country of the world—the narcissistic narrowness of vision, the anti-intellectualism, the curiously inverted ivory tower attitude—but are perhaps more of an impediment to serious writing in Australia than in Europe or America. Mixed up with these attitudes is a fear of betrayal, a fear understandably strong in a society devoted above all to the principles of 'mateship', to the forming of an acceptable identity, and to the setting up of barriers which a more Olympian eye might find irrelevant. It is no wonder that most Australian writers were and are

...devoid of interest in the questions with which great literature mostly deals: the larger questions of man's fate which rise way above contemporary politics or nationalisms or fashionable cliques.²

To an extent not yet fully recognized, Patrick White has taken the very factors thought to be most indigenous, and universalized them in his four major novels. He has shown as capable of endless expansion the problem of identity which is the besetting concern of Australia as it is of her northern counterpart Canada. For the first time, an Australian novelist has examined in all its aspects the reality of his country, and has made of it at the same time an embodiment of a universal reality. In this he is no different from any serious writer who translates the
immediate world of his own experience into the forms of literature, yet who so shapes and organizes this experience that the impressions he records and the forms in which they are recorded become the transparent symbols of a wider totality.

Even by the most subtle use of hindsight, it is difficult to incorporate Patrick White's work into an Australian literary tradition, for such a tradition can hardly be said to exist. Instead, over the past sixty years or so, the greater part of the literary output has served to reinforce a set of popular attitudes which, it is thought, if believed in hard enough, might prove an effective substitute for a reality somewhat less accommodating. Thus have sprung up the frontier myths of a rough-and-ready egalitarianism, an aggressive independence, a cult of masculine superiority enshrined in the tenets of 'mateship', and a distrust of hypocrisy, cant, and anything at all which smacks of the effete. The devastating exposure of this dream world when set against the realities of present-day urban Australia is White's satiric purpose, but above and beyond this satiric purpose is an awareness of the nature of the reality which brought the myths into being. This reality can be seen embodied subconsciously in the work of even those writers most ostensibly dedicated to the propagation of the myth.

Australia was settled initially for the most inglorious of motives. New South Wales and Van Diemens Land were established as penal colonies, last 'asylums' for the casualties of
the Industrial Revolution, not all of whom could be accommodated in hulks on the Thames. When by the 1840's transportation had virtually ceased, and with it the worst excesses of corrupt military rule, the society (which White depicts in *Voss*) set about consolidating itself. It did so, and nowhere so evidently as in its architecture, along the lines of a Georgian England which had long ceased to exist. More important, it inherited a tradition of Romantic thought which in turn informed the developing myth.

Even after the [Romantic] tradition ceased in England, many of its ideas survived here as foundlings unable to give any clear account of their parentage or origins. These ideas have become the staple of a good deal of contemporary Australian writing, though the authors are unaware of the part they originally played in a vanished system of ideas. 4

Vincent Buckley, while denying the emergence of these ideas in any real literary tradition, elaborates further the nature of the essentially Romantic attitudes which were carried over into the early literature, and which even now constitute two major, if unacknowledged, influences in Australian writing.

The two chief lines of influence seem to me to be a kind of utopian humanism or insistence on the soul's radical innocence, and a kind of vitalism, or insistence on releasing the basic powers of life. 5

Buckley sees the strain of utopianism manifested most clearly, in the early years of this century, in the fiction of Joseph Furphy and the poetry of Bernard O'Dowd, and carrying over into the contemporary period in the work of Vance Palmer and Eleanor Dark. Vitalism, with which Buckley associates an insistence on
primal energy and impulse embodied in the power of Will, appears most significantly in the work of Henry Handel Richardson, Norman Lindsay and Christopher Brennan. Whatever the validity of such a division in formulating common lines of development, it becomes evident after a reading of White's novels that in them the two strains come together, their notes sounded over and over again. Utopianism in White emerges nowhere as mere projected wish fulfilment, but rather as an implied belief that in this country of space and light, unencumbered by a long and painful history, exist the conditions for an ideal society. In The Tree of Man the setting itself, before being swallowed up by suburban Sydney, has many of the attributes of Eden, as does the Rhine Towers property in Voss and the grounds of Xanadu in Riders in the Chariot. In many of White's characters is seen a desire to escape from the contingent world into a purer state of being, where good and evil are non-existent and where individual identity is merged in a larger identity of all things. Always allied to this escape from contingency is a kind of mystical animism, the presence of a 'spirit' informing both animate and inanimate worlds and linking man with the nature around him. Ultimately, this animism is the source of the second major strain, the strain of 'vitalism'. White sees clearly that the sustaining source of energy lies in the natural world, and that without reference to this source the soul dries up and ends in destroying itself. The city is always in White a symbol of stifling malignance, of human nature turned against itself.
Urban and suburban life are hideous perversions of the utopian ideal, and in *Riders in the Chariot* they become embodiments of malignance and despair. It is a further characteristic of White's 'vitalism' that it draws no line between inner and outer realities, and hence the ideal state may appear to the divided individual as madness, as in the case of Theodora Goodman in *The Aunt's Story*, and many other characters in a whole gallery of 'eccentrics' who nevertheless are possessed of certain profound insights. But with White, vitalism, when a product of pure will, can only lead to destruction, as in *Voss*, where the lesson of humility is learned too late.

In White's work, the two strains, detachment and transcendence on the one hand, and vitality and intense engagement on the other, coalesce successfully only in rare instances, and always in the struggle between the two lurks the possibility of violence, which in turn forms a third major strain. In this respect too, White can be seen embodying attitudes which underlie a good deal of Australian literature.

The canon of our writing presents a facade of mateship, egalitarian democracy, landscape, nationalism, realistic toughness. But always behind the facade looms the fundamental concern of the Australian literary imagination. That concern, marked out by our national origins and given direction by geographical necessity, is to acknowledge the terror at the basis of being, to explore its uses, and to build defences against its dangers.

Violence, murder, blood, suicide--the disorders of the individual self when it cannot reconcile its own disparities--occur
throughout White's work. At times it even seems that violence as manifested in nature and the individual soul, itself constitutes a principle of the universe. Final tranquillity is attained only when the individual has escaped from or transcended the world of perpetual change; the whole process of destruction and re-creation has usually to be enacted within the individual before transcendence is possible.

In his discarding of the naivetes of the Australian myth, and his incorporation into the novels of those deeper forces and attitudes which brought the myth into being, White has so presented the Australian reality as to render it part of a universal experience. Like Joyce's Dublin or Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, his depiction in infinite detail of the physical and social realities of the Australian environment goes far beyond the regionalist's desire to merely record the attributes of a particular time and place. Working all the time through local manifestations, White destroys the pseudo-myth and sets about realizing the elements of the true myth, the human and super-human realities which transcend the limitations of space and time. In doing this he employs a vast range of references not only to the legends and lore of the original inhabitants of the country, but also to Christian, Hebraic and Greek mythologies. Nowhere in his mature work are these references arbitrarily imposed for the sake of added 'resonance'; often by the merest suggestion the infinite imaginative possibilities of
a given situation are made apparent to the reader, yet the situation itself remains the object of focus, as it must do if its significance is to be made clear.

This conception is likewise central to the work of the painter Sidney Nolan, with whom an appropriate comparison can be made. Both Nolan and White stress the universal element in the local manifestation. As Ian Turner says in his comparison of the two,

The purpose of this seems to be twofold. Firstly, to legitimise the Australian legend by equating it with Christian and pre-Christian mythology, thus removing it from the immediate context of radical Australian nationalism and the "unsophisticated", impersonal forms of popular culture and sanctifying it by giving it depth in time. Secondly, to personalise the legend by investing it with private as well as public meaning.  

Through the media of their respective forms, both White and Nolan stress the loneliness of the human figure in harsh surroundings; both work in terms of the intensely realized visual image which sometimes becomes a repeated motif; both temper a lyrical quality with an almost melodramatic harshness; both exploit the possibilities of violent contrast and startling juxtaposition; both have a power of infinite suggestiveness, of realities as yet unrealized. In his 'Kelly' series of paintings, Nolan imbues with epic possibilities the angular figure of Ned Kelly, the bushranger 'folk-hero'—and recalls strongly White's treatment of the explorer Voss. Nolan's 'Leda and the Swan' paintings consist of a series of antipodean variations
on the original Leda myth, recalling White's use of the Chariot of Ezekiel as the unifying symbol of *Riders in the Chariot*. It is a minor but telling fact that both White and Nolan have made their reputations abroad. The recasting of the Australian experience in newer, subtler, and more penetrating forms has been objected to by local philistines and aesthetes alike.

It would be tiresome and in the end unprofitable to record in detail the general critical treatment White has received in Australia. Although the literary journals have had perforce to devote considerable attention to his work, this has come about largely as a result of his 'discovery' by an admitted small group of English and American critics, and the encouragement he received from Eyre and Spottiswoode in London and the Viking Press in New York. The fact that, like Nolan and innumerable other Australian artists, White has spent considerable time overseas, and thus cannot qualify for the dubious status of 'dinkum Aussie', seems above all to rankle with most of the local critics. Many of these have taken most pleasure in pointing out that White does not really know his Australia, that he uses its settings and people as shaky vehicles for a host of exotic abstractions which he neglected to 'declare' on returning to his homeland. Jack Lindsay, scion of Australia's foremost literary family, sums up much of this reaction when he claims that most of White's "anomalous characteristics" derive from that fact that "his roots lie in English culture and society".8
What he has done in the Australian novels is to take external Australian conditions and details, and to infuse into them abstractions born from his English experience. If only he could come down to earth in Australia, the abstractions would become concrete, and his profound sense of what is truly evil in our world would at last find its effective outlet.9

But this sort of sniping from the sidelines, which in other places descends to a virulence usually reserved for politicians and homosexuals, is of no more importance than the usual parochialism encountered in the popular press of both England and America. But when, as is often the case, it is presented as serious criticism in the pages of the literary journals, it must be assumed that the values expressed in much Australian writing are exactly those of its official custodians. In one of the comparatively few counterblasts, John Rorke offers an explanation of the current critical myopia.

Apart from sheer stupidity, there seems no other way of explaining the consistent moral triteness and deadening lack of some sense of contingency which set the bulk of Australian writing apart. This is part of the price of our righteousness. Where it is supposed that there are no serious spiritual assumptions left, either to make or to question, one cannot expect a literature of high seriousness, high humour, or high dramatic order. Nor have we had it, and where the major critical tradition, grown up around the writing and sharing the common assumptions, has grown used to deluding itself about the qualities of the literature, one cannot perhaps expect it to deal even competently with an Australian novelist of the stature of Patrick White.10

What Rorke describes as the kind of "ritualistic thinking" operative in most criticism of White derives from a euphoric complacency, an unwillingness to admit of moral complexities and ambiguities in a land blessed with an inordinate amount
of sunshine and a convenient, though now diminishing, remoteness from the rest of the world.

It is unusual, wrong and corroding to have an Australian novelist insisting on matters of high destiny and the isolation of great presumption as being relevant to Australia, with the virtue of mateship and the moral simplicity of the "fair go" coming nowhere. And there is a quality about the Gothic which threatens solidarity. Australians have never before been asked to contemplate vast ambiguities in their country or in their souls.11

In his treatment of the "vast ambiguities" White is most obviously a child of his time. The diminishing power of political and religious ideologies to explain the nature of twentieth century man, the authority of the mob and the paralysis of the individual, the claims of relativism in the face of a desperate need for absolutes, the unprecedented bestialities inflicted by men on one another—all wear the distinctive hallmarks of the contemporary experience. White sums up the spiritual impasse in a short passage taken from the end of Riders in the Chariot.

A Jew has been 'crucified' in a factory yard.

It was possible to practise all manner of cruelties provided the majority might laugh them off as practical jokes. And there is almost no tragedy which cannot be given a red nose.12

Here is sounded the authentic note of existential anguish, already explored in detail in the novels of Dostoievsky, Proust, Kafka and Greene, in the philosophies of Kierkegaard, James, Heidegger and Sartre, and finding its current and most powerful expression in the Theater of the Absurd. Anguish comes about because the individual is no longer seen as an integral part of
a theocentric universe, but as the isolated embodiment of an egocentric universe. It is thus not possible to regard the disparities of the outer world as anything other than a reflection of the inner state of division, the alienation within the self. The 'aboriginal calamity' is re-enacted constantly within the individual, who cannot choose to follow one particular course or another offered by the outer world, because all alternatives exist within himself. White's tentative solution to the state of isolation and inner division is worked out for the most part in terms of acceptance as a means to reconciliation. According to temperament and environment, his characters embark on long journeys whose end is often the annihilation of self in a state of mystical union, which has no center but is all-pervasive. With their intense inner lives and their realization of the ultimate impossibility of communion with others, it is little wonder that they are solitary figures, and that "never in any of the books is a satisfactory human relationship portrayed". Only in *Riders in the Chariot* is communion shown as possible between certain individuals, but even here White stresses personal, rather than collective, fulfilment. In his acceptance of the mystical possibilities within the self, White avoids the nihilism and pessimism of much contemporary writing. At the same time, his depiction of the minutest details and shadings of physical reality, his exploitation of the worlds of sensation and feeling, provide a counter-balance to his abstractions. Between the abstract and the concrete, the tangible and the
intangible, White maintains a steady balance, in preparation for a final fusion, where all complexity disappears. This is the goal which White's characters seek; it is also the end White himself seeks through exercise of his art:

Certainly the state of simplicity and humility is the only desirable one for artist or for man. While to reach it may be impossible, to attempt to do so is imperative.14

It should be one of the attributes of a writer's style that it convey with a sense of inevitability the unique purpose which lies behind that act of creation. Certain aspects of White's purpose have been discussed; it remains to demonstrate how his style embodies at the same time the sense of ambiguity and complexity, and the "state of simplicity" to which the artist is directed. It has been remarked that, "in general, those who discover greatness in White's fiction, discover it in spite of, rather than because of, his style".15 It is on this question of style, as much as on the question of essential purpose, that White's critics seem particularly divided. But style and purpose are so closely welded to each other that it is impossible to discuss the one without implicit reference to the other. When no attention is paid to the prime purpose of style, that is, to convey a unique and personal vision, then White's style appears ornate and in many places pretentious. Many disagreeable comments have been made, of which the following is typical:
Although in all the novels there are passages of great power and beauty, much of his writing seems crabbed, awkward, and unnecessarily mannered. Even the most adulatory of his critics could not deny that the style is one thing the reader is never able to forget: to some extent the words seem to stand between the reader and the characters. When White's manner of writing suits his subject it is possible to be conscious of it and to enjoy it. When it seems forced and pretentious, it can be extremely irritating.\(^\text{16}\)

It might be argued that to be conscious of and to enjoy a writer's style points to certain deficiencies in both writer and critic--either the style is its own end and hence no longer a vehicle for the conveying of meaning, in which case the writer is at fault--or else the essential subject matter has gone over the critic's head, in which case he would be better employed elsewhere. To claim that White's style is never, in some places, jarring and over-indulged would be ridiculous; but a second reading of many passages, when the larger intentions have been grasped, shows with abundant clarity that every word, every image, every dislocation of syntax, points uniformly to the development of the idea or informing vision.

The anonymous reviewer in the TLS has claimed that,

There are times when he reminds us of the bower-bird of Australia, with his brilliant display of feathers and the hoard of glittering and dislocated treasures on display for his reader-spouse.\(^\text{17}\)

It should be noted that that the bower-bird itself is not brilliant but dowdy, but otherwise the image is appropriate. White himself says,
Writing, which had meant the practice of an art by a polished mind in civilised surroundings, became a struggle to create completely fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words.

The forms created are often at first glance strangely inapposite. In his effort to create a new rather than a merely derived reality, White builds up a complex structure which demands for its intelligibility a corresponding effort in the mind of the reader to disengage from habitual responses and to become aware of new relationships.

One is not dealing with an artificial set of mannerisms in a trivial sense, but with a peculiar mode of vision related to deep stresses and dissociations in the artist's outlook. This comes out in such formal characteristics as disturbed balance, with unresolved tensions, a certain "illogicality" in the distribution of emphases, an acceptance of ambiguity, an unstable or "revolving" view of the object, the use of shifting planes of reality.

The essence of White's style is that it is never static, but continually shifting from one mode of perception to another. By means of disjointed sentences, abrupt interruptions, the use of participles rather than finite verb forms, an almost baroque profusion of adjectives, deliberate archaisms, and, frequently, the barest possible understatement—by means of a verbal ingenuity which pays little regard to what are commonly accepted as the bounds of taste, White constantly opens up the created forms to the possibility of infinite expansion. At the end of Voss, the would-be artist Willie Pringle remarks:

"...The blowfly on its bed of offal is but a variation of the rainbow. Common forms are continually breaking into brilliant shapes. If we will explore them."
This exploration of new shapes occurs in White's novels at the primary level of style. White eschews the cult of understatement for its own sake, and the verbal paring-down which is so evident in much contemporary writing.

He writes in a mannered, elliptical and exalted prose in an age which has attached itself to plainness....Here grammar disintegrates. Images and allusions and symbols tumble along in the strange twilight of unformulated feeling.21

The groping of characters towards light and clarity, the fumb­lings and the moments of sudden release, are embodied exactly in a style which leads always to the new and the unexpected. The poetic density of White's writing is never gratuitous--White exerts a control whose prime function is to assert the presence of the unstated in the stated. In the process of opening up common forms, as well as in his preoccupation with states of mystical union, White is closer to Forster than any other single twentieth century novelist. Although different in many respects, the essential style of both writers could be described adequately as "the linguistic embodiment of a belief that the world is dual, that it is composed of both spirit and matter, which, though separate, are capable of being fused the one into the other".22

What has been said about Patrick White's style can be extended to include the form and structure of the novels as a whole. Form, the work of art in its total perceivable reality, and structure, the relations between its component parts, are
likewise directed ideally to the creating and conveying of a reality apprehended by the artist and objectified in his chosen form, but ultimately transcending both. The form and structure of each individual novel, like the form and structure of a symphony or a painting, are not ends in themselves. They represent in fact the tangible illusion of the intangible reality, and it is this latter reality which infuses life into the forms, and makes them organic. It is true that, without organic form, the work of art cannot exist—and White's novels can most properly be regarded as organisms. But, as Susanne Langer has pointed out,

An organism, which seems to be the most distinct and individual sort of thing in the world, is really not a thing at all. Its individual, separate, thing-like existence is a pattern of changes; its unity is a purely functional unity. 23

This is precisely what White's characters come to learn about themselves as "organisms", and why they seek to transcend form. Yet they do so, paradoxically, by exploring present forms and creating new ones—as if in discovering every possible combination, they will find revealed the meaning of the whole. White's style, structure and form are a further embodiment of the same paradox, the paradox of the organism which has no constant identity. The artist who is content to mirror external reality (and this has for too long been regarded as the prime function of the novelist) rather than to explore, question, and transmute it, will never encounter this paradox. Only when the apprehended reality or vision underlying the work of art is larger than the immediate world of contingent experience does
the reader, or the viewer, or the listener, achieve that release to which the artist and his created forms are directed. White's achievement is what Susanne Langer calls the "impregnation of ordinary reality with the significance of created form". At the same time as he has given form to his own subjective experience, so has he imbued with a perhaps hitherto unnoticed significance the whole of the world around him. A study of the four postwar novels in sequence will reveal the nature of this significance.
FOOTNOTES


4 Herbert Piper, "The Background of Romantic Thought", Quadrant, II, 1, 1957/58, p.49.


7 "Legend into Myth", Overland, No.23, 1962, p.39. It is worth noting that Nolan designed the striking dust-jackets for all four of White's major novels in the English editions.

