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In Search of the Secular Sacrament:  
Strategies for Salvation  
in Five Novels by Patrick White

Edward Cooney

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in  
The Department  
of  
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
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## ABSTRACT

### In Search of the Secular Sacrament: Strategies for Salvation in Five Novels by Patrick White

Edward Cooney

The Australian writer Patrick White, like many of this century's greatest artists, has examined the plight of contemporary humanity bereft of the support of traditional religion and reason. Because of the power of the religious novels of his "middle" period, many critics see him primarily as a religious writer. This approach is only one of several White investigates as a possible strategy in the individual's search for meaning. Beginning with his 1948 novel The Aunt's Story, each protagonist has sought to overcome his or her alienated state in various ways. In this novel, White explores a woman's search into her own fragmented self in psycho-social terms. In Riders in the Chariot, White uses the mystico-religious paradigm generally regarded as his major theme. However, in The Vivisector religious themes are backgrounded, as White explores Aestheticism as a strategy for salvation. With The Eye of the Storm, White contemplates the life lived with no strategy for salvation at all. The conclusion of each novel indicates the author's discomfort with each approach as a final solution to the problem. With The Twyborn Affair, there is a new sense of resolution which heralds the fact that this novel stands as a retrospective of all his work.

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## Introduction

"Literature . . . must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen within us" (Franz Kafka, qtd. in Steiner, Language and Silence 67).

In an article entitled "Human Literacy," George Steiner summarizes the dilemma facing the contemporary artist in the following way: "We cannot act now . . . as if nothing of vital relevance has happened to our sense of human possibility" (22). The destruction of the belief in the inevitability of human progress in the twentieth century, from both the secular and religious perspective, has left the artist in the untenable position of trying to convey his/her message across a vast gulf of apathy and despair.

Patrick White is a writer whose entire work is an attempt to bridge the gap between the anomie of contemporary life and the artist's desire to anatomize and comment upon that very void. He is a writer who believes that a "will-to-meaning" is the essence of human nature, and that the search to fulfill that yearning may lead to a life lived at the most profound level. Richard Rorty has written that Nietzsche "thinks a human life triumphant just so far as it escapes from inherited descriptions of the contingencies of its existence and finds new descriptions" ("The Contingency of Selfhood" 12). It is possible to view White's oeuvre as an attempt to find and describe a strategy which may permit the contemporary individual to experience this life of triumph.

White's work spans four decades of this century. It displays an adventurous variety of approaches to the

exploration and achievement of the will-to-meaning on the part of his protagonists. Unfortunately, there has been an undue concentration of critical attention on the novels of his middle "mystical" period which has tended to skew interpretation of his entire output. This attention has resulted at times in White's being termed a "religious novelist," the implication being that he is dealing with the human search for meaning solely through the unaffiliated monotheism which is the dominant paradigm of the novels of this period, such as Voss and Riders in the Chariot. As I seek to show here, White, throughout the many years of his work, has rather repeatedly shifted his perspective on the human condition, the strategies for salvation he offers varying widely from novel to novel.

To illustrate my thesis, I have chosen five novels White wrote over a period of forty years which I believe best exemplify each of the various strategies he explores in his study of the contemporary quest for the triumphant life.

In The Aunt's Story, published in 1948, the protagonist, Theodora Goodman, is an Australian spinster who travels to Europe after being liberated by the death of her contentious mother. This antic odyssey, termed by Ann McCulloch as "her search for authenticity" (314), is described in essentially psycho-social terms. At the Hotel du Midi in the South of France of the late thirties, Theodora becomes enmeshed in the lives, memories and fantasies of the polyglottal hotel guests, achieving thereby, through a process of fragmentation and reconstruction, a sense of self



she was not able to achieve in her Australian homeland. The final section of the novel describes Theodora's decision to abort her return journey home. She leaves the train which is carrying her through the American mid-west and descends into an oxymoronic realm of sane insanity which McCulloch describes in this way: "Theodora perishes away from the world of other people but only because she will not accept anything less than the truth" (316). The equivocal stance implicit in the aunt's final situation is a stage we will find common at the conclusion of White's novels. Each strategy is explored, yet each one is never entirely endorsed.

In Riders in the Chariot (1961), White leaves the psycho-social approach of The Aunt's Story to concentrate upon what Patricia Morley calls "the tradition of mysticism which seeks direct experience or immediate awareness of God" (The Mystery of Unity 2). The sense of fulfillment so desperately sought after by Theodora Goodman has in this later novel a definite supernatural incarnation in the image of the heavenly Chariot. Mary Hare, a character in the novel who resembles Theodora, may appear as equally mad, and is perhaps even more isolated from the community around her; nevertheless, with her companions, the exiled Jew Himmel-farb, the aborigine painter Alf Dubbo, and Mrs. Godbold, she forms an earthly manifestation of a communion of saints, centred around an unstructured yet vibrant faith. When pressed to explain the terms of this faith, Mary can only answer: "I believe in what I see, and what I cannot see"

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(58). However, according to White, Mary "would recognize the Hand in every veined leaf, and would bundle with the bee into the divine Mouth" (61). In this novel, the author is no longer exploring the ways in which the self may achieve integration and fulfillment through a search within its own psyche, but instead has given his protagonists the vision of the Chariot, the sign of a divine grace flowing toward his quartet of isolated beings.

This very isolation, however, demonstrates what for White is a hesitancy in adopting a viewpoint not entirely satisfying. The inability of each visionary to assimilate at all with the community surrounding him or her ultimately leads to an at times masochistic asceticism which can only be viewed as a dead end for all those who have not experienced the Chariot. The ambiguity noted concerning Theodora's final state is again present at the conclusion of this novel.

In 1970, The Vivisector was published. The protagonist, Hurtle Duffield, suffers from a profound yearning to search for life's meaning. However, White has Duffield chart a path toward his goal in a very different direction than that explored by the company of the elect in Riders in the Chariot, although the motif is investigated to some extent in the figure of the painter Alf Dubbo.

For Hurtle Duffield, painting becomes the path to salvation. The story of the painter who as a young boy leaves his working-class milieu and is adopted by the cultured Courtneys is also a complex tale of the struggle

between the desire for human belonging and the terror that this belonging may ultimately lead to artistic death. Notably missing throughout the major portion of the novel are the mystico-religious motifs that were the predominant images in Riders in the Chariot. As A.P. Reimer states about The Vivisector: "In this novel the material world and the world of external reality impinge on the central character's private psychodrama to an extent unencountered in earlier works" ("Eye of the Needle" 252). Even though near the end of his life the painter suffers a stroke, during and after which he achieves a level of transcendence, this event occurs so late in the novel as to appear as a virtual deus ex machina in the painter's struggle for meaning. Duffield, like Theodora in The Aunt's Story, achieves salvation at the cost of losing the world. The painter receives his vision on his deathbed, at last able to blend the principles by which he has led his aesthetic life with his overwhelming spiritual need (expressed in the novel by the final blending of the words "indigo" and "God"). Grace through aesthetics is possible, White implies; but again, the arbitrariness of its bestowal is a severely limiting problem.

Brian Kiernan has written that for White's characters "the meaning of the individual life lies in its totality, in the continual struggle to discover permanence within the flow of experience" (Patrick White 109). In his 1973 novel, The Eye of the Storm, Elizabeth Hunter experiences a revelation with semi-mystical implications in late middle

age, early enough for it to make a difference for her in living life's totality. This novel is White's most problematic because this revelation, occurring long before death, has so little effect on the life of the woman who receives it. Elizabeth Hunter is an atypical White protagonist in that not only has she no apparent yearning for a meaningful life but also has no regret that she is missing it. The experience of transcendence she undergoes on a deserted island in the eye of the hurricane is therefore the ultimate in gratuitousness. There is no question of the novel's nihilistic implications. Reimer refuses to endorse the opinion that Mrs. Hunter's baptismal experience at death can be seen in terms of epiphany. He writes: "There is always a suggestion present that her death is merely death, and that, as an extension of this, her experiences . . . contain little, if any, trace of absolute truth" (262).

In this novel White also explores the vagaries of familial relationships that was begun with The Vivisector. The intricate web of intrigues that is constructed between Mrs. Hunter and the rest of her family is explored at length from the perspective of whether the relationships may increase or attenuate a life fulfilled. The triumph which usually marks the death of the protagonist (as in the deaths of Hurtle Duffield and Himmelfarb, for example) is experienced in this novel by Mary de Santis, Elizabeth's night nurse, and not Mrs. Hunter herself. The old woman's determination to live her life outside salvation dissolves at her death into an isolation replete with the typical.

White eschatological ambiguity.