8 Although the first six months of White's life were spent in England, and he returned for schooling at Cheltenham College and Cambridge, Lindsay's claim is untenable. White's great-grandfather arrived in New South Wales in 1826. For further biographical details see "A Note on Patrick White", Meanjin, XV, 2, 1956, p.223.


10 "Patrick White and the Critics", Southerly, XX, 2, 1959, p.66.

11 Ibid., p.70.


15 H.P. Heseltine, "Patrick White's Style", Quadrant, VII, 3,
1963, p.61. Heseltine's article does not in fact deal with style, but rather with technique—in particular, the recurrent image patterns that are built up within the novels.


22 "Patrick White's Style", p.72.


24 Ibid., p.73.
CHAPTER II

THE AUNT'S STORY

The Aunt's Story, the first novel of White's to gain any widespread critical attention, appeared in 1948, and was written immediately prior to the author's return to Australia. The first section of the novel, "Meroë", is prefaced by a quotation from Olive Schreiner's The Story of an African Farm.

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.\(^1\)

In many ways, the central problem facing Theodora Goodman is the same as that which faces Schreiner's heroine, Lyndall, whose inability to communicate with others derives from an intense preoccupation with self, and results in her destruction. But whereas Lyndall, immediately before her death, asks for a mirror, Theodora Goodman is afraid of mirrors—they are an intolerable assertion of the self from which she must escape. White traces, in The Aunt's Story, the stages of the journey toward fulfilment. As in The Story of an African Farm, the physical settings are only a small part of the "solitary land" of the mind. The individual consciousness encompasses all, and makes no distinctions: the reality and the illusion threaten constantly to become one, and the self struggles in vain to
impose order. No help can be forthcoming from others—the soli-
tary process goes on until the individual has absorbed or been
absorbed by all that constitutes the outer reality.

Throughout The Aunt's Story the inner and outer reali-
ties seek to become identified; no distinct line is drawn be-
tween what actually happens to Theodora and what happens within
her. Perhaps such distinctions are unreal, and deliberately
intended by White to be so, for all reality is no more than a
perceived reality, and the stream of experience which goes to
make up the individual self makes no distinctions between what
has its own tangible existence and what does not. At the same
time, however, that other part of the self which seeks to estab-
lish integrity and order within the stream of experience, to
wrest from it significance and spiritual or physical pleasure,
is vitally concerned with identity, its own and that of the
outside world. In an age only too familiar with 'final solutions',
mass graves, and the negation of individual worth and signifi-
cance, the loss of identity is that experience above all to be
feared. Yet identity implies fixity and restriction, from which
the self struggles to escape, and from this struggle emerge
tension and conflict. Thus, at the deepest level, alienation of
the individual from the outer 'reality' is seen as alienation
within the individual himself, as he struggles to reconcile that
part of the self which seeks to impose identity, constancy, with
that part which seeks to escape it. It seems as though the
deciding factor in the struggle will be the inner spiritual
and emotional resources of the individual. In the case of Theo-
dora Goodman, the outcome of her journey to the solitary land
"in which no fellow footfall is ever heard" is ambiguous, but
in order fully to understand the nature of the ambiguity, close
attention must be paid to the progressive stages of the journey.

At the beginning of the "Meroë" section of the novel,
Theodora is introduced immediately prior to her departure for
Europe. Free at last from the restricting influence of her
mother, she begins subconsciously to apprehend the dangers in-
herent in such a situation.

If she left the prospect of freedom unexplored,
it was less from a sense of remorse than from not
knowing what to do. It was a state she had never
learned to enjoy. Anything more concrete she
would have wrapped in paper and laid in a drawer,
knowing at the back of her mind it was hers, it
was there, something to possess for life. But
now freedom, the antithesis of stuff or glass,
posessed Theodora Goodman to the detriment of
grief.2

For the moment, however, Theodora does have something concrete
to hold on to, for "she was at most, but also at least, an
aunt".(5) Her relationship with Lou, the niece who has no ob-
vious connexion with either of her parents, is established as
important in this early stage of the novel; Lou, with the "thin
yellow face", is obviously Theodora's child, and the first in a
number of characters with whom Theodora obtains some sort of
spiritual insight. Where immediate kinship is tenuous, Theodora
and Lou are linked by something at once more tangible and more
mystical than blood. While the Parrotts are upstairs performing obsequies to the deceased Mrs Goodman, Theodora takes out the filigree ball from India and rolls it on the carpet for the children.

And though its hollow sphere was now distorted, and its metal green, when rolled across the drawing-room carpet the filigree ball filled with a subtle fire. (8)

At this stage Theodora is prevailed upon by her niece to tell her the story of Meroë.

The house and landscape in which Theodora was born and grew up are imbued with a feeling of primal and sometimes terrifying antiquity, the antiquity of rock, earth and fire, the beginning and end of all life. Only Theodora and her father sense the power of the black, gaunt hills which are older than Australia and all measured time, and which contain within them the mysteries of preservation and destruction.3

No one ever debated why their flat daily prose burst into sudden dark verse with Meroë in their mouths. Meroë, they said, in their flat and dusty local accents. Although the word smouldered, they were speaking of something as unequivocal as the hills. Only the hills round Meroë had conspired with the name, to darken, or to split deeper open their black rock, or to frown with a fiercer, Ethiopian intensity. The hills were Meroë, and Meroë was the black volcanic hills. (12)

Immanent in this landscape is the other Meroë, "a dead place in the black country of Ethiopia", (15) a heart of darkness in a continent which Theodora will never visit, but toward which her journey has already begun.
So that from what she saw and sensed, the legendary landscape became a fact, and she could not break loose from an expanding terror. Only in time the second Meroé became a dim and accepted apprehension lying quietly at the back of the mind. (16)

In defense against this country and its terrors which they but dimly perceive, Mrs Goodman and Fanny, the other daughter, lead lives of containment within four walls—Mrs Goodman bitter, cruel, withdrawn, and Fanny, bathed in the pink light of roses, adept at the piano and the waltz. Theodora, unable and unwilling to impose on the chaotic depths of Meroé the tinkling artifici­alities of social grace, moves, in her ugliness and angularity, ever closer to the center of this disturbing world.

After she had hidden in the garden, she looked at her hands, that were never moved to do the things that Fanny did. But her hands touched, her hands became the shape of the rose, she knew it in its utmost intimacy. Or she played the nocturne, as it was never meant, expressing some angular agony that she knew. She knew the extinct hills and the life they had once lived. (23)

She knew that the black hills "had once flowed fire". (52) To Violet Adams, a rather intense child she meets at boarding school, Theodora confides that she could write a poem about rocks "and fire. A river of fire. And a burning house. Or a bush fire". (46) And later, to the timid Huntly Clarkson, she expresses a desire to sail past a volcano, "preferably at night". (97)

Theodora, as White depicts her in this first part of the novel, is on the surface an unlikely character thus to be linked with the dark and the elemental. She is self-conscious to the
point of misery, aware of her physical unattractiveness, and hopelessly inarticulate. There is nothing other-worldly about Theodora—her physicality is perhaps the most effective counterbalance to Romantic vagueness that White employs. Physically, she is part of the black and yellow and tawny world around her, and her response to it is complete.

...the landscape was more communicative than people talking. It was close, as close as your own thought, which was sometimes heavy and painful as stone, sometimes ran lighter than a wagtail, or spurted like a peewit into the air. (25)

Relationships with other people are battles to be fought; Meroë has taught her, as the Marabar taught Mrs Moore, that conventional human relationships are in the end of no very great importance. But Theodora lacks also the ability to face herself: she turns away from the sallow, hated image in the mirror, to her a green sea at the end of the passage. The depths of her own being threaten to engulf her as much as the soughing pines on the north side of the house,

...which poured into the rooms the remnants of a dark green light, and sometimes in winter white splinters, and always a stirring and murmuring and brooding and vague discontent (13),

and which sometimes, when the wind blew, "flung themselves at the windows in throaty spasms".(15)

The elements of violence and destruction, implicit in the trees and rocks and fire with which she is identified, are likewise present in Theodora herself, most notably in her predilection for going out on her own with a rifle, despite her
mother's pronouncement that "it was unseemly for a girl to traipse about the country with a gun". (24) A crucial incident occurs when she comes upon a hawk at work on a dead sheep.

The little hawk tore and paused, tore and paused. Soon he would tear through the wool and maggots and reach the offal in the belly of the sheep. Theodora looked at the hawk. She could not judge his act, because her eye had contracted, it was reddish-gold, and her curved face cut the wind. 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. (25)

Theodora's momentary identification with the hawk is remembered some considerable time later, when she is out shooting with her brother-in-law and the hawk reappears, along with the same terrible impulse to destruction.

Theodora had begun to laugh. She knew with some fear and pleasure that she had lost control. This, she said, is the red eye. And her vision tore at the air, as if it were old wool on a dead sheep. She was as sure as the bones of a hawk in flight.

Now she took her gun. She took aim, and it was like aiming at her own red eye....After that Theodora often thought of the little hawk she had so deliberately shot. I was wrong, she said, but I shall continue to destroy myself, right down to the last of my several lives. (63/64)

This whole incident, particularly the last sentence, awaits further expansion at the end of the novel, but the theme of violence recurs again in "Meroë". In Sydney, after Mr Goodman has died, Theodora and her mother live together in a state of hatred, like two snakes, each waiting to consume the other.

It was the great tragedy of Mrs Goodman's life that she had never done a murder. Her husband had escaped into the ground, and Theodora into silences. So that she still had to kill, and
there were moments when she could have killed herself. (89)

At this time also occurs the Jack Frost case, in which a local pastrycook murders his wife and three children, and people felt sick, because "they felt his cakes in their stomachs."(91) Theodora's involvement in this particular horror becomes evident a little later, when she has brought her mother hot milk, and, on seeing in her the image of a white, bearded goat, discovers that "I have a core of evil in me that is altogether hateful".(115) But Mrs Goodman has control over a host of faces "lost or dead", the past which for Theodora was destroyed when her father died, and which cannot be allowed to live on in this mutual corruption of mother and daughter. Theodora picks up a thin knife in the kitchen.

Now she remembered most distinctly the last counsel Jack Frost had held with the meatknife in the kitchen....But this, she trembled, does not cut the knot....It has been close, felt Theodora, I have put out my hand and almost touched death. She could see its eyelashes, pale as a goat's, and the tongue clapping like a bell. (117)

Theodora realizes that "I am guilty of a murder that has not been done", and on the morning of "a vile murder in Cremorne", Mrs Goodman dies.

If one side of Theodora's nature is negative, inward and destructive, this side is complemented by other characteristics, rather more difficult to define. And here one must be wary of dealing in terms of mere opposites, of reducing the novel to a sort of psychiatric case-book, for the fragmentation
of personality which overtakes Theodora, and which is so carefully prepared for in this first part of the novel, is not a mere reduction of this personality into mutually exclusive compartments, but an attempt to render a shifting and infinitely complex whole. To her brother-in-law, Frank Parrott, Theodora "was always about to ask something that you could not answer". (8) The urbane Huntly Clarkson experiences much the same uneasiness, as he forces demands on her she is unable to meet.

Huntly Clarkson had loved as far as he was capable, and finished. Love and Theodora Goodman were, besides, grotesque, unless you were prepared to explore subtler variations of emotion than he personally would care for. (98)

Besides her father, who is never really more than a presence, the substance having long ago been destroyed by his wife, there are three people who are prepared in some way to answer the questions Theodora might pose, who understand the "subtler variations" she offers, and who in turn provide Theodora with a glimpse of the possible end of her journey. "The man who came to dinner" (he is not otherwise referred to) is a fossicker for gold, and a one time friend of Theodora's father, who turns up unannounced at Meroë seeking food. He is attended by rather obvious Old Testament echoes, appearing with his beard "like a prophet", (33) on a day when Theodora has just missed being struck by lightning. For Theodora, he "made the walls dissolve". (34)

"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."
No girl that was thrown down by lightning on her twelfth birthday, and then got up again, is going to be swallowed easy by rivers of fire."(37)

He disappears, promising to return,

But she knew already that he would not come. In all that she did not know there was this certainty. She began to feel that knowing this might be the answer to many of the mysteries. (38)

Thus is recognized the immanence of absence and negation.

Later, when Theodora leaves Meroë for the first time and goes to the Miss Spofforths' boarding school, Miss Spofforth, who is "the eldest, the headmistress, and the name", and who is also "ugly", "strange", and "opaque", tells Theodora, though she does not exactly speak,

Probably you will never marry. We are not the kind.... But there is much that you will experience. You will see clearly, beyond the bone.... Although you will be torn by all the agonies of music, you are not creative. You have not the artist's vanity, which is moved finally to express itself in objects. But there will be moments of passing affection, through which the opaque world will become transparent....(56)

Miss Spofforth's prediction is realized in the figure of the Greek cellist, Moraitis, whom Theodora meets and hears in Sydney. If the man who came to dinner has affinities with the Old Testament, fire and destruction, Moraitis belongs to the lucent, classical world of music and pure form. "He stood in the reflected roselight", the light of Fanny Goodman who played the nocturne to perfection; but, like Theodora, "all the time he was thinking with his hands, feeling his way from object to object..." Moraitis, however, is not concerned with the objects he feels, but with the feeling itself; not so much
experience as abstractions of experience: he is a musician.

It is not necessary to see things, said Moraitis, if you know. It is like this, she said. And yet, for the pure abstract pleasure of knowing, there was a price paid. (103)

For Theodora, the abstract pleasure of knowledge is destroyed by the thing known. For the musician, such is not the case, "because Moraitis was protected by some detachment of unconcern". (104) The man who came to dinner told Theodora that the things she saw would break her. Miss Spofforth intimated moments of transparence; but music, the most transparent of all things, becomes for Theodora an agony. Perhaps outside of madness the necessary wedge between feeling and knowing cannot be driven.

Theodora is trapped within the prison of the self. Like Moraitis, she stands in a room with two opposed mirrors in which the image of the self is repeated, unchanging, to infinity. She has realized that to do violence to her mother, who is not only an unbearable present but also a corruption of the past, would not break down the walls. And other strategies seem likely to be equally irrelevant:

At this point, Theodora sometimes said, I should begin to read Gibbon, or find religion, instead of speaking to myself in my own room. But words, whether written or spoken, were at most frail slat bridges over chasms, and Mrs Goodman had never encouraged religion, as she herself was God. So it will not be by these means, Theodora said, that the great monster Self will be destroyed, and that desirable state achieved, which resembles, one would imagine, nothing more than air or water. (122)

And Theodora is too inadequate to be either a saint or an
ascetic. Rather than attempt to follow any eight-fold way to Nirvana, all she can do is let time and distance gradually break down the barriers. The long journey, usually a search for the self, is for Theodora an escape from it.

This need for escape from the confines of the self is constantly emphasized in "Meroë". On a fairly simple level it is underlined in White's attitude towards houses and domesticity, the prisons in which men unknowingly lock themselves. The man who came to dinner explains his vagrancy:

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. (37)

Violet Adams, after marriage, "was already a prisoner in a house, arranging flowers in a cut-glass bowl". (52) Houses are a showcase for pretensions, and Theodora, somewhat grown in humility, writes to Violet,

At first I thought that I could not live anywhere but at Meroë, and that Meroë was my bones and breath, but now I begin to suspect that any place is habitable, depending, of course, on the unimportance of one's life. (80)

No one knew this more than Theodora's father, all but lost to the world:

More actual even than the dream of actuality was the perpetual odyssey on which George Goodman was embarked, on which the purple water swelled beneath the keel, rising and falling like the wind in pines on the blue shores of Ithaca. (59)

But Ithaca is treacherous, and the virtues of Penelope somewhat dubious. Mrs Goodman's world
...had always been enclosed by walls, her Ithaca, and here she would have kept the suitors at bay, not through love and patience, but with suitable conversation and a stick. (82)

Immediately prior to her departure for Sydney, Theodora is afforded a last glimpse of Meroë and her childhood in the form of Pearl Brawne, once a domestic at Meroe, now a drunken whore. Pearl suddenly remembers Mr Goodman, but Theodora "would have blocked her ears with wax. She could not bear to face the islands from which Pearl sang". (121)

The second section of the novel, "Jardin Exotique", presents on the surface an abrupt contrast to "Meroë". Some explanation of this section is afforded by the quotation from Henry Miller which precedes it:

Henceforward we walk split into myriad fragments, like an insect with a hundred feet, a centipede with soft-stirring feet that drinks in the atmosphere; we walk with sensitive filaments that drink avidly of past and future, and all things melt into music and sorrow; we walk against a united world, asserting our dividedness. All things, as we walk, splitting with us into a myriad iridescent fragments, the great fragmentation of maturity. 5

The apparent dissolution of the novel at this stage into fantasy and hallucination reflects exactly the "great fragmentation of maturity", the second major stage of Theodora's evolution, and the inevitable process of reorganization which must be undergone by the individual who seeks final order and unity.

At the Hôtel du Midi, in the south of France, the walls of identity and the self are breached. As Theodora sits waiting at the reception desk, she looks at the labels on her luggage,
"at all those places to which apparently she had been", (129) but of which the reader learns nothing. In "Jardin Exotique" the labels of identity have been torn off and strewn in a hundred different directions.

Unhappily there is a complete lack of artistic restraint in Patrick White's treatment of the thought processes of this maiden aunt who goes mad. He wants us to get behind the aunt's mind and share her madness with her. However honestly you try, you become positively fatigued with the effort.  

More reassuringly, Cecil Hadgraft writes that the Hôtel du Midi is "a picture of a separate community, all deranged, who do not invite you to become deranged like them, but merely show you why they are like that". In "Meroë" the reader is guided along fairly safe lines. Places and people do exist, and events do definitely occur which follow chronologically some causal pattern. In "Jardin Exotique", the reality of characters in a time-space order tends frequently to disappear: "it was obvious now that clocks were keeping another time". (145) What seems to be a picture of pre-war Europe in microcosm, a tiny world of disarrayed ex-patriates unaware of the holocaust about to descend, tends to turn into merely a subjective chaos, rags and wisps of Theodora's disordered imagination.

But if this process of reordering is chaotic, it is also a process of expansion, and with Theodora's consciousness always at the center of the novel, what was carefully exteriorized in the first part is now encompassed and brought wholly within. Theodora's identity merges with the identities of others,
whether they actually exist or not (White does not show "why they are like that"—causal reality as a touchstone here is next to useless). What is important to note is that major themes and motifs established in "Meroë" are not only maintained but intensified in "Jardin Exotique". The striking differences in tone and structure which cause one bewildered critic to ask: "Who would have thought that a theme so tragic could suddenly turn into exquisite comedy on the shores of the Mediterranean?"

these differences, though admittedly unusual in the novel form, effect no harmful dislocation in the underlying movement of The Aunt's Story, but rather enhance it. Theodora, imposed upon by the outside world in "Meroë", conditioned and shaped by it to the point of committing spiritual murder, is now herself the shaping agent, imposing upon the world her own image of it. That this image is dark and troubled is not surprising, considering the distance Theodora has come since Meroë, at least the Meroë of Fanny Goodman and the roselight. But the other Meroë, of black volcanic hills and subterranean energies, persists, to terrify and distract, in the forms of the \textit{jardin exotique}.

The pines of Meroë, which threatened in whispers to enter into the house itself, still remained on the periphery of consciousness; but here the consciousness has been invaded, and at the center of the rambling passages and cell-like rooms of the \textit{Hôtel du Midi}, the dry spiky forms of cacti and other exotica have taken root. This arid \textit{hortus inclosus}, with its
undertones of sexuality and sterility, brings together and objectifies in a single complex image the subconscious fantasies of the ugly, angular woman who was "also an aunt once". Theodora is faced with her own nakedness, the reflection in a mirror from which she can no longer turn. One of White's most powerful images, the jardin exotique controls and dominates the second part of the novel, and what would perhaps otherwise be merely sensational and voyeuristic is here perfectly objectified and divested of all crudity.

The garden was completely static, rigid, the equation of a garden. Slugs linked its symbols with ribbons of silver, their timid life carefully avoiding its spines. ... Walking slowly, in her large and unfashionable hat, she began to be afraid she had returned to where she had begun, the paths of the garden were the same labyrinth, the cactus limbs the same aching stone. Only in the jardin exotique, because silence had been intensified, and extraneous objects considerably reduced, thoughts would fall more loudly, and the soul, left with little to hide behind, must forsake its queer opaque manner of life and come out into the open. (134)

Here it is possible to achieve the moments of transparence intimated by Miss Spofforth, and which, as the headmistress knew, also have the power to destroy the identities of those who are solitary and inarticulate. The ambivalence of this process is such that whatever other identities Theodora might assume, the jardin exotique remains at the center, itself expanding, destroying and clarifying, though the result of this clarification is as yet obscure.

"Il y a toujours le jardin", said le petit. There was. She had forgotten.... Now she saw it was, in fact,
the garden that prevailed, its forms had swelled and multiplied, its dry, paper hands were pressed against the windows of the salle à manger, perhaps it had already started to digest the body of the somnolent hotel. (155)

In all this period of flux, where destruction and expansion are processes difficult to distinguish from each other, Theodora, victim of time which "continued to disintegrate into a painful, personal music, of which the themes were intertwined", (160) longs for permanence.

Now at the approach of middle age and knowledge, she regretted the closed stones, the fossil shells of Meroë. (160)

But even the permanence of the "closed stones" is found to be illusory: the same volcanic power underlying the hills of Meroë here causes an earthquake, during which the occupants of the hotel are thrown out on to the beach, and Theodora sees across the water a black island move. As in "Meroë", the threat of violence and unrest is again a recurring theme in "Jardin Exotique". There are references to Spain and the immanent collapse of Europe into war, but for Theodora this is all realized in a semi-imaginary past, where her most persistent alter ego is Ludmilla, General Sokolnikov's "sour" and "yellow" sister. The General, Ludmilla, Varvara, Anna Stepanovna, creatures of either the General's of Theodora's imagination--it is impossible to tell which--are nevertheless engaged in fighting off the Revolution; but in the end the noble Russian estate is destroyed, and the little pavilion where they all walked and intrigued is consumed
by fire. All that is left of the catastrophe is the gross General, for whom Theodora is a conscience. "Do not accuse me Ludmilla. It is far too late". (194) But the General is also Theodora's conscience. Ludmilla, when the revolution finally occurred, would not accept the implications of the mob that faced her:

"You could never accept fatality, not even when they showed you the gun". (160)

Theodora of course has experienced destruction by a rifle before. Similarly, the General suggests to the memory of his second wife Edith that she killed with a knife Mrs Arbuthnot, "an old lady whom she 'tyrannized'". (174) Violence and the past are not exorcized until the Hôtel du Midi finally burns to the ground in a last, consummate act of fire. While everyone else is hysterical,

Theodora's gestures were wood. She watched the revival of roses, how they glowed, glowing and blowing like great clusters of garnets on the live hedge. (240)

The ghosts of Fanny in the roselight and Mrs Goodman twisting her garnet rings, rise up in the last moment of destruction.

But before this, in an incredibly complex sequence of conversations and events, other situations from the past rise to the surface and attach themselves to various of Theodora's projections: Lieselotte, the German painter, takes a knife and slashes her paintings to ribbons; the young Greek girl, Katina Pavlou, is a curious fusion of Lou, Fanny Goodman, Violet Adams and Pearl Brawne (whose seduction among the nettles at Meroë
Theodora witnessed, and which is now to be re-enacted despite Theodora's vain attempts to prevent it); the American Mrs Rapallo invents for herself a daughter, a dazzling creature called the Principessa, who again is a fusion of Fanny Goodman and the niece Lou. The General's words are Theodora's own:

Very few people have the capacity for creating life, for being. But you cannot deny, Ludmilla, that one moment of my existence is intensely varied, intensely moving. (162)

But the General is a self-proclaimed artist. For Theodora, who can find no release in her illusory 'creations',

The landscape was a state of interminable being, hope and despair devouring and disgorging endlessly, and the faces, whether Katina Pavlou, or Soloknikov, or Mrs Rapallo...only slightly different aspects of the same state. (174)

Theodora says desperately, "It is most important to believe that relations do exist", (181) but relations can only exist where entities inhabit fixed and determinable positions.

The jardin exotique stands as the central image in this second section of the novel, serving much the same function as the black hills of Meroë in the first, to objectify the vast and perhaps malignant forces which combine to break down the barriers of individual identity. However, in "Jardin Exotique" another image of considerable importance is the nautilus, a fragile, translucent thing created by the sea, coveted by individuals, and destroyed finally by grasping, fumbling hands. The nautilus is borne in by Mrs Rapallo like some grail from the sea:
Though her composition was intended to be static, sometimes Mrs Rapallo advanced, as now. Her stiff magenta picked contemptuously at the fluff on the salle à manger carpet....But most marvellous was the nautilus that she half carried in her left hand, half supported on her encrusted bosom. Moored, the shell floated, you might say, in its own opalescent right. (149)

To General Sokolnikov, who for years has coveted the treasure from the other side of the shop window, Mrs Rapallo announces:

"...And I bought, yes, Alyosha Sergei, I bought my nautilus, of course I bought it. There it was. In full sail. I knew I had never seen perfection, never before, not even as a girl. And now it is mine. My beauty. I have waited all my life". (150)

Later, the General prevails upon his "excellent Ludmilla" to steal the nautilus from Mrs Rapallo's room, and Theodora "began to be obsessed by the same obsession as Sokolnikov, to hold the nautilus, to hold, if it is ever possible, to hold". (204) In stealth, she takes the precious object, but already she realizes that "the nautilus is made to break", (207) and when a furious Mrs Rapallo arrives on the scene, Theodora is helpless before her responsibility.

She could not explain. She could explain nothing, least of all her several lives. She could not explain that where there is more than one it is inevitable always to betray. (207)

The nautilus becomes "a desperate thing of hands", (208) and is smashed; the ideal, the abstracted beauty, is betrayed by the need to feel and to possess. Thus the possibility, by the end of Theodora's journey, of possessing something whole, something of complete integrity, is destroyed, and destroyed for a very
simple reason. Theodora has created her own world, and assumed other identities, but she is helpless before the power with which she has invested this world, the power in the General and Mrs Rapallo to crush the nautilus. As the General kindly explains, "You can also create the illusion of other people, but once created, they choose their own realities". (231)

When your life is most real, to me you are mad.9

The second quotation from Olive Schreiner which White places at the beginning of "Holstius", the third and final section of the novel, indicates a concept of madness which is to recur many times in the later novels, and which might be defined as an acceptance of the proposition that the disorganized mind is the only mind capable of fusing the inner and outer realities. The individual most commonly thought to be mad is the individual who has abstracted himself from the world of causal relationships, and perceives no laws but those of his own being, into which all else is assimilated.

The nautilus broken, the hotel burnt, the illusions exposed, Theodora moves to the end of her journey. In "Holstius" she gets off a train somewhere in the middle of America, and follows a road through country reminiscent of Meroë until she reaches the farm of the Johnsons. At this stage, "Theodora Goodman suggested that she had retreated into her own distance and did not intend to come out". (249) She has discovered that "although she was insured against several acts of violence,
there was ultimately no safeguard against the violence of personality." (254) The violence of "Jardin Exotique" spent, in an act either of total assimilation or total abnegation, she has destroyed her tickets home to Australia, and introduced herself to the Johnsons as Miss Pilkington.

This way perhaps she came a little closer to humility, to anonymity, to pureness of being. (263)

Not even the brief but intimate relationship she experiences with the boy Zack can keep her at the Johnsons' house, however—an orange marble clock on the mantelpiece has identified the house with the temporal world of flux, from which she must finally escape. The road leads on, and Theodora at last arrives at a clearing, in which stands a deserted house which "in no way suggested that it might be carried away by the passions of fire", (268) and in which "there were no clocks", but only "a time of light and darkness". (269) In this house, where distinctions are not observed, Theodora attempts to achieve permanence. At this stage Holstius arrives.

A figure of calculated ambiguity, Holstius might be regarded as a reincarnation of George Goodman and a spiritual return of Theodora to Meroë; or he might be the ultimate distillation of all Theodora's varied identities, a composite projection of all her fantasies; or he might be the final confrontation of Theodora with the truth of her own existence; he might even be her final betrayer and destroyer. No one of these interpretations is mutually exclusive of the others: Holstius
sums up all aspects of Theodora's being, and is himself the ultimate disengagement she has been seeking. What distinguishes Holstius from all the other creations of Theodora's mind is his quiet and inevitable solidity, which Theodora herself cannot really believe in.

Just as the mind used and disposed of the figments of Mrs Rapallo, and Katina Pavlou, and Sokolnikov. And now Holstius. She watched the rough texture of his coat for the first indications of decay. (271)

Whereas Mrs Rapallo and the others appeared and disappeared in a formless diffusion, Holstius is continually present until such time as Theodora no longer needs him, when he has reduced and refined Theodora to a state of pure and exclusive polarity, the concentrated tension of which is new to her:

"Why", she asked, "am I to be subjected to these tortures? I have reached a stage where they are not bearable". (271)

Holstius' words to Theodora following this are for her a final resolution of her agony, and constitute perhaps the single most important statement in the novel.

"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. 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 lives is evidence of this". (272)

Holstius is no deus ex machina; he himself provides no final solution, no mystical vision, no ultimate union with a Design or a Purpose. Theodora is simply made aware that the state of
being is a state of tensions, disparities, irreconcilables, which she in her madness is finally taught to accept. While resisting the idea that one thing is irreconcilable with another, the self is divided; acceptance of this irreconcilability is essential to serenity, the pure state that Theodora has at last achieved, at the expense of her own identity, by the end of her journey. Theodora, in the clinical sense, is probably quite mad. Her acceptance of the interdependence of illusion and reality means that the distinctions between them that sanity postulates and then leans on are to her no longer meaningful. She is baptized by water into a new vision.

The water made her laugh. She looked at the world with eyes blurred by water, but a world curiously pure, expectant, undistorted. (273)

In this vision Holstius is left behind. The irreconcilables, once accepted, become complements.

Out of the rusted tin welled the brown circles of perpetual water, stirring with great gentleness the eternal complement of skeleton and spawn. (279)

Now she can accept her other lives, which "entered into each other, so that the impulse for music in Katina Pavlou's hands, and the steamy exasperation of Sokolnikov, and Mrs Rapallo's baroque and narcotized despair were the same and understandable". (278) She accepts the spikes of the thistle, with their associations of sexual deprivation; more important, she can accept "the pathetic presumption of the white room"(279) to which she is led by Doctor Rafferty, after the final encounter with "those who prescribe the reasonable life". (278) In this last
scene of the novel, Theodora observes from outside her three captors, who are arranging within the four walls of the abandoned house her willing abduction.

So Theodora Goodman took her hat and put it on her head, as it was suggested she should do. Her face was long and yellow under the great black hat. The hat sat straight, but the doubtful rose trembled and glittered, leading a life of its own. (281)
FOOTNOTES


3. Their function as a central image in The Aunt's Story recalls Forster's use of the Marabar Hills in A Passage to India, and they are described in a remarkably similar way.

4. Again A Passage to India is brought to mind—Godbole knows that Krishna never comes, yet he is serene in this knowledge.

5. The Aunt's Story, p.127.


CHAPTER III

THE TREE OF MAN

In 1943, having completed *The Aunt's Story*, White returned to Australia after an absence of some sixteen years. In 1958 he writes of his homecoming:

In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is...and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves.¹

It was White's task to attempt to fill the "Emptiness", and to come to terms with the bourgeois philistinism, the material ugliness, the country itself. *The Tree of Man*, the result of eight years' work, appeared in 1956, and met with wide critical acclaim in Great Britain and the United States, even venturing into American best-seller lists. It is not difficult to explain what in this novel appears to be a radical departure in all ways from the techniques and themes of *The Aunt's Story*. White has turned away from the closed world of one individual's mind to a lengthy and sustained exploration of two main characters and a host of minor ones, together with the society they evolve and the forces that control them. Compared with the conciseness and brevity of *The Aunt's Story*, *The Tree of Man* is long and
rambling, and without the complexity of image and the ambiguity of idea which characterizes the earlier novel. The setting of *The Aunt's Story* is "the country of the mind"; that of *The Tree of Man* is quite definitely Australia—a tract of straggling bushland which over fifty years or so becomes slowly swallowed up by the metropolis of Sydney. The style is less convolute and less obscure, and is directed towards an 'epic simplicity'. In short, White "turns away from the strange, the curious, the accidental, the pressure of abstract ideas, to the elementals".2

Two words used frequently by reviewers in describing *The Tree of Man* are 'epic' and 'elemental'—in the context of the novel, vaguenesses at best, and surely meaningless when contrasted, as in the above quotation, with "the strange, the curious, the accidental". The contrast here set up seems to be one between the subjective vision, as is the case with *The Aunt's Story*, and the broader, less selective vision which animates *The Tree of Man*, but such a contrast suggests itself only when means rather than ends are taken into account. Technically, the two novels present sharp contrasts, as in style and point of view—not because the underlying visions of the two novels are opposed, but because the same vision is being approached from another direction, in order to be further clarified. The problems posed in *The Aunt's Story* center round the integrity of the self and the nature of its relationship to the outside world; the vehicle for White's exploration of
these problems is a singularly imaginative, and at the end, de­
ranged, woman, and the story ends with her complete retreat
from objective reality. In The Tree of Man the problems are the
same, but the vehicle has changed: in this case the main charac­
ters are two quite ordinary people, who, it is clear, will not
suffer Theodora's derangement, but who will enable White to
pursue his question as to whether the self is indeed an iso­
lated entity, or whether it cannot exist in a solitary state,
but must seek communion with others like it. The same problems
of the self, the distinctions between the reality and the dream,
the inevitable corruption by time, the possibility of transcenden­
ce--these problems occupy White as much in The Tree of Man as
in the earlier novel, and are just as central to it. It is the
foreground that differs.

Stan Parker carves himself a home out of the wilderness,
and brings to it his wife Amy. They raise two children, both of
whom bring disappointment and mortification. They experience
the calamities of flood, fire and drought. They drift apart--Stan
goes to the war, Amy commits casual adultery. They come together
again; they grow old and die. If these are the 'elementals'--
loneliness, hardship, sorrow, joy, death--then they are equally
present in The Aunt's Story. The difference lies in the fact
that Theodora is her own world, and the different patterns that
emerge are those of her own mind and imagination; in The Tree
of Man these 'elementals' are given their embodiment in a change-
less yet ever changing setting, an outer world whose exterior reality regulates to a great extent the interior reality, and with which the individual must come to terms. Such, in effect, are the qualities of much epic and frontier literature—the omnipresence of the land, the elements, the external world—the immutable forces which must be fought and lived with, if the individual is to remain persuaded of the significance of his own existence. Otherwise madness will result—not the final, clear vision of Theodora Goodman, but the sort of madness which afflicts the two Parker children, the debased and inferior visions of reality which are born of resentment and fear.

Central to *The Tree of Man* is an underlying animism. To a certain extent this quality informs all of White's work, but it is strongest here, and it explains perhaps why this novel was so popular in the United States, where the myth of the frontier has persisted with unusual strength. The idea of a vast, virgin land, of men heroically wresting from it their living, carries an appeal not only in Australia, but in any country where the predominant shift has been from rural to urban life. Inherent in the conception of the frontier is a belief in the pre-eminence of man, man as an individual fighting with determination tempered with stoicism to establish himself, and man as a social unit, linked to his fellow men by a simple, rigorous, and usually Christian code of values. There may or may not be any empirical justification for such a mystique, but to apply its
principles to *The Tree of Man*, as most reviewers and critics have done, is to simplify dangerously the meaning of White's animism and his belief in the sustaining role of nature in the individual life. To begin with, there is no place in White's world for moral simplicity, at least in so far as this simplicity consists of unthinking adherence to any rigid distinctions between good and evil. His concern throughout the novel is for the individual consciousness and not the group consciousness. The moral issues of the novel stem from the individual's attempt to reconcile with himself rather than with the outer world. In marked contrast to the frontier myth, the individual, rather than struggling with and finally dominating the environment, is far more frequently reduced to an ineffectual and ant-like stature. Finally, of course, Durilgai is far too close to Sydney to be any sort of real frontier, and on this proximity depends much of the basic rhythm of *The Tree of Man*. Floods and fires and other natural disasters play a large part in the novel, and these do indeed impart an 'elemental' quality—but the focus is always on the individual characters, so much so that frequently the disaster at hand seems really to be a projection of the individual's own inner crisis. This relationship between inner and outer worlds gives strength and significance to what in Australian literature (and other frontier literature) is too often mere sentimental effusion and naive nature-worship.

White's animism is no simple God-in-Nature, but a belief
in the tremendous power in nature and the natural forms not only to order and elevate the conscious life, but frequently to terrify and reduce it. As was apparent in *The Aunt's Story*, the forms of nature are never stable: they constantly threaten to break open and dissolve, to overwhelm and to divide into an incomprehensible multitude of sensations. By these forms the conscious life becomes infinitely meaningful, because capable of projection in a virtually limitless outer world. The city, with its constant nightmarish qualities, can provide no meaningful counterpart to the inner life because it is a sort of incestuous progeny, destructive of itself and of those who create it and live in it. As Housman wrote, "The tree of man was never quiet", and White's use of this line for his title, and the presence of trees throughout the novel, but most particularly at the beginning and end, indicate his belief in the continuity of human life when placed in its natural context, that of things which themselves are born and are destroyed. Ray Mathew states that

The Australian writer's emphasis on the bush is part of his search for simplicity: the symbolism is so obvious—man alone with woman, or stock, on earth, on a great stage under the sun's spotlight.

White is uncharacteristic of most Australian writers in his careful avoidance of the obvious and in his refusal to reduce an already dangerously over-used setting to a vehicle for naive wish-fulfilment.