With each of these four novels, the final stance regarding the achievement of the protagonists appears, as noted previously, strangely tenuous and adumbrated. However, a marked change in position occurs with the publication of The Twyborn Affair in 1979. The central focus of the novel is the search of an individual for meaning that seems to reside in what M.H. Abrams calls "its own lost and sundered self" (Natural Supernaturalism 260). The main character, Eddie Twyborn, through a series of gender reversals (as Eudoxia, the kept young woman of the old Greek ~~Angelos~~, as Eddie, the hired man working on a ranch in the Australian outback, and as Eadith, the madam of a brothel in the London of the thirties) makes the same search for self-integration as Theodora Goodman in The Aunt's Story, written three decades before. Yet this return to a strategy previously explored does not indicate repetition. Manly Johnson calls The Twyborn Affair "a fictionalized retrospective" (Twyborn, "The Abbess" 161) of White's life, which undoubtedly accounts for the difference between the achievement of Theodora Goodman and Eddie Twyborn. Theodora lives on but as an isolated figure, judged insane by those around her, and she remains an exile in her alienated individuality. Eddie resolves the conflict within himself/herself and forgives and is forgiven by his mother, the dominant force in his life. Although the novel ends with Eddie's death, there is present a strong indication that a re-birth has occurred on two levels. First, his

mother realizes that she and Eddie have become inextricably united, and this trope of unity transcends the equivocation noted at the end of the previous novels. Second, on the artistic level, the final image of the novel is Mrs. Twyborn fantasizing a bulbul singing in a paradisaical garden. This songbird at sunrise is the birth of the poet, a point that becomes significant with the realization that the death of Eddie (during the London blitz) coincides with the beginning of Patrick White's career.

The Twyborn Affair closes White's explorations of the strategies for salvation. The sense of closure at the conclusion of the novel is an effective culmination of the process of engagement characteristic of all the writer's work. With The Aunt's Story and The Twyborn Affair serving as bipolar signposts of the decades' work, a cyclical pattern emerges, or, more precisely, a spiral, for the end of the cycle, if it indeed covers the same territory as the beginning, is marked by a greater profundity and complexity because of the knowledge gained throughout the decades of exploration. This knowledge makes it possible for the self, in its search for the truth "in an ultimate recognition of its own identity . . . . [to] be 'at home with itself in its Otherness'" (Abrams 260).

## Chapter I

### The Aunt's Story: To Gather Paradise

"For Occupation -- This --  
The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise -- " (Emily Dickinson)

#### I

In his autobiography, Patrick White explains that he chose to write fiction "as the means of introducing to a disbelieving audience the cast of contradictory characters of which I am composed" (Flaws in the Glass 20). In each of his novels, White has taken one of these "characters" and posited a strategy by which he or she may attempt to attain salvation. In The Aunt's Story (1948), the first novel under discussion, this attempt is carried out on what is perhaps the most rudimentary level. Theodora Goodman, the protagonist, undertakes a prolonged odyssey in search of her own essential being.

This novel has been called "White's first serious look at the linkages joining self to universe" (Wolfe 66). The novel is essentially a story of liberation, but a liberation with shattering consequences. The linkages which join the protagonist Theodora Goodman with the universe are of such an intensity as to sunder her permanently from both her environment and her reason.

The novel begins with Theodora's entry into liberation: "But old Mrs. Goodman did die at last" (3). Theodora, the dutiful daughter who had been taking care of her imperious and contentious mother, is at last, by her parent's death, freed from this bondage. However, before she leaves home,

her niece, Lou, requests that Theodora recapitulate the story of her life, a device White employs to usher in the major motifs that will be used throughout the novel:

She had told the story of Meroë, an old house in which nothing remarkable had taken place, but where music had been played, and roses had fallen from their stems, and the human body had disguised its actual mission of love and hate. (11).

Theodora here is indulging in romantic reverie, for when the tale has been told, little music but much disguise is revealed. Roses, music, and disguise are the leitmotifs which White uses in his novel. It is music, especially, which is the embodiment of what might be termed the "psychical harmony" which Theodora ultimately seeks. Yet, at the beginning, her world is one of supreme disharmony, of disguise and disillusion that bury truth within the ground of conventional rigidity. Theodora spends her childhood at Meroë, a place of mythic resonance, a land of black volcanic rock which "conspired with the name, to darken, or to split deeper open the black rock, or to frown with a fiercer, Ethiopian intensity" (13).<sup>1</sup> However, it is not long before Theodora encounters disillusion when she learns what the outside world thinks of Meroë. One Saturday when she is in town with her father, she overhears the other ranchers ridicule her father and call their place "Rack-an'-Ruin Höller" (18).

Consequently, Theodora begins to learn that she must dissemble to preserve the mythos of Meroë. Her sister Fanny



teaches her literally to reject the grub within the rose when her first response is acceptance. However, Theodora's rejection remains superficial, for "she could not condemn her pale and touching grub" (15).

Theodora subsequently becomes an early incarnation of the White protagonist as alienated outsider. "The lonely quest for some reconciling harmony" (Colmer 67) is almost completely abandoned as the mythical substance of Meroë is suppressed by the lessons in conformity and the gestures of disguise as Theodora struggles to preserve her nascent self-expression against encroaching strangulation. White's epigraph for Part One calls specific attention to Theodora's isolation in "that solitary land of the individual experience in which no fellow footfall is heard" (1).

There are at Meroë some factors which preserve Theodora from complete extinction. Her father, "who was thick and mysterious as a tree, but also hollow" (9), represents a qualified measure of escape and companionship; however, his lack of strength makes him an ultimately doomed figure. There is a sense of passivity and indifference in Mr. Goodman through which Theodora cannot break. For all his tales and mythic allusions, he is not powerful enough to counteract the pervasive influence of his wife, who labels his ideas "romantic and ridiculous" (35). Theodora, therefore, learns early not to lean on this "hollow tree."

There are messages that come to Theodora from the outside world, brief flickerings which linger in her psyche and continue to support her while she still must submit to

her mother's regime. A Syrian salesman appears periodically at Meroë and on these occasions "the day was changed, which once had been flat as a pastry board" (22). After he leaves, Theodora realizes that his presence has created a state "in which rocks might at any moment open, or words convey meaning" (23). These visits serve to give Theodora only a momentary glimpse of the possibility of another reality. They point towards an ineffable revelation but, just as this awareness seems on the brink of consciousness, her mother's overbearing contempt for anything tinged with "romance" crushes any awakening.

The most important incident at Meroë can be bifurcated into two events which occur on the same portentous day. The first event transpires on the natural level: "On her twelfth birthday the big oak in front was struck by lightning, and from three hundred yards Theodora was thrown to the ground" (34). This occasion is one of many White creates for his elected ones so that they will be "stroked"<sup>2</sup> into consciousness. Theodora, despite the incipient trauma of this goad, is neither ready nor able to respond appropriately to this possible sign of grace. Her destiny in the form of her long odyssey must unfold in its own predestined manner before she arrives at the goal merely hinted at on this day, her twelfth birthday.

The second event which occurs on this auspicious day begins with the appearance of The Man Who Was Given His Dinner. He is an old prospecting friend of Theodora's father who arrives at Meroë, intending to revive the

friendship the two had shared. However, Mrs. Goodman quite openly displays her bitter hostility and resentment of this figure from what she considers her husband's dissolute past. Faced with this strong disapproval which he is unable to combat, Mr. Goodman hurriedly gives his visitor his dinner outside the house. The old prospector, sensing the tension that his presence is creating, leaves shortly after eating. However, before he goes, he tells Theodora: "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" (38).

This recognition between one member of the elect and another is common in White's work, as we shall see in the later novels. What is striking about this visitor, a man who has achieved the quest upon which Theodora herself will later set out, is his confidence in his wisdom. He is, as we have seen, a prophet; he also views his own life with a quiet certitude and contentment. He looks for gold, he says, not from greed but because "it is as good a way of passing your life as any other" (35). This remarkable detachment, however, cannot disturb the supreme imperturbability of Mrs. Goodman, who remains unimpressed and, finally, victorious. Theodora has watched this conflict and has drawn her lesson from it: "It was terrible, the strength of Mother" (36). The young girl knows by now that she is set against her mother, on the side of the "other," and knowing this, "she felt afraid for what was prepared" (39).

Theodora's last early message concerning her destiny is given to her by Miss Spofforth, the head of the boarding

school the young girl is attending. The older woman tells her young charge: "There is much you shall experience. You will see clearly, beyond the bone" (57).

The effect of prophecy in the novel strengthens the sense of importance in Theodora's life, implying a predetermined destiny as Theodora continues to tell of her early experiences. These prophecies highlight the mythic level of meaning in Theodora's life, a level on which she functions throughout the novel. They finally culminate, in Part Three, in the figure of Holstius, who becomes the instrument of the aunt's transcendence.

However, in Part One, these harbingers of grace are not enough to liberate Theodora from her mother's rule. At one moment she seems about to break free when she is out hunting with Frank Parrott, a young man who is interested in her. She is angry with him and with the simpering flirtatiousness of her sister, and, because of this anger, she not only beats him at his own sport, hunting, but kills a hawk, a fellow being into which she has been briefly transformed: "She knew the white air, closer than a sheath, and the whole cold world was a red eye" (65). This murder, then, is also a suicide. On one level Theodora is angrily fighting against the mores of her background, and yet, on a much deeper level, she realizes that by the very fact of experiencing this useless anger she is repudiating what is best in herself. In frustration and despair she shoots, knowing she cannot miss: "I was wrong, she said, but I shall continue to destroy myself, right down to the last of my

several lives" (66).