It would be misleading, however, to regard the natural symbolism in *The Tree of Man* as the clue to the final meaning
of the novel. This natural symbolism, intimately connected with White's animistic-impressionistic descriptive techniques, should be divorced from the more 'literary' symbolism of the other novels. The dividing line here is necessarily indistinct, but generally speaking the symbolism in the other novels is of two basic kinds—either some ordinary, hitherto undistinguished object or event is given a heightened significance in terms of the novel's development, or certain objects or events have recognizable parallels with extraneous bodies of thought or invention (mythology, religion, etc.). These two methods, the single heightened image or image pattern, and the allegory which brings to the novel added significance from outside, are used in *The Tree of Man*, but to a lesser degree than the 'natural' symbolism, the sort of symbolism which is inherent in all natural things, and which resists formalization by the intellect. On one level, this is the symbolism of "sermons in stones";

Mary McCarthy defines it in structural terms:

> If the story does not contradict the outline, overrun the pattern, break the symbols, like an insurrection against authority, it is surely a still birth. The natural symbolism of reality has more messages to communicate than the dry Morse code of the disengaged mind....the writer must be, first of all, a listener and observer, who can pay attention to reality, like an obedient pupil, and who is willing, always, to be surprised by the messages reality is sending through to him. And if he gets the messages correctly he will not have to go back and put in the symbols; he will find that the symbols are there, staring at him significantly from the commonplace.5

This perception of natural symbolism amounts to a touchstone in
any discussion of White's characters, and it is particularly relevant to a valid account of Stan and Amy Parker; it also explains the formal qualities which distinguish *The Tree of Man* from the other novels.

To state that the natural symbolism does not lead directly to the final meaning of the novel is not to imply that it is unimportant. Floods and bushfires and droughts are major watersheds in the lives of the Parkers and their neighbours, but they do not reveal for Stan and Amy the inner core of significance which both are seeking within the limits of their own lives. The extraordinary phenomena of nature merely counterbalance the ordinariness of the cabbage patch and the daily ritual of milking; the upheavals and violent changes within the natural order serve to underline its essential sameness and continuity. The natural process is haphazard, ragged and diverse, and derives from no order which is based on a pattern of fixed and regular repetition—even the cycle of the seasons is at most a series of unpredictable fluctuations, and this lack of definable pattern is mirrored in the abrupt transitions from winter to summer, from flood to drought, which occur in the action of the novel. It has been written of Australia that

No tidy chessboard landscapes suggested order as a law of nature—a law, which, in any case, could have commanded little acquiescence from the men who fought nature with axe and dam. The rhythm of the seasons is less lullingly obvious in a land of evergreens—and in Australia that rhythm is
further broken by discords of flood and fire and drought.\textsuperscript{6}

In their attempts to discover or impose some sort of structural unity, critics of \textit{The Tree of Man} have frequently confused the natural symbolism with an attempt on White's part to give the novel formal shape. In his review, H.J. Oliver says,

One thing is certain: that the symbol rightly plays an all-important part in the construction of the novel. Exactly as in E.M. Forster, plot is replaced by rhythm; and rhythm is created not only by the division into parts (corresponding to the seasons of the Australian year, as the sections of \textit{A Passage to India} correspond to the seasons of the Indian year?) but also by the recurrence of mention of the cows, watching ants, ducks....the fragment of coloured glass, and--particularly--the white rose. One can only regret that the symbols do not always 'expand' in the full Forsterian way, accruing more and more meaning as the story goes on.\textsuperscript{7}

To proceed from a comparison with Forster to this sort of regretful conclusion is not only to misread the book (it is not divided into parts corresponding to the seasons, for reasons stated above), but to misunderstand completely White's intentions. The rhythm of the novel lies in the movement of an ever-increasing number of people along the road from Bangalay and Sydney, until the drabness of the city finally levels everything but the trees; in the gradual slowing up of the action as Stan and Amy grow older; in the constant shifting of states of mind; in the final irregularity of the thought process itself. In those places where White does attempt to impose a purely structural unity, the novel usually suffers, and seems to be untrue
to itself. At least one critic has objected along these very lines:

...the dramas of fire, flood, drought, isolation and the struggle to make a living are introduced one by one as stock ingredients....what makes it more striking is that all the cliches of Australian fiction are there and that none of these cliches is really relevant to the theme.8

Hope's antagonism to Patrick White is a byword in Australian literary circles, and to reduce the fires and floods to "stock ingredients" is merely irresponsible, but White's tendency to rise to the apocalyptic, particularly in these 'set pieces', does detract to a certain extent from the slow, full movement of the novel, and, more important, it removes the reader from the avowed center of interest.

White said in 1958 that

...I wanted to try to suggest in this book every possible aspect of life, through the lives of an ordinary man and woman. But at the same time I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people, and incidentally, my own life since my return.9

Admittedly, a writer's statement of his intentions need not be crucial in a final estimation of his work by a critic. The serious work of literature, once disengaged from the bosom of the writer, assumes its own reality and cannot be circumscribed by any disavowals, explanations, or any other like attempts to put the imp back into the bottle from whence it came. But in the case of The Tree of Man the difficulties to be met with in fulfilling the author's stated intentions have not been com-
pletely overcome in the novel itself. White's use of the word "ordinary" is curious. Elsewhere in his fiction ordinariness, in the sense of dullness and unimaginativeness, is castigated roundly by the author. If Stan and Amy Parker are to be regarded as ordinary in this sense, then a story told from their point of view must either be dull in the extreme, or else stagger under the weight of the author's own intrusive presence. Neither occurs in *The Tree of Man*, but a degree of manipulation does stand out in this novel, a manipulation which is avoided in the others, if only by virtue of the fact that the viewing consciousnesses are to a greater or lesser extent extraordinary. The manipulation, then, takes the form of a frequent artificial heightening of significance, an investing of "ordinary" things such as cabbages and cows with inspirational, almost mystical qualities. Flaubert of course used the same technique for satiric purposes in such instances as the famous description of Charles Bovary's hat, and White himself uses the same satiric device in his other novels, even, in places, in *The Tree of Man*. But whereas this heightening of significance is acceptable when the intention is comic or satiric, or when the perceiving consciousness itself is endlessly receptive and inventive, the result in *The Tree of Man* is a frequently strained and sometimes unintentionally comic tone, as in the visit of the Parkers to a performance of "Hamlet" in Sydney. White's style of writing, directed as it is to the exploration of the significance inherent in what is usually considered insignificant, depends for
its effect upon a more rigid process of selection and exclusion than is practised in *The Tree of Man*. In the other novels the process of selection is obvious, and is in fact the cause of considerable critical disfavour—it is commonly felt that Theodora Goodman, Voss and Laura Trevelyan, to name only three, set about creating their own closed worlds which have little relation to a common or shared reality; but White can chart these 'closed' worlds with a greater insight into their own significance and their own logic than is possible with the world of Stan and Amy Parker, where frequently too much is imposed by the author, too little created by the characters themselves. Perhaps this is the result of White's stated premise that mystery and poetry "alone could make bearable the lives of such people". "Ordinary" people have little use for mystery and poetry, and it is when White makes of Stan and Amy people of more than ordinary sensibility that the potential of the novel is fulfilled and the central relationship between them becomes one of depth and subtlety.

Stan Parker brings a wife to share his house and property because it is somehow inevitable and necessary that he do so, but this necessity is no guarantee of genuine union. At this stage, such an abstraction is as useless as the silver nutmeg grater given to Amy Fibbens at her wedding, and which disappears after they have taken in their first guest, the bible salesman. Amy has shown him the object:
'That", she said, "is a little silver nutmeg grater that was given me at my wedding."

"Ah, weddings! 'Ow we try to insure ourselves!"10

Neither Stan nor Amy, though given consolation by each other and by the land and the house they are settling into, can escape their own essential solitude, the same barriers of the self which Theodora Goodman finally succeeded in breaking. The release they find in each other is temporary and in the end inadequate, not through any selfishness or egotism, but because the man and the woman seek in two different directions their release and fulfilment.

Stan Parker was named by his mother after the African explorer, and, appropriately enough, Stan's whole life is a search and a "melancholy longing for permanence",(8) but permanence does not come from merely settling in the same place for a number of years. The same daemon which is to drive Voss into the desert causes the struggle within Stan Parker between "the nostalgia of permanence and the fiend of motion".(8) To this struggle Amy is a necessary adjunct. She is part of the farm, part of the immediate surrounding world from which Stan does not need physically to escape, but which provides an image of his own imprisonment.

His[land] was, by this time, almost enclosed. But what else was his he could not say. Would his life of longing be lived behind the wire fences? His eyes were assuming a distance from looking into distances. (38)

To a certain extent this imprisonment is brought about by his own inarticulateness.
All words that he had never expressed might suddenly be spoken. He had in him great words of love and beauty, below the surface, if they could be found. (35)

But it is not through his inability to formulate conceptually what he only apprehends that Stan feels himself "a prisoner in his human mind"(46)--words to him are little more than fumbling substitutes for the experiences they are supposed to convey; what he seeks is the sudden coalescing of experience into a single point of illumination, a drawing together of the multiple strands of his existence. Certain incidents--the violent storm in which he is knocked to the ground, or the fire at Glastonbury--bring him close to the final vision, which is, however, not granted him until the day of his death. But for the moment, 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. (38)

That his soul does not harden into the desirable shape is enough reason for people to avoid Stan Parker, "except on direct practical matters".(225) He returns from the war, in which the only recognition afforded him is the blasted-off hand of an unknown enemy. At home, his son and daughter are strangers to him, and Amy's efforts to penetrate only cause the further removal of her husband who "no longer believed anything could be effected by human intervention".(214) Despite Stan's increasing tendency to isolation, his struggle with a God he cannot understand and who refuses to reveal himself is not brought to a head until Amy's adultery, after which Stan goes through his own dark
night of the soul on the streets of Sydney, spewing his God into the gutter in complete and abject despair. But through Amy's act and his own rejection, further barriers are broken: "the opposition of God, which was withdrawn from him, left him altogether light and carefree", (352) Now, at certain times, everything in his life is seen with an "extreme simplicity of goodness", but at others there remains "some secret source of knowledge that he had failed to discover yet". (406) Stan's detachment at this stage is almost complete:

He had gone one step farther into himself....He had a habit of looking at people as if there were something standing behind them, and they did not like that, because they could not very well turn round to make sure. (409)

On the day of Stan's death two minor events occur. An evangelist comes by the house with a handful of tracts and promises of the glories of salvation, and Amy finds in a patch of weeds the silver nutmeg grater. These tokens of earthly glories and heavenly rewards are rejected.

I believe, he said, in the cracks in the path. On which ants were massing, struggling up over an escarpment....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. (497)

It is inevitable that Stan's general remoteness and detachment in the last chapters in the book lend a certain gratuitousness to his final apotheosis, in which, through lack of sufficiently dramatic presentation, the reader is disinclined
to believe. But whether or not Stan's death and illumination are credible, his remoteness, his essentially solitary condition, is of major importance to the novel for the light it throws on the character of Amy. If Stan carries the burden of White's evolving metaphysic, it is Amy who emerges in all the sharp textures of a completely realized character. It is to Amy, directly or indirectly, that most of the events in the novel happen, and it is through her that the other characters come to life. She observes and is affected by the comings and goings of people. She lacks detachment, and is for the most part lost if she has nothing to do. Lacking the powers of concentration and the rigours of mind that might allow her to escape the claims of the contingent, she absorbs but does not retain. Initial indifference and absentmindedness give way continually to often terrifying involvements with others. She experiences death many times, but of her own we learn nothing, perhaps because she has already suffered a kind of death in her own marriage, and afterwards remains inviolate because part of somebody else.

The woman Amy Fibbens was absorbed in the man Stan Parker, whom she had married. And the man, the man consumed the woman. That was the difference.

It did not occur to Stan Parker, in the suit of stiff clothes he wore for town, that his strength had been increased by an act of cannibalism. (29)

If Amy's individuality has been absorbed into her husband's, she has not thereby found release, but rather a passive dependence from which, in Stan's absence, she seeks to escape,
...as if she might acquire the secret in performing a ritual of household acts, or merely by walking about. Suspecting she might find grace in her hands, suddenly, like a plaster dove....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. (28)

Like her husband, Amy is inarticulate, but in her case the inability to translate experience into words and to communicate with others is a formidable barrier to understanding; unlike Stan, her understanding is dependent on her knowing, and potential knowledge is defeated by her shyness and awkwardness with others.

...she longed for some knowledge of which others were apparently possessors; I have nothing, I know nothing, she suspected....If you could ask, she said. People, however, put on that face of surprise and disgust when cornered by requests in any way peculiar. She knew, because she had adopted it herself. (366)

Amy's absorption in Stan effectively prevents her from knowing and thus understanding her husband. Disengagement from him leads her not to detachment and possible revelation, but to a desperate search for the substitute knowledge of adultery. Early in their marriage she discovers that "if she could have held his head in her hands and looked into the skull at his secret life...she might have been placated", (150) but only at the end does she discover that her lack of knowledge must be attributed to something more than her mere inability to penetrate far enough.

Then she realized it was finally between herself and God, and that it was quite possible she would never succeed in opening her husband and looking inside, that he was being kept shut for other purposes. (432)
These "other purposes", whatever their nature, for the continued impenetrability of others, are not to be discovered by Amy's rational enquiry. To her neighbour, Mrs O'Dowd, the question of two people existing together is reduced to terms of a mathematic simplicity, but the expression of her equation is too confused for Amy to follow:

"...it is the men that make the round figure, even such men as we may have, some of us, they know how much of what we know to be right, is right. It is not enough to know that something is right if you cannot add an subtract an get the final answer". (195)

But for the O'Dowds, the comic counterpoint to the Parkers, communal existence is a gamble for self-preservation, for the maintenance of jealously guarded individual boundaries. In the Parkers' case, boundaries are unwillingly accepted by habit, which "comforted them, like warm drinks and slippers, and even went disguised as love". (342) In the final analysis, the purpose for which the essential separation of Stan and Amy is ordained remains for them a mystery.

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. (367)

Several of the many minor characters in *The Tree of Man* deserve attention for the various attitudes they exhibit towards the same questions of individual isolation and the barriers to understanding. They suggest in turn different avenues of approach to the final vision of reconciliation which Stan Parker is granted. It is Amy, however, who has commerce with
these other inhabitants of Durilgai, and to her their possible message is couched in terms of violence and destruction. The most important of them are Doll and Bub Quigley, known to the Parkers from the earliest days, before Durilgai was even named. Doll, referred to as Miss Quigley by most people on account of her convent education, is "an unfinished totem of which the significance was obscure". (47) An air of importance and respect surrounds Doll because she can write and is capable of certain abstractions.

They brought her things to write, and she sat at a deal table beside a lamp...and made little elegant passes with her hand above the paper, to form the words in air first, and her family looked on in pride and wonder, waiting for her to write. She was above them, though she did not choose to be. (48)

Together with her at all times is her idiot brother Bub, who "had to be taken and poured from here to there, and contained by other people, usually the will of his sister Doll". (48) Doll is not only an interpreter, she is also a figure of absolute simplicity and disturbing goodness, and takes upon herself whatever sins others would be rid of. "She would have suffered willingly if she had been asked. But she was not". (116) The cross she must bear is Bub, the grown man who dribbles and examines the skeletons of leaves with a fixed intensity. He appals and exasperates Amy Parker, who realizes, however, that "this ageless man was singularly free". The intimate connexion between the brother and sister is made abundantly clear by Doll herself, when Amy mentions that Bub should be put away. "Then
the voice of Doll Quigley said, 'He is what I have got.'"(358)

But even for Doll, reduced by the end of the book to the "essence of goodness", love proves to be an impossible burden. She kills her brother, "and Amy Parker saw that Doll Quigley was in hell". (484) The whole sequence can bear many interpretations, but can perhaps best be seen as a further variation of Stan and Amy's relationship. Like the O'Dowds, Doll and Bub complement each other, and in both of these relationships there is an undertone of violence, suggesting at least one possible 'purpose' for the basic separateness of Stan and Amy. Essential freedom and essential goodness cannot coexist, but must turn on and destroy each other. But Stan and Amy perpetuate rather than destroy, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the distance which separates them—a theme which White is to examine more closely in Voss.

Living a life of almost total obscurity, Mr Gage, husband of the postmistress, first attracts Amy Parker's attention when she comes across him crouched down on the road intently examining an ant. She "could have crushed with her foot such ecstasy as remained in his ant-body", but

the intensity of his eyes penetrated the woman's unconscious face almost to the darker corners, as if here too was some mystery he must solve, like the soul of the ant. (103)

Later it is discovered that Mr Gage has hanged himself on a tree, and another "mystery" has resolved itself in an act of violence. He has left behind a group of paintings which Mrs Gage
permits a number of ladies to see. In the midst of the macabre hilarity aroused by this impromptu exhibition, Amy Parker suddenly sees translated into the forms and colours before her a possible solution to the mystery: one painting is of a woman with arms upstretched toward the sun, and down in one corner the scratched-in skeleton of an ant, "and out of the cage of the ant's body a flame flickered, of luminous paint, rivalling in intensity that sun which the woman was struggling after". (290)

For the first time in her life, Amy knows without understanding, but the relevance to her of the artist's expression before he died is not clear—this is left to Stan to interpret just before his death. Gage is a character who figures prominently in White's work—the artist who cannot withstand the power of what he has created.

The power of the irrational and the unprecedented is equally evident in the figure of Madeleine, a visitor from Sydney to the rich Glastonbury estate at Durilgai. To Amy, Madeleine is a strange dark person who rides by the Parker farm on a horse, a figure of vague splendour and mystery who, in a dream, presents Amy with a secret diamond. During the fire which destroys Glastonbury, Stan Parker goes in to rescue her. He is inevitably tempted by her, but on getting her outside, he discovers that her hair has been burnt off, and she is "holding her head, and falling even to all fours". (184) In a parody of Mr Gage's humility before the ant, Madeleine is now the debased
vision, a creature incapable of the significance both Stan and Amy have attached to her. But her effect on the Parkers is never entirely lost, as White points out in a scene late in the novel when Thelma, herself incapable of significance, visits her parents with her friend, the aging Mrs Fisher, who was once Madeleine. Neither Stan nor Amy takes her seriously, but chords are struck which neither can ignore, for Madeleine with her red hair has risen phoenix-like from the flames of Glastonbury. But "poetry that has been used up must go out of the system".(448)

Madeleine and the Armstrongs of Glastonbury are but the advance guard of a steadily encroaching Sydney, whose representatives from now on are not so easily routed as they establish themselves ever more securely around the Parkers' property.

For Mrs Parker was by now unknown to some. She drove on through scenes she could no longer claim.(139) Thelma, the Parkers' thin, prim daughter, soon leaves for Sydney, and in the school of middle class pretensions Thelma proves to be an eager learner—she "soon knew what to do".(259) But she can never know enough, and the terror of not being accepted, of being ultimately turned on and despised for her origins and her ignorance, forces her to deny her childhood and her parents. She changes her name to an eminently acceptable Christine. But if Sydney is slowly invading Durilgai, Durilgai can fight back; if no attempt is made by the individual to break down the barriers of selfishness, they will sometimes be broken down from outside.
Down that road, of loosed barbed wire and dusty trees, which was only distinguished by her parents living in it, she drove at anxious speed, remembering an old man who had exposed himself once in some bushes. To live in a sealed room, she feared, would not exclude all the incidents that must be excluded. (385)

Yet despite White's bitter attack on so much of what Thelma represents, she is also instrumental in providing yet another avenue to eventual release. Her decision to cultivate music takes her farther into uncharted waters than was intended. Unable to face her husband, the timid Dudley, she goes to a concert, her soul firmly anchored until the music begins.

Thelma Forsdyke lowered her eyelids in the face of the assault, shocked and frightened by her approaching nobility. Almost anyone can be raised at some point in his life to heights he dare not own. So this woman looked and retreated. (489)

To those who cannot retreat, like Mr Gage and Doll Quigley, the enormity of the world will mete out some form of destruction; yet where preservation can only be ensured in a sealed room, the retreat of Thelma Parker, the death of the soul, is consistently to White the worst horror of all.

R.F. Brissenden writes that

So far as The Tree of Man is concerned it may be that White has been praised more for his intentions than for what he actually succeeded in doing.11

To this should be added Ray Mathew's observation that "it is traditional in Australian criticism to invent an aim and then to rebuke the artist for not achieving it".12 If The Tree of Man shows a diffuseness and lack of clarity notably absent from
the other novels, this is not because White has failed in his own stated intention to convey the mystery and the poetry which make ordinary lives bearable, but because the mystery and the poetry do not always arise organically from character and situation, with the result that a certain degree of contrivance is felt to be present, particularly in those parts of the novel where the natural symbolism is not allowed to speak for itself, but is embellished and heightened to an unwarranted degree. These deficiencies of realization do not, however, detract from the special achievement of the novel, which lies in the power and subtlety of White's depiction of the central relationship between Stan and Amy Parker—the peculiar dependence on each other which does not permit of final communication, the distance between them which ensures isolation yet which at the same time helps perpetuate. The story of Doll Quigley reinforces the Jamesian idea that complete possession of another individual is spiritual murder. Stan's possession of Amy from the day of their marriage is not so complete as to destroy the inviolable center, the preservation of which enables Amy to feel for her grandson some of that love which is rejected by her children and reduced to a habit by her husband.

Amy Parker had not attempted to possess this remote child, with the consequences that he had come closer than her own. (398)

As he explores the conditions for one individual's meaningful communication with another, White establishes the ground-work for the next two novels.
FOOTNOTES

10 *The Tree of Man*, London, 1956, p.36. All subsequent references are to this edition.
12 "Writing and Criticism", p.163.
It is perhaps surprising that the chronicles of Man's discovery and exploration of the physical world have not been used more frequently as a basis for serious fiction. That there exists a fundamental curiosity about journeys to new and foreign lands has been evident since Caesar first felt it necessary to describe the manners and customs of the peoples he set out to conquer for the greater glory of Rome. The vast interest in the travels of Hakluyt and Marco Polo, the bizarre inventions of Rabelais and the myths of Prester John—all testify to the attraction of the voyage and the voyager as a subject capable of almost infinite imaginative development. Since the circumnavigation of the globe and the other great voyages of discovery of the Renaissance, 'travel literature' has become increasingly specialized and narrow in its scope—appealing in most cases either to the historian, in the form of journals, maps and diaries, or, in guidebooks and personal reminiscences, to the indiscriminate tourist more interested in local colour and low costs than in the discovery of the new and the alien. In modern fiction only Conrad has made wide use of the journey to the unknown as a vast and powerful metaphor in its own right,
although more recently Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* show important variations on this theme. The originality of *Voss*, which appeared in 1957, lies not in White's reliance for source material on the records of several of the great Australian journeys of exploration, nor in his interest in the nature and personality of one particular explorer, the German Ludwig Leichhardt, but in the way in which historical accuracy and plausibility have been used as the altogether convincing background to the larger themes of the novel—the search for salvation, the meaning of suffering, and the nature of the will.

White's own account of the genesis of *Voss* indicates something more than a mere 'historical novel' approach to source material:

Afterwards I wrote *Voss*, possibly conceived during the early days of the Blitz, when I sat reading Eyre's *Journal* in a London bed-sitting room. Nourished by months spent trapesing across the Egyptian and Cyrenaican deserts, influenced by the arch-megalomaniac of the day, the idea finally matured after reading contemporary accounts of Leichhardt's expeditions and A.H. Chisolm's *Strange New World* on returning to Australia.1

A further statement of his intentions suggests the direction White's work is now taking:

Always something of a frustrated painter, and a composer manqué, I wanted to give my book the textures of music, the sensuousness of paint, to convey through the theme and characters of *Voss* what Delacroix and Blake might have seen, what Mahler and Liszt might have heard.2

In *The Aunt's Story* the reconciliation of inner and outer worlds
is arrived at through what is essentially a process of epistemological abstraction; in *The Tree of Man*, in many ways a transitional work, there are hints of a more visionary approach to the same question, not always happily embodied in the figure of Stan Parker. In *Voss*, however, White has a character large and powerful enough to carry the full weight of the novel's far-reaching implications, but in this task Voss himself is not working alone—always present as a support and a counterbalance is the figure of Laura Trevelyan.

The complex themes of *Voss* are ordered and objectified in the novel's form, which at once ceases to consist only of the more obvious structural devices, and becomes an analogue which is at the same time the very substance and quality of White's vision. This vision can best be described, following White's suggestion, in musical terms. Voss and Laura are two counterpointed figures which interact for the most part in discord with each other, but which are united in an overall fugal form, the form the novel in its entirety takes, as individual themes are repeated, elaborated and expanded through the two main characters. The structural bare bones of *Voss* are simply described. Laura Trevelyan, niece of the explorer's patron, and Voss meet each other on a few brief occasions at the beginning of the novel. Voss's expedition departs for the Interior, while Laura remains in Sydney, but as time passes, and the distance between them increases, an intense spiritual 'communi-
cation' is established, lasting until Voss's death, after which Laura retires from the world to become a schoolmistress. In alternating sequences White traces the progress of the relationship in his two main characters, and at the same time examines two contrasted societies—the society of Sydney in the 1840's which serves to illuminate the central figure of Laura, and the other members of the expedition who illuminate the central figure of Voss. Both Laura and Voss dominate their respective sections, but it is the nature of the intimate relationship which develops between these two major figures which gives the novel its structure, its form and its meaning, just as it is the nature of this relationship which has been so consistently misinterpreted by the majority of critics.

When Voss and Laura first meet, they recognize in each other basic similarities. Resentful of the mediocrity around them, they are fundamentally isolated and withdrawn, dependent on a sustained inner life and a self-sufficiency which amounts to spiritual pride. Laura's decision that "she could not remain a convinced believer in that God in whose benevolence and power she had received most earnest instruction" has led her to subscribe to the tenets of a vague rationalism.

Yet, in spite of this admirable self-sufficiency, she might have elected to share her experience with some similar mind, if such a mind had offered. But there was no evidence of intellectual kinship in any of her small circle of acquaintance....3

But if Laura's pride is as yet uncertain of its object, being
in fact the reaction of any sensitive and intelligent young woman to a society of deadening vacuity, the pride of the very much older and more experienced Voss has created its own object, its own potential vindication, in the expedition. Not only, like Laura, is he "sufficient in himself"(17), he is also possessed of a desire for self-aggrandizement amounting to the ambition of a Nietzschean hero to recast the world in his own image.

If he were to leave that name on the land, irrevocably, his material body swallowed by what it had named, it would be rather on some desert place, a perfect abstraction, that would rouse no feelings of tenderness in posterity. He had no more need for sentimental admiration than he had for love. He was complete. (45)

Laura, however, for all her self-sufficiency, does not claim completeness. Already in her mind she has entertained the various possibilities of "self-improvement". She is one of those prepared to move "out of the luxuriant world of their pretensions into the desert of mortification and reward".(80) She tells Voss, "You are my desert!"(94) It is the irruption of Voss into the hitherto closed world of Laura Trevelyan which precipitates the beginning of a journey whose outcome is perhaps even more disastrous than that which befalls the expedition.

With a facility for which he has come under attack from several quarters, White uses a vast number of devices to link the progress of his two characters after their physical separation. Elaborate parallels are drawn between the success-
ive stages of the expedition and the process of trial and conflict which develops in the mind of Laura Trevelyan. In imaginative re-enactment of the betrayals and sacrifices which occur during the expedition, Laura undergoes similar crises of soul and conscience. The physical realities of the expedition, hunger, thirst, sickness, the never-ending expanses of rock, desert and sunlight, form the basic imagery used to describe these crises. Laura enters her illness as Voss and his remaining companions enter the flat desert at the center of the continent. Surrounding Voss at this stage are the shadowy figures of the blacks who will shed his own blood, while in attendance at Laura's bedside is the doctor with his leeches. Deliverance from this time of trial appears to both parties in the form of a brilliant comet which for several nights lights the darkness.

From an examination of these devices it is an easy step to the conclusion that Voss and Laura find spiritual or mystical union where physical union is not possible, that in a mutual transcendence they have succeeded in escaping the bonds of physical reality. Such a reading, though possibly satisfying in itself, would place an altogether unsuitable emphasis on the technique of parallels. Other critics than the reviewer for *Australian Letters*, who says that "the weakness of this contrivance detracts from the stature of the novel", object to what appears to be a rather obvious method of getting the point across, but they seem clearly to miss the subtle and terrible
irony at the center of the novel, that there is no real communion, that Laura and Voss have in fact used each other to develop in entirely opposed directions. John Rorke rightly sees this irony as essential to an understanding of Voss:

The relationship is not essentially mystical.... The point is that, spiritually, they cannot come together. The irony of their relationship is that they are, in a sense, betraying one another.5

Thus, the whole device of parallel development must be regarded in the light of irony, and the fact that only two of Voss's and Laura's letters ever reach their intended destination is significant not because it shows a transcendent union of the senders, but in that it underlines the very impossibility of such a union. What appears to be empathy and communion across vast distances becomes in reality two adjacent but opposed worlds of self-projection and fantasy, and from this duality derives White's moral vision.

Voss's first recorded encounter with the spirit of selflessness occurs when earlier in the year he visits a mission near Moreton Bay. One of the brothers says to him, "Mr Voss... you have a contempt for God, because He is not in your own image". (54) Later, during the important confrontation which takes place in the Bonners' garden immediately prior to the departure of the expedition, Voss heatedly rebukes Laura for her nebulous atheism.

"But the God they have abandoned is of mean conception", Voss pursued. "Easily destroyed, because in their own image. Pitiful because such destruction does not prove the destroyer's power. Atheismus is self-murder. Do
you not understand?" (95)

At this stage Voss's determined destruction of Laura's possible pretensions masks his own awareness that Laura, too, can inflict wounds. After disclaiming any similarity between them, he goes on to warn her further: "For some reason of intellectual vanity, you decided to do away with God...but the consequences are yours alone". (96) Unable to tolerate the possibility of a soul-mate whom he suspects of becoming a rival, Voss detects in Laura the first of his betrayers. It is necessary to him that "all, sooner or later, sensed his divinity and became dependent upon him". (188) During the conversation in the garden Laura exposes the magnanimity of Voss, denying him his right to be self-appointed man as well as self-appointed god.

"...Everything is for yourself. Human emotions, when you have them, are quite flattering to you. If those emotions strike sparks from others, that also is flattering. But most flattering, I think, when you experience it, is the hatred, or even the mere irritation of weaker characters". (94)

Laura has also grasped the essential truth about the explorer: he is, in fact, dependent on others, who are at all times a necessary yardstick against which the stature of Voss is measured, and it is this dependence, rather than the possibility that some of his fellow men might deny him, that makes him vulnerable. This possibility does not occur to Voss. His motives for undertaking the journey are fully in keeping with his own conception of himself.

"Every man has a genius, though it is not always discoverable, least of all when choked by the trivialities of daily existence. But in this
disturbing country...it is possible more easily to discard the inessential and to attempt the infinite. You will be burnt up most likely, you will have the flesh torn from your bones...but you will realize that genius of which you sometimes suspect you are possessed, and of which you will not tell me you are afraid". (38)

Voss knows, as Theodora Goodman knew, that the self must be destroyed if transcendence is to be achieved, but the egotism of the German regards as an end the ultimate refinement of the self, the emergence of "genius". What Voss desires is not final liberation from the self, but the enslavement of all else to it, and it is this which makes his statement "To make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself"(38) more an exercise in egoistic nihilism than a valid guide to the attainment of freedom. For the nihilist can destroy everything but his own will, which is then elevated as the final and attained goal of his liberation. Laura's claim that "this expedition of yours is pure will" is countered by Voss when he reminds her of the restraint he will be under from the other members of the party, yet his explanation of why he does not walk into the desert on his own is highly unsatisfactory:

"It would be better", he added abruptly, "that I should go barefoot, and alone. I know. But it is useless to try to convey to others the extent of that knowledge". (74)

The fear that there will be no witness to his divinity is concealed.

Unprepared for the nature of the witness his party will bear him, Voss underestimates his companions.
He did not altogether trust those he had chosen for his patron's comfort, but at least they were weak men, he considered, all but one, who had surrendered his strength conveniently to selflessness. (24)

Such a surrender to humility as Palfreyman has apparently made is a constant source of irritation to Voss: "Is man so ignoble that he must lie in the dust, like worms?" (161) But selflessness in others need not be any more than an irritation until such time as it appears to form a conspiracy. At Rhine Towers, Sanderson's station and the first major stopping place of the expedition, Voss first senses the pressures from that direction. Sanderson makes him uneasy: "both he and his wife would wash their servants' feet in many thoughtful and imperceptible ways"; (135) but it is when he sees Judd and Palfreyman speaking together that he realizes the possibility of a closed circle.

Then he almost experienced a state of panic for his own isolation...and he had come down another step in an attempt to see what was in the faces of the convict and the ornithologist. (147)

The expedition proceeds from Rhine Towers, a place of simplicity and gentleness whose name evokes for Voss a lost innocence of childhood, to Jildra, where the squatter Brendan Boyle lives in a darkness of disillusion of squalor. To Boyle, "to explore the depths of one's own repulsive nature is more than irresistible --it is necessary". (179) The idealism of Sanderson and the despair of Boyle provide two opposed absolutes between which the individuals of Voss's party manoeuver with difficulty. The patterns of individual existence which gradually emerge as
Voss comes into ever closer contact with his party establish
the tensions through which the pride of the leader is threat­
ened and finally destroyed. Three men in particular reverse the
God-man relationship and suggest those standards by which Voss
himself might be measured. But in a wilderness where human
values become hopelessly relative and dependent for their defi­
nition on their own opposites, White never suggests that any one
of the alternative patterns of thought and behavior posed by
Palfreyman, Judd and Le Mesurier is in itself of ultimate worth:
the final vindication is left to Voss himself.

A pivotal yet ambiguous figure, the ornithologist Pal­
freymann seems at first to be the most dangerous threat to the
pride of Voss. While condemning the morality of other men, he
sees as his only justification his ability to love them. Laura
Trevelyan "suspected a knife might be hidden somewhere. A knife
intended for herself". (114) Voss knows that, "in the surrender
to selflessness, such individuals enjoyed a kind of voluptuous
transport". (52) Palfreyman's assumption of saintliness, however,
is not without undertones of a perverse attraction to the lep­
roursore rather than the act of healing, and the pride he takes
in his Christ-like role is exposed when, "through some trick of
moonlight or uncertainty of behaviour", Voss appears to him in
a travesty of martyrdom, his head detached from his body in
anticipation of what is to come.

Ah, Christ is an evil dream, he feared, and all my
life I have been deceived. After the bones of the
naked Christ had been drawn through the foetid room,
by sheets of moonlight, and out the doorway, the
fully conscious witness continued to lie on his
blanket, face to face with his own shortcomings
and his greatest error. (189)

Palfreyman later relates to Voss a detail of his early life,
in which he had forcibly prevented his hunch-backed sister from
taking her own life.

"And you rescued, or condemned, your sister", Voss
accused, "by denying her the Gothic splendours of
death. Her intention was glorious, but you rushed
and tied a tourniquet, when all you had to offer
was your own delusion".
"You cannot destroy me, Mr Voss!" Palfreyman insisted.(282)
The strength of the delusion will not permit Palfreyman to be
destroyed—indeed, the more mortifying the revelation of truth,
the more justification he feels for his own existence, in a
terrible inversion of pride. When, near the end of the expedi-
tion, the aboriginals finally close in on the party, Palfrey-
man offers himself up for sacrifice. The rest of the party
looking on, he is killed by spears, "laughing, because still
he did not know what to do".

Ah, Lord, Lord, his mind repeated, before tremen-
dous pressure from above compelled him to lay down
the last of his weakness. He had failed evidently. (365)

Whether his last act is a failure or a triumph, whether his
death is really a victory of selflessness and love, or merely
the logical termination of the delusions of a self-appointed
martyr, White does not make entirely clear, but from this point
on, "the two parties now rode in opposite directions",(371)
leaving between them a small cairn of stones.

Frank Le Mesurier is at all times closer to Voss than
Palfreyman, and elects to stay with leader after the 'rebellion' led by Judd. He is a man of no convictions, a complete pragmatist who is a greater source of danger to Voss than Palfreyman because his scepticism admits of no prior commitment and because he possesses a certain enviable freedom.

"...I am a man of beginnings. They are my delusion. Or my vice....There is some purpose in me, if only I can hit upon it. But my whole life has been an investigation, shall we say, of ways". (106)

In his lack of ideals of any sort, which Voss finds enormously irritating, lies a possible mystery which Voss cannot enter. To Le Mesurier the mystery of life lies "in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming", (289) and the record of this mystery lies in the jealously guarded book of poems which is a torment to the German, and which he is forced finally to read in stealth. What he finds is a selflessness not so easily derided as Palfreyman's, because imbued with a resignation and acceptance of the dual nature of man.

Humility is my brigalow, that must I remember; here I shall find a thin shade in which to sit....Then I am not God, but Man. I am God with a spear in his side. (316)

But the resignation does not hold: the sort of humanism bred by suffering which Le Mesurier expresses, is finally destroyed by its ultimate lack of object. He destroys the poems as soon as he realizes that the desert and the suffering offer no further beginnings, no further becomeings.

Bracing himself against the tree, Frank Le Mesurier began to open his throat with a knife he had....It was his last attempt at poetry. Then, with his remaining strength, he was opening the hole wider, until he was able to climb out into the immense fields of silence. (405)
The one-time convict Judd is opposed to Le Mesurier in that his experience lies behind him. His life is not a search for beginnings, but is itself an aftermath, of a hell endured many years before.

What he knew could have been considerable, though would not escape from him, one suspected, even if pincers were brought to bear. (142)

Judd's knowledge, a well which Voss cannot plumb, is signified by his possession of a telescope and the expedition's compass, which Voss himself causes to be 'lost' and later discovered in Judd's own equipment. This mysterious attempt on Voss's part to convict Judd again, before the expedition, for crimes he has already paid for, fails, if for no other reason than that Judd is the only member of the party to survive. In the convict reside the Christ-like qualities which Palfreyman seeks vainly to attain at the expense of his own life in dubious martyrdom. He ministers to others whose sins are engraved on his own back, and in his continued existence as scapegoat and possessor of knowledge he is Voss's most powerful adversary.

[Voss] despised physical strength; he despised, though secretly, even the compassion he had sensed in the ministrations of Judd. His own strength, he felt, could not decrease with physical debility. But, was Judd's power increased by compassion? (226)

Judd is the only character whose destruction is already accomplished, and in all four novels he is the only major character who does not seek escape from the contingent. He does not question his own existence either in itself or in relation to the outer world: his freedom has been achieved under a duress
which was never, as in the case of Voss, self-imposed. Any freedom which is not at the same time freedom from the tyranny of the will is illusory, and in the case of Judd, aspiration of any sort is the will in subtle disguise: it is precisely this recognition that motivates the convict in his rebellion against Voss's leadership. Judd is intended for life. His own soul "had achieved fulfilment not by escaping from his body, but by returning to it". (261) It is his duty to prevail in the teeth of destruction, and White's questioning of "whether the act of pure will can be anything more than the expression of the destructive ego" throws into effective relief the whole conflict between assertion and passivity which he is to treat further in the next novel. In Voss, however, Judd, like the other members of the expedition, is sketched in sufficient detail to suggest many possibilities, but even he does not overshadow the figure of Voss himself.