Part of Theodora's struggle with Frank Parrott involves her own androgynous nature. Cynthia Vanden Driesen has remarked that "androgynous motifs mark the progress of a character to psychic wholeness, and bi-sexual characteristics mark the endorsed characters of [White's] novels" (80). In this novel, the theme of androgyny does not assume the central significance it will in the later novels such as The Solid Mandala and, especially, in The Twyborn Affair; this latter work will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five, which will also contain a study of this motif.

The death of her father effectively completes Theodora's isolation at Meroë. This quintessential, albeit failed, symbol of inner life has gone, leaving his grieving daughter "walking in the passages of Meroë, a reflection walking through mirrors" (80). Theodora now feels that whatever stirrings have occurred within her, and whatever intimations she has perceived in her surroundings and from others, these have all been finally and forever stifled. The death of her father has also ushered in the death of her self. She tells her mother: "I am dead, I am dead, Meroë has crumbled" (80).

However, Theodora's will to meaning is resilient enough to survive the loss of Meroë and the subsequent move to Sydney with her mother. White treats this city negatively: it has to bear the weight of everything the author finds contemptible in what he considers to be a materialistic, superficial, and smug society. From the romantic bleakness

of Meroë, Theodora has come to a row house of "thin gardens" (84). This house, and her mother's presence within it, soon further imprisons the daughter within a relationship marked by the wearying and overbearing malice of the older woman:

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. (93)

One Sunday a man named Jack Frost murders his wife and three daughters by slashing their throats. In spite of the consequent consternation of the neighbourhood, Theodora, again the outsider, feels a kinship with the murderer: "it is still so close. Like something one has done oneself" (96). Theodora realizes that through this act, Jack Frost "had finally dared to pitch the stone" at all that was preventing him from penetrating what she calls this "irreproachable facade" (96).<sup>3</sup> Theodora knows that she does not yet have the courage, nor the means, to follow.

Fortunately, even in the bleak morass of Sydney, Theodora encounters signifiers of her destiny, the most important of which is the Greek musician, Moraïtis. The music motif, already referred to above, becomes of central importance here. On the night Theodora meets the musician, the mythos of Meroë flashes across her consciousness: "The roselight that Theodora remembered now [was] of Meroë. She swam through the sea of roses towards that other Ithaca"

(104). Through Moraītis and his music, Theodora experiences, at least for a brief moment, fulfillment of the search for meaning that she has most of her life been trying to ignore: "She had waited sometimes for something to happen. Now existence justified itself" (111). The potential of Meroë, the resolution of the prophecies, seems to be at hand.

Yet the fulfillment remains unrealized. Theodora sacrifices further intimacy with Moraītis to answer a summons from her pregnant sister Fanny, and shortly becomes an aunt. Lou, the baby that is born, is the niece to whom Theodora is recounting her life. As the new aunt holds her niece, whose trembling body "was reminiscent of the tender unprotected moments of her own retrospective awkwardness" (112), she realizes that, as close as this relationship may become, she is now an aunt, an onlooker. She is not someone in life to whom events will happen but will remain a bystander in the lives of her sister Fanny, her brother-in-law Frank, and their children.

The males with whom Theodora is involved in Sydney represent opposing aspects of her life. Moraītis the magician/musician, harbinger of grace and transcendence, is counter-balanced by the stalwart Huntly Clarkson: "if he experienced malaise, he usually put it down to physical. He took things for it" (103). It is Clarkson who is ultimately a dangerous influence, because he represents survival through continuous compromise. Theodora notices that "an abject and sorry deference had begun to make Huntly soft"

(118), and she realizes the death that lurks within that deference.

However, it is the real death of her mother that liberates her from the danger of succumbing to Huntly Clarkson. Even her niece Lou, despite Theodora's attachment to her, cannot keep the aunt from leaving, for, as the latter realizes, "There is no lifeline to other lives" (130). So, in the spirit of the postulant in Olive Shreiner's epigraph who must travel to "that solitary land of the individual experience in which no fellow footfall is heard," Theodora casts off from Australia and lands in a Europe marking time between two wars.

## II

"Jardin Exotique," the central panel in the triptych into which Patrick White divides his novel, marks an abrupt and startling change from Part One, which is permeated by the faint brooding presence of Meroë. The motif of the solitary seeker of wisdom is highlighted through the epigraph to Part Two, by Henry Miller: "we walk against a united world, asserting our dividedness" (131).

The setting is the Hôtel du Midi in Southern France where Theodora has come to rest after travelling throughout Europe. The name of the hotel connotes midday, and it is, appropriately, the midway station of Theodora's journey as well as of the novel. This section also depicts Theodora in mid-life in the glare of a midday sun that produces hallucination.



White introduces his theme of the opposition between reality and illusion early in this section: Theodora realizes that "there is no more complete a reality than a chair and a table" (133). He then proceeds to provide a cubistic fragmented representation of Theodora's reality which so completely intermingles fact and fantasy, so thoroughly blurs the boundaries of subject/object that the reader is left with the undeniable impression that a great deal of these events must surely be occurring only in the mind of the Australian guest. The characters in the hotel are never delineated in the same realistic manner that White has used in Part One. The stolid Fanny and Frank could never exist through these ethereal shifts and blendings. As one critic has commented, the residents of the Hotel du Midi "are rich in being, as the respectable conformists of conformist Australian society . . . were not" (Burns 169).

It is through the very subjectivism of Theodora's vision in this section that White begins to explore in greater detail the aunt's search for enlightenment. It is ironic that only when she has ceased travelling does her true exploration begin. In Part One, the sacramental presence of Meroë, and later its memory, as well as the few messengers which pierced through the cloak of conformity, were insufficient to break the bonds of Mrs. Goodman and Sydney. The Theodora encountered in Part Two is unbound and free-floating amid the debris of Western civilization. This is the end of the road for her. As we will see, everything after this is a return. She has sought revelation in a

Europe "in which the ghosts of Homer and St. Paul and Tolstoy waited for the crash" (137). This Spenglerian vision is further developed in the stories Theodora will hear from the residents of the hotel. The aunt's futile quest in Europe demonstrates White's point that her pilgrimage can only take place within the mind.

The central symbol of this section is, of course, the garden itself. Theodora, upon arrival, "hoped that the garden would be the goal of the journey" (137), and yet once she places herself within it, she realizes that this garden is a place of futility and will fail her as completely as everything else has: "The garden was completely static, rigid, the equation of a garden . . . the garden was untouchable" (138). Because of the garden's ineffectiveness as even a symbol for the salvation she seeks, Theodora quickly turns to the denizens of the hotel for answers. White portrays the aunt's relationships with these characters through a montage of shifting patterns that weave in and out of Theodora's consciousness in the same manner as the residents enter and leave the garden. Even though, as Barry Argyle states, Theodora realizes that "we are all to some extent imposters" (Patrick White, 29), she watches them, she listens, she becomes fragments of their lives.

The key to the interpretation of White's method of mosaic fragmentation lies in the following passage:

The landscape was a state of interminable being, hope and despair devouring and disgorging endlessly, and the faces, whether Katia Pavlou, or

Sokolnikov, or Mrs. Rapallo, or Wetherby, only slightly different aspects of the same state.

(179)

In the Hotel du Midi, one finds characters from the major European countries. The stories that Theodora hears and in which she later partakes include that of a young Greek girl trembling on the edge of her first romantic and sexual experience. The aunt also listens to the older residents, who recapitulate their tales of illusion and disillusion for her. Many of them seem to have come to the hotel primarily to wait for death. John Colmer writes: "because she is no longer constrained by conventional bonds, Theodora is free to liberate herself through her imaginative identification with the dreams, illusions and frustrated passions of the hotel residents" (25). The middle-aged woman, by adopting various identities in the stories of the residents, absorbs these experiences which become fragments of her own burgeoning identity. Yet the parameters of the identity remain fluid enough to allow her to take on yet one more role as she hears of the life of one after another hotel guest.

In a Europe fast becoming politically polarized, where everyone seems to be lining up to shout allegiance at one another, Theodora is often asked to define her own political affiliation. The Bloch sisters, for example, ask, "What are you?" and the aunt responds: "I have never really stopped to think" (146). This admission not only adequately answers the question on the political level, but also describes

Theodora's general state of mind. For it is clear that she has still not found the wisdom she seeks, has not yet ended her search, and therefore will not commit herself until she has reached her goal.