It can be said of Palfreyman, Le Mesurier and Judd that their fates, from the outset of the expedition, are the predestination and logical enactments of their individual natures. Voss, on the other hand, is a tragic figure whose stature is increased by the metamorphosis he undergoes. This metamorphosis would not in itself be tragic if all it entailed were the substitution of humility for pride, leading up to the moment of recognition before death. This process of destruction, recreation and final self-awareness does, however, constitute
the inner transformation of the character of Voss, even if it
does not indicate the final significance of this transformation.
The explanation of the humility which emerges in Voss is in
itself simple. He has been shown 'unaccommodated man'. He has
suffered what the rest of the expedition has suffered, and he
has been forced to recognize, after the physical and spiritual
deaths of his companions and the splitting of the party in two,
that, except for the simple Harry Robarts, his divinity is no
longer accepted--is not even relevant, as each man retires into
himself to fight the last solitary battle.

"Lord, will you not save us?"
"I am no longer your Lord, Harry", said Voss. (390)
The dependence of his companions on Voss has proved, with the
exception of Harry, to be a transitory thing, as is also Voss's
dependence on them. No longer does he need witnesses to his
divinity, because his divinity is now an illusion. With this
recognition, the conflict becomes fully internalized, and the
"completeness" with which he had earlier accredited himself is
now reduced to a terrible duality, the irony of which gives to
his self-awareness and subsequent death the essential impact
of tragedy.

Laura's statement that "when man is truly humbled, when
he has learnt that he is not God, then he is nearest to becoming
so"(411) is on the surface a reasonable account of the meaning
of Voss's humility, but in one of his dreams she has said to him:
"It is the woman who unmakes men, to make saints".(201) The un-
making of Voss, and the making of him into something else, is for Laura a teleological process, an advance towards sainthood, which Voss, in his dream, distrusts. For Voss, it is the state of duality itself, in which the making and the unmaking exist in constant tension, which is significant, and his humility is not a confession of his own worthlessness, but an acceptance of the irreconcilables in his own nature. In this regard White is emphasizing again the conclusions reached in *The Aunt's Story*.

The importance of the idea of basic duality is underlined in a passage which describes Voss attending to the sick Le Mesurier.

He was all tenderness for the patient, as if he must show the extent of his capabilities. To dispense love, he remembered suddenly. If nobody was impressed, it was not that they suspected hypocrisy, but because they 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. (286)

The individual components of this division do not really matter, any more than in the case of Hamlet a knowledge of the immediate causes of his torment will lead to a final understanding of the speech to Guildenstern: "I will tell you why...." In *Voss*, as in *Hamlet*, is dramatized the dislocation of the self when it first becomes aware of the gulf within between will and desire, motive and act, aspiration and achievement, God and man. It is Voss's recognition that "He was, after all, a man of great frailty, both physical and moral" (303) which prepares him for
the logical outcome of his first giving Jackie the knife. The young aboriginal is a member of a race almost unbelievably primitive, yet whose mysteries alone can contain the landscape in which they are not so much inhabitants as elements. Jackie's explanation of the cave paintings with their combination of mysticism and crude realism, revolves around the escape of the spirit from the body, and its subsequent immanence in all things—an account of death which renders the isolated fact of physical death in itself unimportant, and which makes of the aboriginal the ideal instrument of death and release. But the peculiar nature of Voss's death is foreshadowed several times in the novel, and its importance stressed throughout by recurring imagery of knives and skulls. Sanderson's account at Rhine Towers of how he once came across a human skull; Palfreyman's vision of Voss's disembodied head; even the splitting of the party itself in two—such incidents bring closer all the time the final destruction of Voss, as the head is hacked laboriously from the body. The physical death is a ritual re-enactment of the state of inner division which Voss has previously recognized, accepted, and overcome by humility: "O Jesus", he cried, "rette mich nur! Du lieber!"(415)

...Voss's own death becomes a mere formal affair, empty of sacrificial virtue. For Voss at his death is mere and humble man who calls on God to save him.7

The significance of Voss's journey is in no way modified by its termination. His life is neither enhanced nor diminished by his death, the final mystery of which remains concealed.
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. (419)

Some explanation is now necessary of the role played by Laura Trevelyan in the metamorphosis of Voss. The slow growth of selflessness and humility in Voss can only come about through the constant presence of the dream-figure Laura, and it is important to remember that she is, in fact, a necessary projection of Voss himself, a constant, idealized figure offering solutions to his conflicts and salve for his wounds, a conscience, a refuge, a torment, a strange objectification of his own subconscious inner self which he abandons when the metamorphosis is complete, and there is no longer any need for her. The dream Laura, in fact, bears little resemblance to the real Laura who, once Voss has left, repeats the same process, and out of the memory of Voss creates a necessary projection of herself. But in this case there is a significant difference. From the dream-Laura Voss takes only as much as he requires to effect the transformation of his pride into humility. Laura, however, invests the dream-Voss with her own pride to such an extent that a monstrous blasphemy results which will destroy her just as surely as Voss is destroyed in his humility.

Laura is distinct from the society around her not only by virtue of the accidents of intelligence and sensitivity and
an aversion to social niceties. The "flawless girl" who greets Voss at the opening of the novel has set herself apart for quite definite reasons.

If I am lost, then who can be saved; she was egotist enough to ask. She very badly wanted to make amends for the sins of others. (80)

The religious instruction she has forsaken in the cause of rationalism has merely been banished to the subconscious, and the God "in which she could not remain a convinced believer" re-appears in the human form of Voss. Not only is Laura elevated by this manifestation, she is also able to take upon herself the role of intercessor in Voss's salvation. Voss is thus for Laura what he is at first for the members of the expedition—man and God; but whereas Voss's party finally rejects his divinity, Laura accepts and intensifies, and ensures her own elevation by accepting Voss's proposal of marriage, in reply to which she writes, at the end of her first letter to him,

In any event, Mr Voss, I do thank you once again for your kind letter, and shall intercede as ever for your safety and your happiness. (199)

In a later and more cryptic letter Laura seems to resent the pride of Voss the man, which, she realizes, will hamper her own aspirations as the true Bride of Christ and Mother of God.

I understand you are entitled, as a man, to a greater share of pride, but would like to see you humbled. Otherwise, I am afraid for you. Two cannot share one throne. Even I would not wash your feet if I might wash His. (256)

At the time of this letter, the emancipist servant Rose Portion has just recently died from childbirth, and the infant
has been adopted by Laura herself. To the reader who has missed
the overtones of the letters and insisted on the true communion
of Voss and Laura, the child device is understandably confusing.

To the marriage of their true minds, the child
is an impediment. One can see what White is up
to, after a fashion, but the very fact that he
is "up to" something is distressing.©

What White is "up to" is in fact rather more than this critic
at least suspects, and is only fully understandable in the light
of Laura's fantasies, for Laura, parentless, has herself given
vicarious birth to the bastard daughter of Rose Portion. "Doves
began to soothe", and "Laura Trevelyan bit the inside of her
cheek, as the child came away from her body". (246) Voss himself
senses with some disgust the significance of this nativity. The
dream-Laura appears to him:

If I have suffered the Father, she smiled, then
I can suffer the Son. Immediately he sensed the
matter had attained flesh-proportions, he was
nauseated....I am One he protested, forming the
big 0 with his convinced mouth. (287)

As Voss enters the dead center of the continent, Laura falls ill.
"I feel", she tells a doctor, "that the life I am to live is
already utterly beyond my control". (349) At this stage she be-
comes vaguely aware of the extent of her own blasphemy, since
Voss, in the section immediately prior to this one, has an-
nounced that he is no longer Harry Robarts' Lord.

She began to cough. Mrs Bonner was frightened.
"Oh, dear, it is my throat. It is the terrible
Sun that he is imitating. That is what I must
believe. It is a play. For anything else would
be blasphemy". (395)

Laura is now obsessed with the idea of sacrifice. During the
fever her hair has been taken off, but this is not enough: she
is determined also to give up her foster-child. But these two
acts, conceived by Laura as sacrifices, are capable of a more
profane interpretation. In her guilt, Laura is doing penance
for her blasphemous union with Voss. With this interpretation,
many levels of meaning become apparent in a statement such as
"...you see, I am willing to give up so much to prove that
human truths are also divine". (395) The sickness continues, and
Laura's suffering increases, but the extent of her pride is not
fully revealed until the crisis, when she says, "Dear Christ,
now at last I understand your suffering". (410) By now Laura
understands that Voss is not, in fact, God in human form, and
her earlier warning to him that "two cannot share one throne"
takes on an added significance in the light of the following:

"Dear God", she cried, gasping for breath, "it
is so easy....except that man is so shoddy, so
contemptible, greedy, jealous, stubborn, ignor­
ant. Who will love him when I have gone? I only
pray that God will". (411)

In the light of her now confirmed elevation, the decision to
send away the child Mercy can be shorn of its undertones of
subconscious guilt and reinterpreted:"I know that my will
waivered, for which I hope I may be forgiven". (421)

Some years later, Laura is found to have retired com-
pletely, "like some foolish nun", as Mrs Bonner expresses it.9
But her seclusion is inevitably threatened by the historical
fact of Voss, and Colonel Hebden, leader of a party sent out
to search for what remains there may be of the original expedition, returns as her first tormentor. In a close parallel to the final hours of Voss in the twig hut, guarded by the old aboriginal, Laura faces her own destruction.

She was looking about her. Now she was caught. The little summer-house was most skilfully constructed, of closely plaited twigs. It had a deserted smell. She could not answer him, nor look, not even at his long hands. The silence was stretching. Then, when it had almost broken, she shuddered, and cried out: "You would cut my head off, if letting my blood run would do you any good". "It is not for my sake. It is for Mr Voss". "Mr Voss is already history". "But history is never acceptable until it is sifted for the truth. Sometimes this can never be reached". She was hanging her head. She was horribly twisted. "No, never", she agreed. "It is all lies. While there are men, there will always be lies. I do not know the truth about myself, unless I sometimes dream it". (439)

Final judgment does not, however, fall on Laura until the reappearance of the convict Judd, whom she meets after the official unveiling of a statue of Voss. To her, Judd is Voss himself, and the truth is no longer distorted by distance.

Of dreadful metal, he towered above her, with his rather matted, grizzled hair, and burning desire for truth. Her mouth was dry. Was he, then, the avenging angel? So it appeared, as they struggled together. (470)

Judd gives an account of the expedition, concluding with the belief of the blacks that Voss is still there, all pervasive.

"Like a god, in fact", said Colonel Hebden, but laughed to show his scepticism. Judd looked up, out of the distance. "Voss? No. He was never God, though he liked to
think that he was. Sometimes, when he forgot, he was a man". (472)

Laura's final judgments of both Judd and Voss are at this point terribly confused.

"Whether Judd is an impostor, or a madman or simply a poor creature who has suffered too much, I am convinced that Voss had in him a little of Christ, like other men. If he was composed of evil along with the good, he struggled with that evil. And failed". (474)

As closely wrought as The Aunt's Story and as large in its scope as The Tree of Man, Voss is the most successful and rewarding of White's novels to date. Its ironies and ambiguities defy successful analysis, and White does not attempt to resolve the problems the novel poses. Rather, he examines them from a vast number of vantage points, and dramatizes them in the interactions set up between his two main characters, and between each of these and the societies in which they move. The central problem, carried through from the earlier novels, is the possibility of meaningful communication between individuals, particularly between individuals possessing sensitivity, intelligence, and the potentiality to expand and grow. These values, inherent in both Voss and Laura, are perverted by the will, the complete destruction of which is necessary if the individual is to be made content within himself and reconciled with the disparities of inner and outer worlds. A casual reading of Voss will promote the feeling that Voss and Laura form a closed circle, custodians of truths from which ordinary mortals are barred.
If there is any lived opposition it is by default... There is in fact a failure to put up any sort of criterion, established as a dramatic actuality, through which Voss can be opposed other than through his soul-mate Laura. There is no lived opposition that is not seen as contemptible prejudice... against intellect and the strangeness of Voss.10

Apart from the fact that egalitarian sentiments have little to do with White's investigation of the individual psyche, this reaction, a common one in criticism of White in general and Voss in particular, can only arise from indifference to or ignorance of the true nature of the Voss-Laura relationship, which might be termed an experiment that failed.

Obsessed by the struggle between their two souls, they had threatened each other with the flashing weapons of abstract reasoning, while overlooking the common need for sustenance. (203)

What might be the nature of this sustenance, and under what conditions it might flourish, are questions White does not answer in this novel, but, stated in negative terms, it can never come about when any attempt is made to possess and reshape the other individual. By the end of Voss, White appears to reject the idea that it is ever possible for souls to merge and for minds to become one.

Given time, the man and woman might have healed each other. That time was not given was their one sadness. But time itself is a wound that will not heal up. (408)

Given the inexorability of time, the limitations of abstract thought and concrete words, and the essential isolation of the self, can individual salvation and the vindication of the
individual life be anything other than a battle waged in a land "where no fellow footfall is ever heard"? The need to answer this question is the point of departure for Riders in the Chariot.
FOOTNOTES


2 Ibid.


5 "Patrick White and the Critics", Southerly, XX, 2, 1959, p.72.

6 Geoffrey Dutton, Australian Writers and their Work: Patrick White, Melbourne, 1961, p.34.

7 Rorke, "Patrick White and the Critics", p.71.

8 Dutton, p.38.

9 It is interesting in this respect to compare White's Laura with Katherine Anne Porter's character of the same name in Flowering Judas. Porter bears close stylistic resemblances to White in any case, and their respective treatments of a woman destroyed by a spiritual pride which is in essence blasphemous, are strikingly similar.

The appearance of Riders in the Chariot in 1961 seemed to divide White's critics into two implacably opposed camps. To those who all the long had rejected his style of writing, his treatment of Australia and Australians, and his predilection for mystical remoteness, the latest novel proved simply impossible to read; to his admirers it represented a new peak of achievement (on its appearance White was canonized in a review article in the TLS), and was so stunning in its impact on one critic as to make any sort of critical appraisal redundant:

It seems to me that it is even above the level of art, and penetrates into what is now the almost inaccessible realm of mystical experience.¹

It was, of course, strongly evident that from The Aunt's Story onwards White was primarily concerned with the possibility of a mystical union above physical reality and yet immanent in all its manifestations. In the earlier novels, however, the primary condition for attaining transcendence was the retreat of the soul further and further into itself and away from the contingencies of the outer world. Thus detached, the individual was able to observe and partake of only what was found to be significant; by the process of exclusion he could identify with
the immanence of transcendent reality in all forms, yet remain free of the forms themselves, unaffected by the contingent aspects of physical reality. Yet, paradoxically, acute perception of contingent reality was the necessary condition for transcendence, for only through the intensities of feeling and emotion roused by the outer world was the soul made aware of its further potentialities. Here lay the stumbling block: Theodora Goodman underwent torment and madness before achieving serenity; Doll Quigley committed murder and Mr Gage hanged himself; Voss had his head severed from his body and Laura was destroyed by illusions of pride. None on their journeys received sustenance from other souls which was not a potential or actual betrayal, and none had preconceived ideas as to how their salvation might be achieved (Voss's acceptance of the Christian concept of salvation does not occur until the end of the novel, and even then White is non-committal as to its final efficacy). This emphasis on isolation from other individuals and from any shared body of thought fulfilled White's need to examine in its uttermost depths the mystery of the self; it also caused this sort of comment:

This conception of man is undignified. It conceives of man in isolation from man, selfishly working out his own salvation, giving nothing in human relationship except humility, and taking all in acts of penance. 2

If the conception of dignity implied in the above is one White would not accept, it nevertheless seems evident that while writing Riders in the Chariot he felt that the besetting prob-
lems of the individual could only be further illuminated by creating a number of characters linked together in their need for transcendence and salvation by a shared, if not rationally acknowledged, body of belief.

On first reflection, White's use of the principles of Kabbalistic and Zoharic mysticism as the apparent doctrinal framework of the novel seems puzzling, and difficult to justify against the background of the earlier novels. The questions are immediately raised: how seriously does White intend the reader to regard these mystical doctrines of an obscure and esoteric Jewish philosophic movement? What relevance can these doctrines have to the characters and situations of the novel, and to what extent is an understanding of them necessary to an understanding of the novel as a whole? To introduce such questions at this stage might give the impression that Riders in the Chariot is a *roman à clef*. If such indeed were the case, the stature of the novel would be greatly diminished; that it is not the case can be at least partially demonstrated by referring to the quotation from Blake with which White prefaces the novel:

> The Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel dined with me, and I asked them how they dared so roundly to assert that God spoke to them; and whether they did not think at the time that they could be misunderstood, & so be the cause of imposition.

Isaiah answer'd: "I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the infinite in everything, and as I was then persuwaded, & remain confirm'd, that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences, but wrote...."
I then asked Ezekiel why he eat dung, & lay so long on his right and left side? he answer'd, "The desire of raising other men into a perception of the infinite: this the North American tribes practise, & is he honest who resists his genius or conscience only for the sake of present ease or gratification?"3

Here is obliquely stated White's own relation to the mystical center of the novel, and his justification for choosing such a center. The logic behind his choice is not that of carefully contrived relationships and parallels—Riders in the Chariot is too diffuse to be an allegory. As Ezekiel points out to Blake's voice of reason, the means are unimportant—all that matters is the raising of other men "into a perception of the infinite". But this perception can only be arrived at, in terms of the novel, when the formal aspects, the structure, the characters, the patterns of symbols, become as it were transparent, and only the perception, that which the formal aspects signify, remains. In minor or second-rate novels (or any other art forms), such a transparence cannot occur: the tricks and devices of the craft are there for their own sake, and the symbols remain opaque, means rather than ends. In Riders in the Chariot the major symbols seem to be sometimes arbitrarily imposed, and in this respect at least the novel is unusual in the present time—little attempt is made to explain the Chariot, the Fiery Furnace, the sparks of the Shechinah, the Crucifixion, and the other derived symbols, in terms which bind them indissolubly to the characters and action of the novel. White's method of ensuring that the mystical reality expressed by the symbols is in no way
diminished by the exigencies of character and plot, results in a certain detachment of the symbols, and gives rise to the criticism that they have no real grounding in the novel. But only if the Chariot, for instance, is regarded as important in itself, does the coming together of four visionaries, all of whom have had direct experience of it, seem a manipulated coincidence on the part of the author. The validity of the symbols themselves depends not on the action of the novel, but on the nature of the vision they convey, and as an awareness of this vision is built up in the reader's mind, the importance of the symbolic form in itself diminishes, and the light of the central vision reflects back through the forms to illuminate all the incidents of the novel.