Her seeming passivity is so striking here that it can easily be misunderstood. Theodora is aware of the feeling of vague drifting in those around her: "People no longer come and go . . . people are brought and sent" (199). D.R. Burns thinks that this static condition is an attribute White gives intentionally to his elect: "For White, solitude, not society, is the true human milieu, and passivity not action, the proper mode of being" (111). Is this an accurate reading of Theodora Goodman? Will wisdom descend upon her in a pentecostal blaze while she merely stands and waits? As we have seen, even the role of aunt itself seems to indicate a condition of support and marginality. In her relationship with Katia Pavlou, the young Greek girl who becomes a niece surrogate for the Australian Lou, we read that "Theodora Goodman had become a mirror held to the girl's experience" (140). Not only has her physical journey come to a standstill, but her spiritual pilgrimage seems also to have been abandoned. She begins to resemble a stranded Penelope listening to all these strangers' tales that weave together with faint echoes of The Waste Land.<sup>4</sup>

On closer examination, however, it is clear that, as receptive as Theodora indeed is, she has abandoned neither her journey nor her search. Receptivity is not the same thing as passivity, for, as she absorbs the activity and

experiences of those around her, she is acutely aware of her own condition, waiting "for some act that still had to be performed" (233). As William Sheik has written, she is "reaching for immersion not transcendence" (141). A precise metaphor for this state in Theodora is her activity of knitting. She collects the scattered skeins of experiences, uniting them to form a garment the identity or function of which she tells the inquisitive Demoiselles Bloch "I have not yet made up my mind" (217). Yet Theodora is confident enough in her own work (or action) to know it will not turn out like that of the confused French sisters whose "consolation lay in worrying wool and cotton into deeper tangles" (145) and whose neglected, half-completed doilies, festoon the spikes of the jardin exotique. The garment upon which Theodora works is of grey wool, connoting here not blandness but instead characterizing the detachment with which Theodora is viewing all these lives. She tells the young British poet Wetherby, "I have reached the age of tolerance . . . It is agreeably compact" (229). Theodora is a listener who has reached a Barthian degree zero, "pregnant with all past and future specifications" (Barthes 58). Far from being the solitary passivity which Burns suggests, Theodora's listening, her ravelling, is a continuation of her attempt to assemble some idea of reality against which she can measure herself, from which she may be able to discern a pattern which will indicate to her the end of her journey both from and back towards Meroë.

Two events occur which will propel Theodora onward out

of the garden. The first one is her desperate attempt to intervene (another action, although a futile one) when the young girl Katia, overwhelmingly in love with the Wertherian Wetherby, is taken by the latter to a deserted, unmistakably Freudian, tower. The surrogate aunt, distracted and confused by her worry for Katia, quickly loses her way as she is following the couple. She is finally helped by a peasant woman in a periwinkle dress.<sup>5</sup> Theodora, now outside the mists of illusion that circulate throughout the Hotel du Midi, runs abruptly into the table/chair reality mentioned by White at the beginning of Part Two: "The woman gathered up her washing. She carried the armful of stiff white sheets into her square pink house, out of the mist" (240). The simple and concrete quality of the description sharply contrasts with the fragmented and fluid qualities of the events and people back at the hotel.

When Theodora first arrives at the hotel, she is divorced from reality and confused by it, so that, when she is exploring her new hotel room, "she regretted the yellow object beside the bed which served the purpose of a chair. She could not love the chair, or rather she could not love it yet" (136). Yet this reality is slowly beginning to solidify: the residents of the hotel start to admit to their illusions, and Theodora realizes the futility of her attempt to help Katia. The young girl refuses her offer of help, and coldly rebukes her with: "It is better finally to know" (242), a sentiment Theodora herself might have voiced.

The second event that causes Theodora to leave is the

complete destruction by fire of the Hotel du Midi. The arena of illusions is destroyed along with several of the players. While perhaps not the only spur needed for Theodora (the woman in the periwinkle dress should not be forgotten), the holocaust at the hotel is a fitting symbolic closure to the European episode. However, it is significant that the jardin exotique remains even though the hotel itself has been destroyed: "the forms of the jardin exotique remained stiff and still; though on one edge . . . they were black and withered. Their zinc had run into a fresh hatefulness" (254). White, who is writing The Aunt's Story after the Second World War, realizes that, although Europe has been devastated, much of the old sickness still remains.

### III

It is in "Holstius," the third section of the novel, that Theodora's final achievement, if one is to occur, must be found. Geoffrey Dutton describes this third part as "a coda rather than another movement" ("The Novels of Patrick White" 11). The setting of this very short section is the mid-Western United States through which Theodora is traveling by train, ostensibly to return to Australia and her family.

The music motif, predominant in the part of the novel concerned with Moraïtis and mentioned in the context of the psychic harmony of Meroë, is once again in the foreground, signalled at the opening of this section by a "trumpeting of corn" (257). Weaving through this episode as well is the

theme that was central in Part Two, the dichotomy of fantasy and reality. Although Part One of the novel is entitled *Meroë*, it is the restrictive reality of Sydney which ultimately dominates the fading influence of Theodora's ancestral home. The jardin exotique, the central image of Part Two, broods over the fragmented atmosphere of the hotel and its guests. In Part Three we have the results of the dialectic from the two previous sections, both sides vying in the aunt for domination.

The evidence of this clash occurs early. In the train Theodora encounters an American, a fellow passenger, who exists as a representative for White of a distinct type: "The well-laundered, closely-shaven man scratched his slack white muscles through his beautiful hygienic shirt" (257). This travelling companion is a compendium of facts and figures of the Gradgrind kind who regales Theodora with the population statistics of Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis and Detroit. Against this barrage Theodora can only remember that in Chicago she "had seen the nun who danced along the sidewalk, unconsciously, for joy" (258).

When the American finally stops talking, Theodora, significantly, begins to think by association of her family back in Australia. The image of Fanny receiving Theodora's last letter is an extension of the trepidation the aunt experiences in listening to the American's demographic listings. Reality is once again sharp and distinct in Fanny's safe room amid the "consoling complacency of bacon fat" where "thought was slow and comfortable" (259). It is



uncertain here whether White intends this scene to be merely an interpolation of Theodora's mind. What is inarguable, however, is that Theodora is aware that Fanny would read her sister's letter aloud to her husband Frank, who is described as "thick and red, the father of her complacency" (260). It is only Lou who emerges from this scene unscathed. She is still Theodora's alter ego, someone who experiences the same isolation, someone else who is "afraid and sad, because there was some great intolerable pressure from which it is not possible to escape" (261).

After this Australian interlude, Theodora's attention returns to the train and the natty American sitting opposite her. She then decides "she did not fit the houses" (262) and leaves the train. The insurmountable combination of American solidity and Australian complacency threatens the delicate equanimity she has built up throughout her stay at the Hotel du Midi. Consequently, she flees the train and the journey home, abandoning the vestiges of her identity in her flight: snapshots of Fanny's children (thereby disposing of her "aunt-hood"), and her "sheaves of tickets" (266) which would take her back to Australia. The process of dissociation culminates in the giving up of her own name. Theodora tells the farm family that she meets that her name is Pilkington. Suffering a twinge of guilt, she nevertheless feels that "this way perhaps she came a little closer to humility, to anonymity, to pureness of being" (271).

Yet, at this point, Theodora is still trying to maintain the chair/table vision of reality. She notices

"the unashamed flesh on which dust and sun have lain" (265). Theodora now finds herself as the visiting stranger, The Woman who was Given Dinner. She arrives at a farm owned by a family named Johnson who have a number of sandy-haired "surface" children, and a special child called Zack whom Theodora immediately identifies as living in "the depths" (268). There is now a sense of a cycle being completed. Theodora appears now in the same light as her father's prospector friend who visited Meroë on the day of lightning. Now Zack in the same way hungrily watches this visitor from the outside, looking for any clues she may give him to explain the sudden intense fellowship that has inexplicably sprung up between them.

The Johnson family, who are treated gently and sympathetically by White, stand in contrast to the ridiculous Parrotts in Australia. The American family is poor, unpretentious and open, while the Australians, whom White has described only a few pages before, are shown in their malicious smugness as they read and react to Theodora's letter. Yet even the Johnsons at this point are perceived by the fleeing aunt as a threat. She realizes that she must leave even this remote section of civilization: "Why . . . said Theodora Goodman, is this world which is so tangible in appearance so difficult to hold" (274). This is a strong indication of the future for Theodora and it is an ominous one. In the dualistic struggle between fantasy and reality, the two elements White soon characterizes respectively as music and stone, the aunt demands of others

standards which are too difficult in the long run to uphold. Exactly what these standards are remains unspoken in the text of the novel. We are given some indication of the quality of this inner reality, or at least the possibility of expressing it when Theodora responds to the music of Moraftis with: "If I were an artist . . . I would create something that would answer him" (111). As Patricia Morley has remarked, "Theodora's fruit, as she is destined to be neither artist or mother, is her soul" (78). In fact, it is to be several years, as we shall see, before White studies the issue of the artist and his response to the will to meaning.

The mysterious figure of Holstius whom Theodora encounters in the deserted house she occupies is an important clue to White's purpose in the novel. He has been variously interpreted as the Holy Ghost, a compendium of all the men and events in her past life, or a manifestation of her father.<sup>6</sup> John Colmer appears to have the most likely explanation: Holstius is "a name chosen both because the author had known a Holstius and because of its association in German with 'wood,' and hence a bedrock reality" (21). It is obvious that what Holstius has to say contains the final summing up of Theodora's journey. He tells her: "I expect you to accept the two irreconcilable halves" (280). This is finally all he has to say and it seems to Theodora all he needs to say, for, after he departs, "she looked at . . . a world curiously pure, expectant, undistorted. She could almost have read a writing on the back of any given

tree" (281). This preternatural gift which has at last been bestowed upon her is a fulfillment of Miss Spofforth's prophecy at the boarding school when she looked at the young Theodora and told her "You will see clearly, beyond the bone" (57).

Theodora, then, has finally reached her goal, but at what cost? Holstius visits again to tell her she must submit to the Johnsons, and the music motif is finally resolved. Theodora must sacrifice her fluidity. White comments: "We abandon the dangerous state of music and achieve the less distracting positions of sculpture" (287).

As Theodora, an antipodean Blanche Dubois, is led away by a doctor and the plain, well-meaning Johnsons, the question must be asked: What is White's final attitude to the resolution of Theodora's quest? It is obvious by its location in the novel that White considers Holstius' admonition to Theodora concerning the union of irreconcilable differences to be of major importance. As Frederick J. Hoffman, paraphrasing Kierkegaard, has written: "Each of the self's moments of experience must involve both its temporality and a transcending eternity which resides within it" (427). Doubtless, Theodora has reached the point of transcendence but the radical split with which the event occurs, the ultimate alienation of her psyche from those around her, must be judged as a repudiation of reality rather than a reconciliation with it. As Simone Weil, a writer who has greatly influenced White, has written: "The original pact between mind and world must be rediscovered through the

actual civilization in which we live" (First and Last Notebooks 45). In her leaving of all that civilization, Theodora has reached an enlightenment White could hardly be proposing as legitimate for us all.

The Aunt's Story represents a quest for transcendence without external support. In this novel White has depicted a protagonist who responds to the stirrings of a will to meaning within herself and who then ultimately seeks, virtually unaided, the answers to that yearning within a journey into the depths of her own consciousness. Her final discovery, that "the soul must learn to recognize its country in the very place of its exile" (Petrément 370), indicates that this place of exile has become for Theodora a refuge of solitariness. While not necessarily tragic for the Australian, her fate must seem to us quite undesirable. The ambiguity with which White closes the Aunt's story demonstrates the dissatisfaction he felt with Theodora's solution to her quest. It is not surprising then that in Riders in the Chariot support for the struggle for transcendence is at hand in overwhelming strength.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>There has been much discussion concerning the Abyssinian connection of Meroë and the resulting parallels this imagery may have with Samuel Johnson's The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia. See especially Ian Donaldson's "Return to Abyssinia," Essays in Criticism 14 (1964): 210-14, and Manfred Mackenzie's "Abyssinia Lost and Regained," Essays in Criticism 13 (1963): 292-300.

<sup>2</sup>This term in White's work implies divine intervention in the lives of his elect. The full implication of the term is discussed below in Chapter Three, which is concerned with The Vivisector.

<sup>3</sup>Jack Frost is a depiction of an outsider driven through stultification to perform an outrageous act. A more detailed and equally sympathetic view can be found in White's portrait of Felicity Bannister in his short story "The Night The Prowler" from Cockatoos.

<sup>4</sup>The jardin exotique itself is an extraordinary waste land image which strongly recalls the lines: "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / out of this stony rubbish?" (ll.19-20). T.S. Eliot's influence on the early White was considerable.

<sup>5</sup>White's epithetical description of characters (The Man Who Was Given his Dinner, the woman in the periwinkle dress) supports the mythic quality of the steps in Theodora's journey.

<sup>6</sup>Examples of these interpretations may be found in the following: Holstius as the Holy Ghost, in Manfred Mackenzie, "Abyssinia Lost and Regained," Essays in Criticism 13 (1963): 292-300; Holstius as a manifestation of Theodora's father, in Ann McCulloch, "Patrick White's Novels and Nietzsche," Australian Literary studies 9 (May 1980): 309-17; Holstius as "a familiar compound ghost of all the meaningful men and incidents of her early life," in Peter Beatson, The Eye of the Mandala: Patrick White, A Vision of Man and God (London: Paul Elek, 1976) 101.

## Chapter II

### Riders in the Chariot: The Fordable Passage

"... like a child surprised and overwhelmed by loneliness, a prey to the terror of the creature that has begun to die, man must go seeking the fordable passage that shall at last assure his life and safety" (Hermann Broch, The Sleepwalkers 641).

#### I

Romano Guardino, in Rilke's Duino Elegies, writes: "it is our task to imprint the mark of this provisional, perishable earth so deeply, so painfully and passionately on ourselves that its essence may rise up in us again 'invisibly'" (261). Patrick White's work seeks to explore the process of this imprinting. In The Aunt's Story, Theodora's task, finally achieved with the requisite pain and passion, is performed outside of any theological parameters. In that novel, the heroine undergoes her quest unaided by spiritual promptings. During a sermon in church, "Theodora listened coolly to the words that did not touch. Her own mystery offered her subtler variations" (50).

In contrast, the quartet of protagonists in Riders in the Chariot, written after White's publicized conversion to a kind of unstructured monotheism, places the Godhead as both the goal and inspiration of their spiritual yearning. According to Peter Wolfe, Riders is "the most boldly and grandly conceived of White's novels" (139), a statement few critics would dispute, given the pre-eminent position the novel occupies in White's canon. Unfortunately, the very power of Riders, added to the effective portraits in the



mystically inclined Voss, his previous novel, and the spiritual implications of the subsequent The Solid Mandala, has led critics mistakenly to label White a religious writer, neglecting thereby the secular themes in the novels that preceded this mystic trinity; in so doing, they have also erred by categorizing his later novels in the same terms. It will be seen in future chapters that the theological approach to what Broch has called the "fordable passage" is only one of the many which White has explored.

In his autobiography, Flaws in the Glass, White has written that "the ultimate spiritual union is probably as impossible to achieve as the perfect work of art or the unflawed human relationship" (74). Yet Riders in the Chariot is an attempt to portray exactly such an ultimate spiritual union in two of its aspects. First, the novel is the story of how four individuals achieve transcendence through the vision of the Chariot. Second, these four are brought together, rather haphazardly, to form the mystical Company of Riders, in the process experiencing a profoundly intimate bonding with each other, a relationship of sufficient strength to enable each member immediately to recognize one another. For example, when Mary Hare, the mad spinster denizen of the Gothic folly called Xanadu, meets the half-caste artist Alf Dubbo, she immediately recognizes him as a fellow member of the Company: "Once she had entered through his eyes . . . and their souls had stroked each other with reassuring feathers" (62).

In The Aunt's Story, Theodora's search for meaning

forms the basis of the relatively simple narrative line. It is the story of a woman's quest and the events of this quest are developed in a straightforward, linear fashion. In Riders, the later novel, there is no sense of linear progress because the revelation that Theodora sought has been granted to each one of the protagonists at the outset. Therefore the narrative thread of Riders must become more complex, an interweaving of past and present which, in effect, explores, in the story of each of the protagonists, the ramifications of this early bestowal of grace.<sup>1</sup>

We must first of all inquire into the causes, if any, for the bestowal of this grace. What criteria for "electedness" did these four possess to enable them to participate in the Vision of the Chariot? Has White abandoned the position, implicit in The Aunt's Story, that the achievement of meaning comes after a long shattering journey in favour of a view that grace is gratuitously given? A look at the four Riders should answer these questions.

## II

The first of the group to whom we are introduced is Mary Hare. She is directly related to several of White's protagonists through her isolation and misanthropy: "Naturally she found it impossible to like human beings" (18). Except for her relationships with other members of the Company of Riders, she finds any contact with her own species to be exceedingly painful and terror-ridden. She does experience a timid fascination for her fellow humans,

but in the end these unsettle her enough for her to prefer "to peer at them through leaves" (62).

Mary Hare's childhood experiences at Xanadu have been fit preparation for this eccentric adulthood. "She is the only child of the wine merchant Norbert Hare, who had built Xanadu as well as given it its whimsical name. Her father had also at one time "considered writing a treatise on Catullus" (14). The daughter inherits her father's penchant for non-conformity.

While Mr. Goodman evinces a kind of withdrawn timorousness in The Aunt's Story, Norbert Hare wears his romanticism with a vengeance. One day, in a paroxysm of frustration, perhaps with his family, perhaps with Australia, perhaps with life itself, he throws his dinner out the window of the mansion, and shouts: "But it is never possible to free oneself. Not entirely" (34). Shortly after this scene, in a later fit of exasperation, he loads his gun and begins to shoot at a crystal chandelier described as being "of exceptional loveliness" (34). The landowner is reacting against all the blocks he sees before him standing in the way of his perennial search for the fordable passage:

Norbert Hare had experienced his moments of illumination. . . . Whatever the source of his experience, he was, however, aware of a splendour he himself would never achieve except by instants, and rightly or wrongly, came to interpret this as failure. (55)

Even his suicide is a botched, confused affair. He

jumps into a cistern on his property and cries out immediately for his daughter Mary, but when she holds out a pole for him to grasp to save himself, he repeatedly rejects it, shouting at her: "Mary! Don't! Have some pity! For God's sake! Run!" (57). These commands and cries are highly ambiguous. Is Norbert telling his daughter to run for help, to run away to protect herself from him, or to run away to let him drown in peace? Mary interprets his calls as cries for help, but when she returns with someone, it is too late.