White has chosen Jewish mysticism as the vehicle for his vision, not through any desire to be deliberately abstruse, but because here he has found a formalization and imagery whose total impact is intended for the senses rather than the intellect. Such an incident as Miss Hare's first vision of the Chariot becomes immediately significant because of the sensuous power with which it is described, a power White no doubt found present in his original sources, and which is familiar already to most people through the Old Testament. The symbols of Riders in the Chariot, then, derived from varying sources, refer always to the central mystical vision which informs every aspect of this extremely complex novel.
The complexity of *Riders in the Chariot* may be explained first in purely structural terms. Four main characters, the four "riders", dominate the book; in addition to these there are at least forty other characters who are given a great deal of attention. The immediate setting is reminiscent of *The Tree of Man*—a region on the outskirts of Sydney which is being slowly swallowed up by the metropolis. The time span for the actual events of the novel is comparatively short, but over half the book is taken up with the life stories of Miss Hare, Himmelfarb, Mrs Godbold and Alf Dubbo, and the settings for these long flashbacks vary from East Anglia and Central Europe to Israel and northern New South Wales. From the start, little attempt is made by White to impose some hierarchy of order on this crowded canvas. Backwaters and byways are meticulously charted, there are numerous digressions, descriptions and details, and often, as in Dostoievsky, it seems as if the hand of the author has found wearisome the task of keeping everything under control. Yet the figure in the carpet does emerge. The novel is, in effect, a vast dialogue between good and evil. The dialectic which is sustained throughout is as firmly controlled as the Voss-Laura dialectic in *Voss*.

In formulating this dialectic, the use White makes of 'minor characters' and 'background materials' is of major importance. In *The Aunt's Story* these are filtered and transformed through the consciousness of Theodora Goodman; in *The Tree of Man*
they are a prevalent but subdued undertone of an ever-encroach­ing city and the people it brings with it; in *Voss* the social life of Sydney, for all its brilliant observation, is kept sub­sidiary to the figure of Laura Trevalyan, and the other exped­i­tion members never dominate the figure of Voss himself. White's treatment of society as a whole was as a comedy of manners against which the more important individual destinies were played out. But in *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* there are increasing indications that the problems of good and evil transcend the individual consciousness, and must somehow be treated on a correspondingly larger scale. The result in *Riders in the Chariot* is an intensification of social criticism to a point where the delineation of society becomes a far-reaching examination of the principles of good and evil. That a novelist can conduct this examination in an Australian suburb of all places is sufficient indication that more than mere satire is intended—*homo australiensis* is not particularly significant in himself, but, as a sub-species of *homo sapiens*, is quite capable of the enormities of behavior he would prefer to ignore.

The idea...that life itself might be a conscious choice of evils has not permeated Australian society. In such a world, White's *Riders in the Chariot* is a rabbit-killer, a blow so foul it can be forgotten only in the sensual orgy of the Agricultural Show which each capital stages annually; there--sight, sound, smell and touch--all combine to remind us of our world of once-upon-a-time....Even White has not yet hit us hard enough to expose that show for what it is, to make us acknowledge exactly what we are.
White's exposure of Australian social patterns is at its most deadly in this novel, and if the only available tool is a sledge hammer, White will use it, to demolish everything from the hallowed concepts of mateship to the orange-brick, walnut-veneer monstrosities which collectively embody the essence of the 'desirable Australian home'. In a letter quoted by Geoffrey Dutton, White says of *Riders in the Chariot*:

> There is certainly bitter comedy or satire running all through it, for it is about contemporary Australia. But it is too big and rambling to support the term "comedy"; that suggests to me something compact and complete in itself.5

White must force his reader to acknowledge the reality of evil in a society which is collectively unable to do so. Only with this realization can the reader become involved in the opening-out process which follows the exposure; only when the pervasiveness of evil is recognized will the story of the Jew, Himmelfarb, take on its proper significance. And White resorts to violent measures to convey the evil; as Mr Heseltine remarks with some sadness:

> It is, I think, a new and profound insight into the Australian character that we have the spiritual capacity to conduct a crucifixion; it is scarcely a soothing one.6

In *Riders in the Chariot* the power for evil which results in the crucifixion of Himmelfarb emanates from an unlikely source--two suburban matrons, who present a picture at once comic, grotesque and terrifying. White unashamedly brings all his nastiness to bear in his depiction of Mrs Flack and Mrs
Jolley—two fat furies who cast their spells from behind pastel venetians. Between them they embody all the malice of the world, disguised beneath cups of tea, eiderdowns and the sentiments of motherhood. Their sights are set on Xanadu, the crumbling folly in which Miss Hare has lived since childhood, and on all the people who at one time or another congregate there. Xanadu is set on a hill opposite Sarsaparilla, while the valley between is occupied by Himmelfarb and Mrs Godbold. The aboriginal Alf Dubbo has 'no fixed address'. The geographical distribution of characters is of considerable importance to the novel, but for the moment it is sufficient to realize that a battle between forces of good and evil is being drawn up, and that Mrs Jolley's foray, introduced in the first pages of the novel, into the territory of Miss Hare at Xanadu, represents the first actual engagement. Stated thus baldly, the conflict might seem to partake of all the elements of crude melodrama, until it is discovered that the lines of demarcation are not at all as clear as they seem. Failure to recognize this fact, that White is not dealing with moral absolutes, will lead to misinterpretation from the start:

...his admirations and contempts are ultimately patrician: there is no mean worth his attention between the highest and the low. And this is perhaps the serious defect of his novels, that sympathy is occluded for the middling damned, although not his understanding.

That there exist such beings as the "middling damned" is itself theologically dubious, and such an assumption in any case shows
a misunderstanding of the nature of the conflict in the novel, but a misunderstanding which is easily accounted for when some of White's methods of depicting and exteriorizing the conflict are examined. At one stage Himmelfarb is looking at the shed where Mrs Godbold lives:

It did seem as though goodness had been sown around the brown house below the post-office, and might grow, provided the forces of evil did not stamp it flat.\(^8\)

Miss Hare tries to recall Himmelfarb's expression of loving-kindness "that alone might save, if it were not obliterated first by conspiracy of evil minds",\(^{(320)}\) and when he does come back to Xanadu, she says to him,

"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".\(^{(328)}\)

The suspicion has long ago entered Miss Hare's mind (admittedly in a subliminal way) that she herself is involved in both "chains", and she looks to Himmelfarb for denial of this. Himmelfarb is mute on the subject, recognizing that the conflict cannot thus be taken out of the arena of the individual consciousness, that the sense of guilt, the awareness of personal culpability, is the first necessary step towards atonement.

There is no character in *Riders in the Chariot* who is not faced at some time with his or her own guilt. Refusal by the individual to accept this guilt, or his attempt to transfer
it to others equally incapable of accepting it, might be said to lead to ultimate damnation, were it not for the fact that the life of this individual is already a hell to be endured: by rejecting the possibility of evil in himself, he also rejects the possibility of good, and for this he pays dearly. The interdependence of good and evil is a theme that has been touched on before by White, but here it is of particular importance in an adequate explanation of the symbol of the Chariot. More immediately related to the principles of good-and-evil, however, and serving to lead up to the Chariot, is the image of the Shechinah, the indwelling of the godhead in the physical world.

Thus did light and darkness, good and evil, begin to contend for the mastery of the world. The Divine harmony was disrupted and the Shechinah exiled. At the same time, scattered hither and thither, the sparks of Divine Light intersected everywhere the darkness, with the result that evil and good became so mixed that there is no evil that does not contain an element of good, not is there a good entirely free from evil.9

To redeem the world from this state of division is the task imposed on Israel by the Covenants, and each man has it in his power to bring back the Shechinah from exile and thus bridge the gap between good and evil. In the light of this, the significance of White's use of the Chariot seems clear. The Riders in the Chariot are not those who, by predestination, comprise the Elect, the Saved—they are those who by the supreme exercise of love and of the will have transcended good and evil, the basic duality of the world, and are returned to the primal condition of Adam Kadmon, the condition of universal light. However, only
one of the four Riders is Jewish—the others have no knowledge of the redemptive power with which they are invested. Their perception of the Chariot is in all four cases radically different, as are their basic natures and the functions they perform in the novel. Much criticism of Riders in the Chariot has revolved around their relations to each other and to the vision of the Chariot which appears to be their only common factor.

The fact that the four main characters are specifically referred to as "Riders in the Chariot" does not mean *ipso facto* that they are part of a universal Elect; indeed, the doctrine of Election is as foreign to the Zoharic teaching as it is to Taoist and Hindu mysticism. A misunderstanding of this point results in the sort of criticism levelled at White in his previous novels, criticism of his supposed 'closed circles':

So far as White's myth of the Chariot of Revelation has a schematised theology it appears to place value, not on the redemption of mankind but only on the difference of the saints. The elect can make no human contact, except with others of the elect; except, that is, with those who have faced the horror, the boredom and the cruelty of life and seen it for what it is. It depends which side of the mirror you are on.10

It must be borne in mind that the actual instances of physical contact between the four main characters are surprisingly few. At no stage do the four ever come together at the same time. Yet the brief contacts they do make with each other are far-reaching in their consequences. They are in a way prepared for these encounters during the whole of their previous lives,
which are recorded in sufficient detail to destroy the notion that the flashbacks are irrelevant, or that the final proximity of the four to each other at Sarsaparilla represents an infrangible union which destroys the self and obliterates the past. Union there is, but in keeping with the doctrines of atonement underlying the novel, none of the four is by this union so transformed as to break the individual continuity of his own life, and to destroy the function with which he is uniquely endowed. Mutual recognition of the individual and inviolable center is indeed one of the factors that does bind them together, just as the denial of privacy is, on a lower level, essential to the hatred propagated from the brick home on Mildred Street. But that the four main characters do share something more in common is obvious. Apart from the fact that all have at some stage encountered evil and guilt within themselves, White gives no indication of any common pattern which might emerge from their respective histories. Their common quality can be approached first of all by examining the relationship that exists between the individual self and the outside world. Jack Lindsay states that,

In Riders in the Chariot White tries to overcome the rather crushing monotony of a vision of mere alienation by adding as sympathetic characters the few who by totally and voluntarily contracting out of a corrupted world achieve the vision of wholeness, of union with universal life. He comes closer here to communicating a genuine horror and to defining the existence of pure wells of feeling amid the socially demented scene; but the inability to deal with more than the hopelessly isolated individual deadens the impact.
Although it may appear that Miss Hare and Himmelfarb have 'contracted out', the charge can certainly not be levelled at Mrs Godbold and Alf Dubbo, most of whose lives have been spent desperately involved in the 'corrupted world'. But in any case, the individual who has acknowledged his own guilt can hardly be said to have 'contracted out' (the figure of Harry Rosetree, who does attempt to do this without acknowledging his guilt, and who finally commits suicide, is Himmelfarb's obvious counterpart). Lindsay comes closer to the point when he defines the four Riders as "pure wells of feeling", but goes on to describe them as "hopelessly isolated"—a reversion to the former fallacy, and a seeming contradiction in terms: can a pure well of feeling be thus limited? The inviolable center, which each of the four seeks to discover and define in his own way, is the means by which he may become a pure and transparent vessel of experience. Theodora Goodman found this center at the cost of her own identity, but in *Riders in the Chariot* the individual identity is not necessarily destroyed, but is expanded into a vessel large enough to contain all apparent contradictions within itself. When this center is not found, the vessel of experience is opaque; the individual is constricted and forced in upon himself, seeking his eventual release in acts of deliberate malevolence. The nature of the center is such that awareness of its existence immediately establishes a bond with others likewise aware; but it cannot be called into existence until its possibility is recognized, and it is finally this fact that accounts
for the gulf between Sarsaparilla and Xanadu.

The search for this center by the four Riders is expressed in the novel by the imagery of the Shechinah, the indwelling light which seeks to be reunited with its source, the final coming together being the vision of the Chariot, where immanence and transcendence, the dual aspects of godhead, are no longer separate. To all four is this state of final unity the sought end, and the end they recognize in each other. Despite White's use of Kabbalistic imagery to express this end, the meaning is equally clear if conceived of in other than Messianic terms—for instance, the union of Atman, immanent godhead, and Brahman, transcendent godhead, in the state of Nirvana. What each Rider recognizes in the others is a transparence which will help lead to greater knowledge of the Chariot, and to the final moment of identification. When Himmelfarb returns to Xanadu at Miss Hare's request, he recognizes the true nature of what it is that links them:

She was at her ugliest, wet and matted, but any disgust which Himmelfarb might have felt was swallowed up in the conviction that, despite the differences of geography and race, they were, and always had been, engaged on a similar mission. Approaching from opposite directions, it was the same darkness and the same marsh which threatened to engulf their movements, but however lumbering and impeded those movements might be, the precious parcel of secrets carried by each must only be given at the end into certain hands. (327)

Himmelfarb's realization that he and Miss Hare are approaching their common goal "from opposite directions" underlines
the complete separateness of their lives up to the present, and though linked by a common awareness of the Chariot and all it signifies, in all other respects the four Riders are notable for their extreme dissimilarities. Such is White's skill in building up the 'inner structure' of the novel that no one of the four assumes thematic domination over the others; the function of each complements those of the other three, and even in the technicalities of style and character delineation, no two are handled in the same way.

In many ways a development of Theodora Goodman, Miss Hare, the most striking and brilliantly executed character in the novel, is the focal point of the first hundred pages. At the beginning of the story she is an epileptic living alone in the crumbling mansion, Xanadu, built by her father, an eccentric visionary who knew well "the caverns measureless to man", and who never forgave his daughter for perceiving this knowledge. Xanadu itself was once a place where "gilded mirrors led by subtle, receding stages far beyond the bounds of vision". But now, in the slow process of decay, it has suffered the fate which threatened Meroë, the incursion of the natural world.

Old birds' nests, lying on the Aubusson, or what had become, rather, a carpet of twigs, dust, mildew and the chrysalides of insects, trapped guilty feet with soft reminders.... in the course of some historic storm, an elm had entered in....the early leaves pierced the more passive colours of human refinement like a knife. (41)

In the midst of the decay, Miss Hare "wandered here and there,
letting in always more light". (37) Much of the time, beneath her wicker hat, Miss Hare is hardly recognizable as a human being—she is a scarcely tangible object, identified by and with that natural world which has invaded Xanadu and which the solid brick homes keep at bay with vigilance and lawnmowers. In herself she is clumsy, ugly and ungainly, seeking at all times that release which comes only with annihilation of the self: "Eventually I shall discover what is at the centre, if enough of me is peeled away". (51) It is emphasized early that Miss Hare has no part in a rational, ethical world. Amoral, and frightened of religious concepts, she needs no baptism into 'higher realities':

...she, Miss Hare, whose eyes were always probing, fingers trying, would achieve the ecstasy of complete, annihilating liberation without any such immersion. (8)

Xanadu becomes "a temple of mystic contemplation devoid of rational direction", 13 and to this temple of irrationality come, at one stage or another, each of the other three Riders. But it is the dreaded arrival of a housekeeper, Mrs Jolley, which introduces Miss Hare into the presence of anguish and guilt.

The Chariot appears to Miss Hare only at times of physical crisis. At such times, during her periodic fits, she is seized with terror, and a desire to identify the occupants of the Chariot of which she can hear only the trace-chains, and feel only the impact of the wheels. Her father once asked: "Who are the riders in the Chariot, eh, Mary? Who is ever going to
know?"(20) But Miss Hare, "whose own vision never formed, remaining a confusion of light, at most an outline of vague and fiery pain",(67) has first to undergo a spiritual crisis at the hands of her tormentor Mrs Jolley. Mrs Jolley, partial to kiddies, fluffy sponges and pastel shades, and determined that "at least she would remain a lady, whatever else might come in doubt",(51) brings with her into the world of Xanadu not only the trappings of conventional morality, but something more dangerous and insidious, the machinations of Mrs Flack, who, "through the medium of Mrs Jolley, insinuated herself into the cracks in the actual stone".(79) But only after her term of trial with Mrs Jolley does Miss Hare fully recognize the power of evil.

"All bad things have a family resemblance, Mrs Jolley, and are easily recognizable. I would recognize Mrs Flack however often she changed her hat. I can smell her when you do not mention her by name". (316)

Before gaining this knowledge, however,

...she had had little experience of evil. Newspapers she never read; living, not reading about it, had been her life. So the world had revolved on the axis with which she had provided it, until Mrs Jolley brought the virtues to Xanadu. (61)

What this means to Miss Hare becomes officially inscribed in pink letters on a cake Mrs Jolley bakes—FOR A BAD GIRL. Through the medium of a corrupt and self-appointed 'conscience', Miss Hare is brought to recognize her own potentiality for evil.

Days after the lettering had been consumed, Miss Hare was haunted by the pink cake. She must, she would understand it, though there were pockets
of thought which her mind refused to enter, like those evil thickets in which might be found little, agonizing tufts of fur, broken swallows' eggs, or a goat's rational skull. (61)

For Mrs Jolley learns that, in circumstances never made entirely clear, Miss Hare was somehow responsible for the burning of a goat in a back shed, and for the death by drowning of her father, whom she made little attempt to save, and may even have pushed under. The parallels here with the death of Mrs Jolley's own husband, by spiritual if not physical murder, are obvious, and in a re-enactment of the balls which were once held at Xanadu, Miss Hare and Mrs Jolley dance together.

"However much you intend to hurt me, I shall not be hurt", Miss Hare called. "I shall not watch". But followed after—or could she have been leading?—in her wicker hat. (87)

After this sudden exposure of the dance, Mrs Jolley suggests that they are two of a kind; but "Miss Hare could not accept the possibility of that, and was rootling in remote recesses for some evidence of her own election". (90) Finding no evidence, she runs outside and into the orchard, where she meets Himmelfarb for the first time. The story that he tells her, the story of his own life, brings her into a new awareness of evil as an operative principle—but still she will not accept its presence, there, under the tree: "how can we look out from under this tree, and not know that all is good?" (162) And still, like Himmelfarb, she does not recognize the Riders in the Chariot.

On the morning of Mrs Jolley's departure, the house-
keeper accuses Miss Hare of consort ing in the orchard with "a dirty Jew". In a travesty of piety, she demands,

"Who did the Jews crucify?"
"The Jew!" Miss Hare panted. "I know that. Because Peg used to tell me. It was horrible. And blood running out of his hands, and down his poor side. I have never allowed myself to think about it". (317)

Not until she has stood in the fire of Himmelfarb's burning shack, and tended the Jew in the Deposition scene at the end of the book, does the actuality of suffering and evil emerge for her in complete clarity, along with a new-found power of love.

In order to love and honour the more, she had invested the Jew with a goodness so pure as to render the possessor practically powerless against the consummate forms of evil. (454)

In expiation for the burning of the goat and the drowning of her father, she has herself gone through the fire. "So Miss Hare was translated". (465)

[she] had, in fact, entered that state of complete union which her nature had never yet achieved.... So she wrapped and cherished the heavenly spirit which had entered her, quite simply and painlessly, as Peg had suggested that it might. And all the dancing demons fled out....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. (471)

The end of Miss Hare is to become "all-pervasive", and her rumored death by drowning is in itself of no importance. Subscribing to no dogmas of reason or intellect, and generally conceded to be quite mad, Miss Hare is an embodiment of that spirit of primitive animism which sounds so insistently in White's work. Her own final translation is more remote and
ineffable than those of the other three, and she herself is the most unreal of the four Riders, having about her the evanescent of a purely imaginative reality. But her reality is such that she alone has the capacity to seem to escape the controlling hand of the author; she might gather up into her own reality all the other characters and events of the novel.