Along with her eccentricity, Mary has also inherited her mysticism from her father. He is the one who conjures up for her the initial image of the Chariot.<sup>2</sup> One day he asks her, "Who are the riders in the Chariot, eh, Mary? Who is ever going to know?" (23). It is typical that Norbert finds it necessary to ask this question; his daughter will never have the need. He is destined to be forever bereft of this knowledge, while Mary is to be granted the full revelation and the vision of exactly who these riders are (Norbert, then, is a mad precursor, a renegade John the Baptist figure, who, even more painfully than that New Testament saint, will also, Moses-like, be denied a vision of the Promised Land).

Mary Hare is saved by her isolation. Where Theodora succumbs for a long time to the stifling conformity of her mother, her sister Fanny, and Sydney society, Mary Hare, through her isolation and asceticism, and through the grim lessons of her father's futile life and death, never feels

the need to rebel or to leave her home.

Cut off as Mary is from most of humankind, her mystical unity with the nature surrounding her is all the more intense. Although she does not directly link this symbiosis with her experience of the Chariot, it is clear that her attitude to the flora and fauna of her estate has a highly spiritual resonance. When she is feeding wild birds, "All throats were moving, wobbling, and hers most of all. In agreement. In the rite of birds" (38). When she communes with nature as she walks through the bush on her land,

Each pool would reveal its relevant mystery, of which she herself was never the least. Finally she would be renewed. Returning by a different way, she would recognize the Hand in every veined leaf, and would bundle the Bee into the Divine Mouth. (61)

These walks, indeed Mary's entire feeling for nature, lead her to experience the incarnation of the vision of the Chariot at Xanadu. She has not struggled to achieve this. It seems instead to have been bestowed upon her in compensation for leading a forgotten life.

### III

It is significant that it is on one of these rambles that she meets Mordecai Himmelfarb, a fellow member of the Company of Riders. These two of course immediately recognize one another as fellow "elected" ones. As we have seen in The Aunt's Story, it is a mark of the elect that they can

recognize each other at first sight, as Theodora Goodman recognizes The Man Who Was Given His Dinner and as, later in the same novel, the young boy Zack instinctively becomes aware of the kinship between himself and Theodora.

The meeting between Mary Hare and Mordecai Himmelfarb is a striking example of the strength of the ties that bind the Riders together, for the eccentric, cloistered spinster and the European Jewish intellectual refugee are dramatically different in a number of important ways.

The two dominant criteria for Himmelfarb's acceptance into the Company of Riders appear to be the suffering which he experienced as a Jew in Nazi Germany and his subsequent abandonment of the intellect as a strategy for salvation. While Himmelfarb indeed experiences the "pain and passion" undergone by Theodora in her quest, his situation is different. The aunt actively seeks the road to her salvation while the Jew is roughly thrust upon his. He is never really in control of his fate while he is in Europe.

At first indifferent to his Jewishness, Himmelfarb neglects his faith. Although he does not go so far as to reject it, he undergoes a "spiritual withdrawal" (118) while furthering his intellectual ambitions at home in pre-war Germany and then in England where he attends Oxford. His mother remains the exemplar of the Jewish faith, fighting her husband for their son's soul: "I only ask Mordecai shall be remembered as a man of faith" (102).

Ironically, however, it is through his father that the boy meets the person he will later call his "self-appointed

guide" (128). Another one of the visitor-prophets that quite often appear to White's pilgrims, "the little dyer, whose skin was bathed in indigo" (109), will ultimately be the vehicle for Mordecai's introduction to the woman who will become the young scholar's wife. In his capacity as prophet, the dyer tells Himmelfarb: "I did not doubt you would see what was indicated . . . and know you will justify our expectations. Because your heart has been touched and changed" (128). The sign of the elect has already been recognized by a fellow member. The old man has intuited the sense of yearning in Himmelfarb and predicts that the latter will achieve his goal of salvation.

Soon after Himmelfarb marries, he accidentally comes upon the old books of the Jewish Hasidim.<sup>3</sup> The writings of these mystics at first serve only to increase his desire, not to satisfy it: "spiritually he longed for the ascent into an ecstasy so cool and green that his own desert would drink the heavenly moisture" (136). This place of "cool and green" is a direct evocation of Xanadu and its arbors, yet this paradise and its mistress Mary Hare still lie many years in his future. However, at this point in his life, his desire is insufficient to grant him membership in the Company. Soon, through his extensive study of the books and much meditation upon them, he has an initial revelation which leaves him "transfixed by his own horror. . . . The long awaited moment was reduced to a reflection of the self" (136-37).

There are two levels of strategy at work in these

novels: that of White as author in depicting his characters' struggles with their own wills to meaning, and secondly, within the framework of each novel, the strategies by which each of the characters expect to achieve salvation in their own lives. In The Aunt's Story, White uses Theodora's struggle for selfhood as her strategy to attain the salvation she ultimately sought. However, with Riders, the selfhood of each of the Company is seen as a blocking device which stands in the way of transcendence. Hence, the depictions of Himmelfarb's frustration with his plodding progress during meditation. White has here replaced the Socratic "know thyself" as a goal of the soul's journey with the Godhead, evoked by the blazing significance of the Chariot.

While it is not enough to assure Himmelfarb that he has experienced legitimate revelation, the Jewish mystical lore that he studies serves as discourse which becomes a ground from which his enlightenment will eventually spring. It is only after he has lost everything (involuntarily) and has survived the cleansing fire of the holocaust that Mordecai is finally ushered into the company of the elect. He visits Israel after he escapes, but now, a strong sense of destiny present within him, he knows that he cannot stay in this promised land: "If I could feel that God intended me to remain . . . then you could be sure of my remaining. But He does not" (192). He realizes that his life in Israel would be too easy, that he would never be able to practice the expiation he feels that he must make for the death of his



wife and for the fact of his having survived the events in Germany. The remaining actions of Himmelfarb in the novel are characterized by a deterministic zeal that renders the final crucifixion scene at the factory the fulfillment of prophecy in the same way that Christ's death fulfilled the testaments of the old Jewish prophets.

One essential ingredient for the bestowal of grace in the novel is the Rider's isolation from the community. In spite of Himmelfarb's intense desire to save humanity, he does not necessarily want to join it. In his younger days when he was teaching at the university in Germany, "it was not that he was loved, exactly, but he could have been, if he had not withdrawn for the moment too far into himself to be reached" (121).

In Australia, already somewhat of a social outcast because of his refugee status, Himmelfarb is advised by Ernie Theobalds, the good-natured factory foreman: "a man stands a better chance of a fair go if he's got a mate" (308). However, Mordecai maintains his aloofness, knowing that he must do so in order that his destiny unfold. This intense isolation is broken only by the company of the three other Riders, rather easily and comfortably with Mary Hare and the laundrywoman Ruth Godbold, but awkwardly and hesitantly in his brief painful meetings with Alf Dubbo, another outcast, the aborigine who also works at the factory.

## IV

Alf Dubbo's history reflects the native Australian experience in the twentieth century as Himmelfarb's has mirrored the Jewish European. Another of "the fringe dwellers of an empty continent of unfulfillment" (Hassall 13), Alf's history is as erased as Himmelfarb's is documented. All we learn is that the half-caste was born "to an old gin named Maggie, by which of the whites he had never been able to decide" (313). As a young boy he is adopted by the Reverend Timothy Calderon and the minister's widowed sister, Mrs. Pask. Reverend Calderon embarks upon an educational regime with Alf which consists of "fatherly love, and spiritual guidance, to say nothing of Latin verbs, and the dates of battles" (313). The treatment of the aboriginal boy by the white couple directly mirrors the paternalistic attitude of the white settlers to the native Australian population. And, in a parallel manner, Alf, with a sense of fatalistic innocence, submits with astonishing amiability, in spite of negligible sulks and complaints, to this alien discourse.

From an early age Alf senses intimations of his destiny, an intuition which the intellectually trained Himmelfarb realizes only much later in life after his experiences with the Nazis. The young aborigine feels early that he has little control over his life: "At no time in his life was Alf Dubbo able to resist what must happen" (330). As with the European Jew, he is acted upon by events rather than being the cause of action.

Alf's life is set upon a different path, the beginning of his true life of isolation, when Mrs. Pask discovers the boy in bed with her brother, Reverend Calderon. It is not surprising that the sister immediately reverts to a black/-white bi-polar system of morality and hurls an accusation at the young black boy rather than at the older white man: "You! You devil! What have you done to my brother?" (332).