In many ways diametrically opposed to Miss Hare is the figure of Mordecai Himmelfarb, who, burdened with the failure of intellect and the weight of guilt, represents an attempt on White's part to come to terms with the particular tragedy of the twentieth century. Unlike Miss Hare, who, as a thing of nature, is scarcely responsible for her own actions, and whose subtle changes and modulations are those of the natural world, Himmelfarb the Jew is victim of his own consciousness. The conflict of reason and passion, commitment and escape, alienation and faith, within the enclosed world of his own mind, makes him an analogous figure to those peculiarly contemporary heroes of Kafka and Camus.

There is a notable change in style in the hundred pages which describe Himmelfarb's life up to his arrival in Australia. The comment has been made that

...in Riders in the Chariot the flashback to Himmelfarb's life, though brilliant in itself, makes a fissure in the book and is not so beautifully moulded into the whole as are the past lives of Miss Hare, Dubbo and Mrs Godbold.14

The somewhat flatter and more prosaic style of this part of
the book is on White's part quite intentional, in that Himmelfarb's story introduces into the novel a catalogue of the horrors of recent European history which, it seems, all modern writers have at some time to face, and to which White, up till now, has made only oblique reference. Built up detail by suffocating detail is a picture of middle class European Jewry, in which the young Himmelfarb grows up, despising his apostate father and falling into complacency and intellectual stagnation. During the celebration following his marriage to Reha Liebmann, however, he encounters again the dirty and impoverished dyer from his own town, who first introduced him to his wife. Himmelfarb is exasperated that this man should introduce him now to the naggings of deeper responsibilities, and he accuses him of being all riddles and secrets.

"There is no secret", the dyer appeared to be saying, or shouting back. "Equanimity is no secret. Solitariness is no secret. True solitariness is only possible where equanimity exists. An unquiet spirit can introduce distractions into the best-prepared mind". "But this is immoral!" Mordecai protested, shouting. "And on such an occasion! It is a denial of community. Man is not a hermit".

"Depending on the man; he is a light that will reflect out over the community--all the brighter from a bare room". (134)

The image of the dyer is never to leave Himmelfarb during the whole of his long journey of atonement. The necessity to reconcile the supposed opposites of love and hate, good and evil, is objectified in the tension he feels this night between love for his wife and disgust 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. (135)

Early in his married life Himmelfarb comes across some old Hasidic books which introduce him to the Chariot of Redemption, but, like Miss Hare, he cannot identify the faces of the riders; attempts to escape out of the shell of himself result only in transferrence of his own image.

So that the long awaited moment was reduced to a reflection of the self. In a distorting mirror. Who, then, could hope to be saved? (143)

Knowledge of his own imperfections only increases his desire to fulfill the covenant, to restore the sparks of the Shechinah to their source,

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. (147)

But any pride Himmelfarb might take in his Messianic role is quenched when his wife is taken by the Nazis at a time when he, in a moment of inexplicable fear, has sought refuge in the house of his childhood acquaintance Konrad Stauffer. In this betrayal, not only of his wife, but of all Israel, he is forced to face his own inability to honour the Covenant—as he explains to Miss Hare: "It was I, you know, on whom they were depending to redeem their sins".(162) During a period of withdrawal at the country estate of the Stauffers, he regains his convictions
in spite of the knowledge of his own guilt, and

...would not recognize that he was not always acceptable to those he was trying to assist. For the unresponsive souls would rock, and shudder, and recoil from being drawn into the caverns of his eyes.\(^\text{15}\) (166)

Only at dusk would Himmelfarb "begin to suspect the extent of his own powers".\(^\text{16}\) His period of withdrawal and growing humility prepares him for the long journey of penance. He gives himself up to the authorities and is transported across Europe to the extermination camp at Friedensdorf. The sustained nightmare of this part of the novel reaches its climax in a final vision of helplessness and horror, when Himmelfarb's fellow prisoner, the Lady from Czernowitz, appears naked before entering the gas chamber, calling for help which the Jew realizes he is powerless to give. Capable now only of his own possible salvation, he is delivered from this hell by the almost divine intervention of a fire in the camp, and proceeds via Istanbul to Israel. On one of the kibbutzim he finds his brother-in-law, who believes, along with everybody else, that things have changed completely with the setting up of the Jewish state. But Himmelfarb knows the falsity of this, and with this knowledge he has changed radically within himself. He realizes that the redeemer must also be the scapegoat.

"The earth is in revolt. It will throw up fresh stones--tonight--tomorrow--always. And you, the chosen, will continue to need your scapegoat, just as some of us do not wait to be dragged out, but continue to offer ourselves".\(^\text{20}\)
The dual role of redeemer and scapegoat is highly dangerous to Himmelfarb, when he arrives in Australia and settles down in his shack between Xanadu and Sarsaparilla. His search for simplicity in the daily rituals of faith seems inevitably frustrated by his unknown but evidently appointed end. With the arrival of Easter and the Passover a decision one way or the other must be made.

It was his own open door which finally persuaded that he was the stranger whom some doorway must be waiting to receive. (410)

Accordingly he makes his way to the house of Harry Rosetree, the manager of the factory where he works, and, like Himmelfarb's own father, an apostate Jew turned Catholic. The Rose-trees reject the Jew, too obvious a symbol of their own defection, and he returns to the bitter herbs of his own seder table, his mission unfulfilled.

He touched the clay of Egypt, which time had turned browner. And herbs, never so bitter as facts. That he knew for certainty. (424)

He then discovers that in his absence Mrs Godbold has brought a shankbone of lamb, and with it seeming confirmation of his role as redeemer. On Good Friday his alternative role is played out, and at the instigation of Mrs Flack's son Blue, Himmelfarb is strung up on a tree in the factory yard, in a parody of crucifixion. A number of interpretations can be placed on this event, and it is perhaps doubtful whether White's intentions at this point are entirely clear even to himself. What is obvious, however, is that the crucifixion is in itself a failure.
Because he does not die on the cross, he can fulfill neither of his dual roles.

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. (447)

Having been taken down, he leaves the factory "in which it had not been accorded to him to expiate the sins of the world". (449)

It has been objected that the crucifixion scene is a fatal mistake, that the novel is marred "by the alien imposition of the central drama of Christian dogma". But it need not be an alien imposition if the close relationship between Passover and Easter is borne in mind. The Deliverance of Israel and the Redemption of Man which are celebrated in the two feasts are, in terms of the respective religions, the inception and the fulfilment of the Covenant. But in the context of Riders in the Chariot they are no more, or no less than, the hypothetical and unattainable limits of a process which begins over and over again in each individual's finite life, a life which can never hope to encompass the extremities that ultimate deliverance and redemption represent. Similarly, the role of redeemer or scapegoat can never be fulfilled in its entirety by Himmelfarb, while there remains the endless transmigration of souls. But in terms of the individual life, failure with respect to the rest of mankind does not preclude union of the individual soul with the source of all being. In spite of his greatest failure and error, Himmelfarb embarks on the last solitary journey, united with
the primordial being in the source of light: "Again, he was the Man Kadmon, descending from the Tree of Light to take the Bride". (462)

Although treated in less detail than the other three, Mrs Godbold is of equal thematic importance in that she is the only one to have already attained the state of complete receptivity. Living with her children and drunken husband in a shed at the bottom of the hill, she remains largely unaffected by the pattern of events around her. Despite her apparent simplicity, she alone has the power to reconcile the elements of dissension and conflict in those with whom she comes in contact, and her function is to take unto herself all evil, and transform it by love.¹⁸ The knowledge and the eventual release which the other Riders seek are hers from the beginning. Mrs Godbold, who to Miss Hare is "the most positive evidence of good"(66), has her own vision of the Chariot:

The massive rumps of her horses waited, swishing their tails through eternity. The wheels of her chariot were solid gold, well axled, as might have been expected. (67)

The assuredness of her vision corresponds to her own monumental stability, and contrasts with the many transformations of Miss Hare, and the endless cerebration of Himmelfarb. The nature of her belief is never clarified, because any statement of it would only codify and hence reduce its assimilative power. She says to Himmelfarb on first meeting him,
"Oh, yes, I believe. I believe in Jesus. I was brought up chapel, like. At home. We all believe". But added: "That is, the children do". (233)

Himmelfarb, who senses in her attainments quite beyond him, is inclined to resent—possibly because in her innocence and ignorance she is incapable of considering any reality she had not herself experienced.

It could have been, within her scheme, that evil was only evil when she bore the brunt of it herself; she alone must, and would deflect, receiving the fist, if necessary, between the eyes. He rather sensed this, but could not accuse her innocence. Besides, he suspected it of being a vice common to Christians. (236)

Himmelfarb is perhaps unwilling to recognize that, as Moraitis told Theodora Goodman, "it is not necessary to see things if you know". 19

The moment of Mrs Godbold's most complete release, "closer than you are ever likely to come", (253) as she is told, occurs early in her life when she hears the organ in the East Anglian cathedral near her home. The effect on her is similar to the effect on Thelma Parker of the concert in Sydney:

Her courage failed before the summit, at which she must either step right off, into space, crash amongst the falling matchsticks, or be lifted out of sight forever. (253)

But unlike Thelma Parker, Ruth Joyner has built up no defenses against the realities of guilt and death. Shortly after the experience in the cathedral, she is forced to carry to her father the broken body of her brother, crushed by a hay-cart while under her care. The two experienced realities, fulfilment of
the spirit and death of the body, are closely allied after this in Mrs Godbold's mind, and her ability to endure is explained largely by her very failure to reach the heights she once attained as a child. Not that she aspires to such heights any more—the rather banal hymns she sings over her laundry are sufficient reminder of the knowledge she alone possesses, and which it is her function now to communicate to others in the form of love—not Himmelfarb's "lovingkindness" so much as the inability to reject, the infinite power of assimilation. That her love is mute, and dependent on the recognition of others for its power, is made evident in the account of her relationship with Mrs Chalmers-Robinson, a wealthy Sydney woman who engages Ruth Joyner in domestic service on her arrival in Australia. Faced with increasing age which she hides under powder, and a financial collapse which she hides under a desperate astuteness, Mrs Chalmers-Robinson seeks vainly to tap the knowledge, appearing to her as secrets, which her maid seems to possess. Ruth is unable to make good this failure of self, and her employer turns for possible refuge to Christian Science and her own social reinstatement. Ruth Joyner marries the iceman and moves to Sarsaparilla, where her love can extend, not only to Xanadu, where at one stage she nurses an incapable Miss Hare, but also to such bastions of iniquity as Mrs Khalil's bordello, where she meets for the first and last time Alf Dubbo. But it is not until Himmelfarb's crucifixion that Mrs Godbold's strength becomes finally apparent, and her shed, into which
she has taken the dying Jew, becomes transformed by the light of the fire destroying his own house. She is silent, leaving the more violent manifestations to Miss Hare, but she, too, becomes in her own way "all-pervasive". Her own virtual anonymity derives from her belief that most expressions of the self are pointless--like expressions of faith, they imprison rather than release. She endeavours to explain some of this to Harry Rosetree, born Haïm Rosenbaum, who comes to her after Himmelfarb's death.

"Men are the same before they are born. They are the same at birth, perhaps you will agree. 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". (480)

If Mrs Godbold undergoes no final translation herself, as the other three do, it is because she has no need; she has united within herself those elements of dialectic and tension which, in the other three, give direction and impetus to their respective journeys to the center and source of light. Mrs Godbold goes through no process of becoming: she herself is being, and as such she is present not only at the center but also at the periphery of things.

Mrs Godbold, when she was noticed at all, seemed to live for irrelevance. 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? (517)

To most people, of course, the significance of Mrs Godbold remains hidden--being at once too complex and too simple. It
remains concealed even to the woman herself.

Even though it was her habit to tread straight, she would remain a plodding simpleton. From behind, her great beam, under the stretchy cardigan, might have appeared something of a joke, except to the few who happened to perceive that she also wore the crown. (531)

Like Judd in Voss, her function in the world is to be of the world; like Judd, she "continued to live". (532)

In The Tree of Man some of the mysteries of being were objectified and possibly explained by a stack of paintings hidden in the postmistress's house. In Voss, crude cave paintings, done by unknown members of a primitive race, translated, for those members of the expedition with eyes to see, the duality of flesh and spirit. In Riders in the Chariot, Alf Dubbo grapples with the same problem of somehow representing in plastic form the common mystery of the four Riders. His own individual existence is of no consequence; it can be made significant only in so far as it can be translated into the forms of art. White's obvious concern with the nature and function of the artist receives its fullest expression in the depiction of the aboriginal half-caste, the fourth Rider, and the fourth and unrecognized figure in the Fiery Furnace, which is made the subject of one of his paintings. As in the other three Riders, it is Dubbo's goal to break through to "the sparks of light imprisoned in the forms of wood and stone". (147) But the aboriginal must first translate his experience into other forms, the forms of painting. His function is analogous to White's
own function as artist—the rendering of experience in the forms of words; but just as words themselves can imprison if the symbols and images they contain are not liberated from the page to assume their own independent reality, so must Dubbo break through the reality of pigment and created shapes to the reality of the expressed idea, which will then inform the whole, much as the idea of union expressed in the Chariot informs and contains all aspects of the novel.

In thus embodying his conception of the artist's function in a character in the novel, White runs the risk of explaining what is already implicit by virtue of the novel itself as a work of art. Not that Dubbo is in any way a mere cipher—he is as intensely realized as any of the other major characters. But in describing in detail the paintings themselves, White fails where others have failed before him, that is, in attempting to convey in a literal equivalent what is conceived and executed in another art form—a form which imposes its own laws and its own reality. Whether or not Dubbo is a great, or even a good, artist, is beside the point; the result, however, of all this literal attention to the paintings themselves is to rob them of any real significance and divert the reader's attention from Dubbo himself. But this failed attempt at an impossible realization does not affect the importance of Dubbo as artist in the total pattern of the novel.

The aboriginal at one stage announces: "I owe everything
to the Reverend Timothy Calderon, and his sister, Mrs Pask". (298)

Raised according to the dubious program of a Christian experiment, Dubbo is corrupted at a fairly early stage by the Reverend Timothy himself, who successfully introduces his ward to that knowledge which his sister, Mrs Pask, would keep from him with the aid of the diversions of her paint box. Instead, she unwittingly puts into his hands the instruments of his damnation and ultimate salvation. His foster-parents between them create in Dubbo the polarity which sustains his art. Following on from the Reverend Timothy's destruction of his innocence, Dubbo wanders through a hell of sickness and degradation; but the gift for creation originally exploited by Mrs Pask for her own peace of mind claims more and more of his existence, and the two forces, sickness and creativity, the classic combination for the artist, contend for mastery.

There was always, of course, his secret gift.
Like his disease. He would no more have confessed those to a black than he would have to a white.
They were the two poles, the negative and the positive of his being: the furtive, destroying sickness, and the almost as furtive, but regenerating, creative act. (366)

His painting flourishes most at Hannah's place in Sydney, where a scruffy collection of prostitutes and queers enacts the rituals of a human behavior stripped of all pretension. Here he does an outline for his painting of the Chariot, inspired by an insipid nineteenth century French print found in a library. At Hannah's place the painting begins to take shape in his mind, but the final details are indistinct—"he could not master the innermost,
incandescent eye of the feathers of fire". Moving on to Sarsaparilla he encounters Miss Hare, briefly, at Xanadu, recognizing in her "an apostle of truth"; an almost furtive relationship is established with Himmelfarb at the factory, when the Jew discovers "Ezekiel" in the washroom; and, of greatest importance, Mrs Godbold wipes away the blood when he haemorrhages on Mrs Khalil's floor.

But the knowledge which Dubbo seeks to gain contains within it the seeds of betrayal. Himmelfarb's crucifixion brings with it a crisis of responsibility. The utter commitment of the Jew has its counterpart in the aboriginal's total inability to act, and White perceives well the necessary callousness of the dedicated artist who faces always away from the outer world, which he recognizes only in terms of what he might make it become; his only commitment is to the reality he will himself create.

...Alf Dubbo was stationed as if upon an eminence, watching what he alone was gifted or fated enough to see. Neither the actor nor the spectator, he was that most miserable of human beings, the artist. All aspects, all possibilities were already splintering, forming in him. (437)

After the ritual enacted in the yard,

Dubbo knew that he would never, never act, that he would dream, and suffer, and express some of that suffering in paint—but was, in the end, powerless. In his innocence, he blamed his darker skin. Somewhere clocks were chiming. (441)

Thus is Dubbo forced to play Peter to Harry Rosetree's Judas. Always standing to one side of the drama which is being unfolded,
he watches briefly through a window the subsequent scene inside Mrs Godbold's shed. Already the experience is crystallizing in his solitude, and before his death Dubbo succeeds in painting the Riders in the Chariot.

The Four Living Creatures of Ezekiel are of course readily recognizable.

One figure might have been done in marble, massive, white, inviolable. A second was conceived in wire, with a star inside the cage, and a crown of barbed wire. The wind was ruffling the harsh, fox-coloured coat of the third, flattening the pig's snout, while the human eye reflected all that was ever likely to happen. The fourth was constructed of bleeding twigs and spattered leaves, but the head could have been a whirling spectrum. (494)

Thus is the detail made clear, the human reality shaped and controlled by the hand of the artist. Thus also, at the end of his last novel to date, White asserts a union arising from and overcoming a world of discord, chaos and horror; but the ultimate nature and purpose of this union constitutes a mystery. It is true that no artist is required to solve the problems he poses in his art, but in White's case the only final resolution must always entail more than can be encompassed by words. The reality beyond the forms must be recreated in the mind of the reader.

Just as he had not dared completely realize the body of the Christ, here the Chariot was shyly offered. But its tentative nature became, if anything, its glory, causing it to blaze across the sky, or into the soul of the beholder. (494)
FOOTNOTES

1 Marcel Aurousseau, "Odi Profanum Vulgus: Patrick White's Riders in the Chariot", Meanjin, XXI, 1, 1962, p.30


8 Riders in the Chariot, New York, 1961, p.235. All subsequent references are to this edition.


12 The name given to Mrs Flack's house, "Karma", is in this respect of great significance. Not only does it underline the fact that White's mysticism is not to be restricted to Kabbalistic Judaism alone, but it also indicates Mrs Flack's ultimate function as representative of the contingent world of deeds, acts and retribution. She is one of those souls "who protested in grey voices that they had already been directed to enter the forms of plants, stones, animals, and in some cases, even human beings". (330)
This passage, along with several others, emphasizes the strong parallel with "The Ancient Mariner". Himmelfarb's ensuing journey is also one of expiation and atonement, but Miss Hare of Xanadu, to whom he tells his story now, is not the unwilling listener of the poem.

Her name is so similar to that of Professor Godbole in A Passage to India that an analogy here seems justified. Godbole, too, is able to reconcile all disparities. In an incomplete and divided world, all qualities imply all other qualities: thus, good is merely the absence of evil, but both are manifestations of the ultimate reality (Brahman) which is without qualities. Like Mrs Godbold, he achieves serenity by infinite acceptance, and survives the events of the novel because untouched by them.

White's previous accounts of the musical experience suffer from the same inherent defects—even Proust fails to discover any really workable analogy, but his seemingly greater appreciation of the problems involved leads him to incorporate much more successfully into A La Recherche du Temps Perdu such 'foreign elements' as Elstir's paintings and Vinteuil's musical phrase. This conveying of the experience of one art form in terms of another should not be confused with the legitimate borrowing of another art form's terminology. For instance, 'image' and 'rhythm', though derived from the forms of painting and music, are perfectly acceptable literary terms.
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