Even though he is cast out forever from this white-ruled paradise, Alf's fatalism precludes any bitterness:

As he wandered through paddocks and along roads, the fugitive did not reflect on the injustice of Mrs. Pask's accusation, sensing with her that all which had happened, had to happen, sooner or later. (332)

The aborigine, then, shares with the others in the Company a strong sense of separation from the community, a feeling of rejection by a "homeland," accompanied by a passive acquiescence in the face of the various ministerings of fate. What makes Dubbo different from the other members is the fact that he is an artist. The theme of art as a road to spiritual fulfillment will be more fully explored in The Vivisector through the character of the protagonist Hurtle Duffield (discussed at length in the next chapter) for which the character of Alf Dubbo serves as a preliminary sketch. In Riders, White considers the act of painting as a visible manifestation of Dubbo's yearning for the supernatural. Regarding Dubbo's attitude to his art, White writes: "where other men might have prayed for grace, he

proceeded to stare at what could be his only proof of an Absolute" (334). White also links Dubbo's creative force to the act of physical creation, in this case fathering a child. The novelist describes Dubbo after he has just completed a painting: "His thighs were as sticky as though he had spilled out over himself" (354). The act of creation, therefore, is not only a path towards redemption, but also is a way the artist creates a legacy, assuring himself of immortality. We will see this idea, developed again in a more literal sense, with Ruth Godbold, whose six progeny are described as six arrows shot "at the face of darkness" (489).

# V

Ruth Godbold is perhaps the least flawed of the four Riders. She is also the least isolated, and the only one with an existing family. She ministers as an "angel of solid light" (230) to each of the Company in turn, and consequently solidifies in the mind of each the vision and possibilities of the Chariot.

While more marginally acceptable to the community than Hare, Himmelfarb, and Dubbo, Mrs. Godbold is still looked down upon by all the residents of the suburb that we meet. She is a woman who lives in a shack, her family being considered "no-hopers of the worst kind" (65), a woman who does laundry for others (another anticipation of The Vivisector, in which it is Mrs. Duffield, the protagonist's mother, who is laundress to the rich).

Ruth comes as close as any of the protagonists do to practicing an established Christian religion. She sings the traditional hymns of the Church and her first mystical experience occurs in a cathedral which she visits as a child with her brother. As Theodora Goodman is transported by the secular music of the musician Moraitis, so Ruth Joyner, the young girl, experiences the religious music of the cathedral organ as "bliss, surging and rising, as she herself climbed the heavenly scaffolding and placed still other ladders, to reach higher" (236). When she meets the organist, another of White's prophesiers, he says to her: "I can see you will remember this day . . . when you have forgotten a lot of other things. You have probably been taken closer than you are ever likely to come" (237).

It is appropriate that when Ruth leaves the fens of England for the new country of Australia she becomes a maid, for in one capacity or another she will serve as a handmaid to others for the rest of her life. During her term of employment with Mrs. Chalmers-Robertson, the spoiled rich society woman who becomes pathetically dependent on her, Ruth realizes her particular demonstration of faith through the duty of serving others. She "would attempt to express her belief . . . in the surrender of herself to a state of passive adoration, . . . she could have been offering up the active essence of her being in unstinted praise" (245).

Ruth Godbold's essential goodness seems to be evidence of strong predestination, a gratuitous blessing, bestowed on her from early childhood. Even at that point, "she was

granted a rapture her father had never known" (234). She has added to her gift, cultivating a faith by modestly serving others, unselfishly helping out wherever she can. We see her at Mrs. Khalil's whorehouse sitting in state, patiently waiting for her husband Tom so she can help him home. With astonishing acceptance she sits, a balanced centred force amidst the turmoil and dissonance of her surroundings. She immediately senses spiritual qualities in the tubercular Alf Dubbo and, not at first realizing the nature of his spirituality, she asks him: "Are you a Christian?" When he answers her by saying, "There is no point in putting on a pair of boots to walk to town, if you can do it better in your bare feet" (285), she at once understands that he is a member of the Company and accepts him as such.

## VI

One of the reasons that the Riders must form such instantaneous and firm bonds is to counteract the threat posed by the forces arrayed against them. In The Aunt's Story, these countervailing powers were sketchily represented by Mrs. Goodman, Fanny, and the general nebulous malaise represented by the population of Sydney. However, in Riders the depiction of Sydney takes on the sinister sheen of a William Burroughs nightmare, livid and chaotic:

The train was easing through the city which knives had sliced open to serve up with all the juices running--red, and green, and purple. All the

syrups of the sundaes oozing into the streets to sweeten. The neon syrup coloured the pools of vomit and the sailor's piss. (391)

The suburb of Sarsaparilla is White's synecdoche for Sydney and indeed for all of Western decadence. The Company of Riders meet and live here, and it is here that the forces of evil coalesce to do battle against them, personified in the characters of Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack. In a darkening age, the vision of the Chariot must be strong enough to bolster the struggle for the soul. Theodora Goodman, in a time of greater innocence,<sup>4</sup> could attempt transcendence unaided through an exploration of her own psyche; however, in the later novel, what is required is the steel faith of one's own electedness coupled with the strength of an ineffable bonding and comradeship which existed between the members of the Company.

One important criterion possessed by each member of the elect is that their isolation prevents them all from being part of the community of Sarsaparilla. They stand apart, listening to the stalwart pillars of that community engage in their own invective: "The voice of Sarsaparilla . . . took for granted its right to pass judgement on the human soul and indulge in a fretfulness of condemnation" (211).

Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack, two solid citizens who together embody the Law of Sarsaparilla, are drawn with particularly Dickensian grotesquery. Pitted against the naive faith espoused by the Company and articulated at Mrs. Khalil's by Alf Dubbo, is the staunch orthodoxy of the two

women's support for the established religion of the land. Mrs. Jolley, hired reluctantly by Mary Hare to be the recluse's housekeeper, smugly tells the latter: "I attended Church of England ever since I was a kiddy" (58). To ensure that the reader does not miss the irony here, White adds the following sentence: "and would batter somebody to prove it."

Mary Hare quickly intuit's that there is much to fear in this woman who has now such an intimate role in her household: "she did sense some danger to the incorporeal, the more significant part of her" (60). As quickly as the members of the Company are able to recognize each other, they can just as easily identify those who in some way threaten their souls.

When Mrs. Jolley meets Mrs. Flack and the two become friends, the dialectic is in place and the two women form a Company of their own:

As they continued sitting, the two women would drench the room with the moth odours of their one mind. . . . This could have been the perfect communion of souls, if . . . it had not suggested perfect collusion. (74)

This inverted imagery of mysticism depicts the root and source of the disruption which will be experienced by the Riders directly at the hands of the community surrounding them. It is the threat from this community that necessitates that the Riders recognize each other so quickly.

Within the society that the riders shun exists the chaos to which Dietrich Bonhoeffer refers when he writes:



"It will be the task of our generation, not 'to seek great things' but to save and preserve our souls out of chaos" (169). In the cases of Himmelfarb and Dubbo, the prospect of greatness has been actively shunned: the former has abandoned all prospects of intellectual and academic triumph, the aborigine steadfastly refuses to allow his paintings the public exposure that could lead him to wealth and fame. The two women, Mary Hare and Ruth Godbold, have not had the chance, in Bonhoeffer's words, "to seek great things," nor have they any inclination to do so. Their turning away from the world and turning towards each other in compensation and support is in part caused by their perception of the values they have rejected. Further explanation of the threat aimed at the members of the Company can best be illustrated by the case of the unfortunate Harry Rosetree.

This man, an example of a person who seeks great things and abandons his spiritual centre to attain them, comes into contact with the forces activated by the Riders and loses everything by this exposure. In her First and Last Notebooks, Simone Weil writes: "a man who is capable of being satisfied by something possible . . . will not expend the portion given him when he left his father's house" (222). Rosetree has become a successful businessman and has been assimilated quite completely into middle-class Australian life, so that all traces of the ghettoized roots of his former self as Herr Rosenbaum have been eradicated. Himmelfarb becomes a spiritual gadfly to him, beckoning to the factory owner from out of the common richness of their

ritualistic past that the latter believes he has, completely effaced. Despite all his attempts, Rosetree ultimately cannot live with the compromises he has made in his new life. In vain he tries to ignore the mock crucifixion of Himmelfarb which is taking place right outside his factory:

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

Yet this protection, built up so assiduously throughout the years, proves illusory. Playing Pilate to Himmelfarb's Christ, Rosetree at last commands intervention, but it is too late, not only for Himmelfarb, but also, as the sequel proves, for the factory owner himself.

Harry Rosetree is a Rider mangue. Himmelfarb, as a member of the Company, recognizes the factory owner's potential in the same way that Ruth had discovered the spiritual core in Alf at Mrs. Khalil's whorehouse. Mordecai embarks upon a long journey to the Rosetree house on Passover to give his fellow Jew a last chance to save himself by acknowledging the Jewishness he has shrugged off, thereby affirming his place among the elect. When Himmelfarb arrives at the factory owner's on Seder evening, the night during Passover when it is obligatory for Jews to welcome strangers, Harry is dismayed and exceedingly uncomfortable in the visitor's presence. Rosetree indicates his final choice in the matter when he abandons Himmelfarb to go out to water his shrubs. He tells his visitor: "You

must excuse me if I leave you for a little. I gotta water a few shrubs before it is dark" (387). Rosetree has chosen his own material well-being, and by extension the welfare of his possessions over his duty to his Seder guest. It is this decision which finally seals his fate. Rosetree's suicide a few days after this episode is merely the physical manifestation of the spiritual suicide he has already committed that evening.

His is the tragedy of the novel. Hare, Himmelfarb, Dubbo, and Godbold are the chosen ones and, no matter what happens to them, it is obvious that their lives must close in spiritual triumph. The coterie consisting of Mrs. Jolley, Mrs. Flack and their kind are too far gone in cant and smug conformity to merit salvation. It is only Harry Rosetree who treads the tightrope of compromise and who, when he realizes that he should not be attempting this at all, teeters in self-consciousness and guilt, and falls into the abyss.

## VII

In spite of the unalloyed importance given to the position of supernatural grace experienced by the four protagonists in the novel, there is still a sense of vague uneasiness concerning the arbitrary way in which each of the characters has acquired this grace. David Lindsay has noted that White "flattens and narrows the complex and spiritual pattern and thus shuts himself out of his own perception and creation" (Decay and Renewal 259). In creating the boun-

daries of his paradigm, White has posited such diametrically opposed characters that, as John Colmer writes, "a sense of strain and awkwardness" (50) must arise in any close analysis of the novel. The dice are indeed loaded and, for some reason, Harry Rosetree is the loser while all the Riders win. Others do not even rate entry to the game.

As he has done with Theodora Goodman in The Aunt's Story, White postulates an a priori yearning for salvation in each of his Riders. Part of the awkwardness to which Colmer refers arises from the fact that this potential for transcendence in the Riders is based upon a symbol of the Judeo-Christian mythos which is not innately relevant to at least two of the members, the reclusive Mary Hare and the half-caste Alf Dubbo.

Ann McCulloch has written of White's "artistic alienation, of the plight of the artist who sees but cannot express the meaning of man" (319). It is obvious that in Riders in the Chariot White views the world as a hostile place. His scathing denunciations of the cesspool of Sydney and his portrayal of the warped denizens of its suburb Sarsaparilla point out the omnipresent danger facing the good person. The method applied here is indeed quite unsophisticated but, as Keith A. Dobson has written, referring to Brecht's world: "the ideal community is not one where saints and heroes abound, but one where they are an anachronism" (142). White has provided a corollary to this statement: the damned community is one where saints and heroes are anathema.

What, in the end, have these four achieved? Himmelfarb has fulfilled his self-inflicted destiny through the crucifixion incident at the factory. We observe him, after Rosetree has commanded that the farce cease and the victim be taken down from the tree: "Very quietly Himmelfarb left the factory in which it had not been accorded to him to expiate the sins of the world" (418). His example serves to drive the hapless Harry Rosetree to expunge his guilt by hanging himself in his bathroom, an act which in spiritual terms may betoken victory, but must remain a pyrrhic one at best. Himmelfarb's "sacrifice" is indeed an inspiration to the other three members of the Company but it must be remembered that the reader has been shown at great length that these three are already members of the elect, and that therefore the old Jew's sufferings do not cause a qualitative change in any of them but merely reinforces the strength of the vision present in each one.

Therefore, as with The Aunt's Story, we are left with an ambiguous resolution concerning this strategy for salvation. Since the former novel, the world has perceptibly darkened. The mild condescension of Mrs. Goodman and Fanny has developed into the sinister vitriolics of Mrs. Jolley and Mrs. Flack. The provincial mediocrity that constricted the growth of Theodora Goodman has changed so that Sydney is now an Australian City of the Plain. Supernatural intervention, and the earlier the better, is required for the individual to be saved. Yet this intervention can also fail, as in the case of Harry Rosetree. The

Calvinistic corner into which White has painted himself is ultimately exactly that, a corner with no exit. Whether the supernatural remains a feasible alternative for the author or not, it soon leaves centre stage in his art. In The Vivisector, the next novel to be discussed, White explores the nature of art itself as a strategy for salvation.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Instead of the fragmentation of the self that is found in The Aunt's Story, it is the Company of Riders itself that is dissected, so that the reader is presented with the tales of each protagonist. The Self has been replaced by the multifaceted Company.

<sup>2</sup>The Chariot, of course, refers to the vision seen by Ezekiel I:4-28. The four riders and the Chariot are described in intricate visionary detail. It is interesting to note that Ezekiel prophesied during the Babylonian exile of the Jews. The theme of exile in the lives of each of White's riders is also extremely important.

<sup>3</sup>It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss the details of Jewish mysticism as they relate to Himmelfarb and the novel as a whole. For a penetrating analysis of this aspect of Riders, see Patricia Morley's The Mystery of Unity.

<sup>4</sup>This is arguable, since The Aunt's Story takes place on the eve of World War II. However, Theodora herself is not touched by these events, while the Riders are much more present in the world and hence exceedingly vulnerable to its threats.

### Chapter III

#### The Vivisector: Art, Salvation and the Problem of Belonging

"The vision of the artist or poet is the intermediate determinant between the subject (the person) and the objective pole (the world-waiting-to-be)" (Rollo May, The Courage to Create 79).

#### I

In The Vivisector (1970), as we have come to expect from a White protagonist, Hurtle Duffield suffers from a profound yearning for what Walter Benjamin calls "the special high purposiveness" of life (Illuminations 72). However, the mystico-theological route by which his characters attained salvation in the novels of his middle period, best exemplified in Riders in the Chariot, is no longer seen as the only method by which Benjamin's "purposiveness" can be achieved.

Hurtle Duffield is an artist. He attempts to interpret the life he observes through the canvases he attacks and transforms. As Noel Macainsh observes, in this novel White "ironically presents a central figure obsessed with crossing . . . a metaphorical [desert] on the way to salvation in art" (77). Through an analysis of the painter's life and struggles, White studies the feasibility of obtaining this salvation through a grounding in aesthetics.

A second but equally important theme White investigates in this novel is the problem of the individual's isolation from the human community. Throughout his novels, White has consistently depicted his protagonists struggling against a strong sense of exile. Theodora Goodman in The Aunt's Story



must make her odyssey alone. It is only at the end of her journey that she experiences the ambiguous companionship of Holstius, the problematic figure who becomes her guide and mentor. Each of the quartet of elected ones in Riders is an isolate. Here, the community is depicted with such a sense of loathing that the alienation experienced by the four protagonists is a mark of his or her singular integrity.

With The Vivisector, White is exploring the possibility of replacing the communion of saints depicted in Riders with a more natural human community. This new concern with external reality serves two functions. In the first place, through the privileging of physical detail and description White fittingly illustrates Duffield's attempts to portray physical reality through his art. Secondly, the more naturalistic settings of this novel replace the more lurid and frenzied urban landscapes that predominate in the descriptions of Sydney in Riders. Through this less strident approach in describing Duffield's surroundings, White then allows the city to become a place of potential belonging, a landscape from which his saints no longer have to withdraw to be saved.

Although the religious motif, so overwhelming in Riders, has been displaced by aesthetic and social concerns, it nevertheless remains an important component of this novel. Hurtle Duffield is not permitted to achieve transcendence without a shattering encounter with the supernatural.

This chapter will discuss three aspects of The Vivisec-

tor: aesthetics as a strategy for salvation, the problem of belonging to the human community, and the place of the supernatural within this framework. Finally, I will discuss White's conclusions concerning these various strategies.

## II

In Axel's Castle, Edmund Wilson writes: "Only in artistic creation may we hope to find any compensation for the anarchy, the perversity, the sterility and the frustrations of the world" (159). There is of course in the twentieth century a strong tradition of the novelist using his own art form as a self-referential exploration of the uses of creative endeavour as a defence against the perceived absurdity of modern life. Instead of following the path of Joyce or Proust, for example, where the protagonist is a thinly disguised representative of the novelist himself, White places his protagonist at one remove and, following more in the tradition of Joyce Cary in his portrayal of Gully Jimpson, selects painting as the route to aesthetic fulfillment. This is not a surprising choice for White. In Flaws in the Glass, he writes:

The Vivisector . . . is about a painter, the one I was not destined to become - another of my frustrations. I had imagined that if I could acquire the technique I might give visual expression to what I have inside me, and that the physical act of painting would exhilarate me far more than grinding away at grey, bronchial prose.

(150)

Therefore, for White the act of painting is to "give visual expression" to the creative impulse, and this novel is his own attempt to mediate that expression through what he somewhat disingenuously considers the far inferior medium of prose.

The Vivisector is a portrait of the artist Hurtle Duffield and encompasses his entire life from early childhood until his death at the height of his fame. It is important, however, to take a most detailed look at his early life, the years of his artistic formation, in order to find the roots of the aesthetic philosophy from which the artist will construct the principles governing his strategy for salvation.

Hurtle becomes aware of his own sense of aesthetics early in his life. As a young boy, when he is still living with his biological family, the Duffields, he is possessed of a sensitivity which he knows he must hide from others:

He loved the pepper tree breaking into light, and  
the white hens rustling in the black branches. . .  
. He could do nothing about it though, . . .  
people looked down at their plates if you said  
something was beautiful. (18)

When he is taken for the first time to the Courtney home, the large mansion owned by the family who will later adopt him, Hurtle is arrested by the sight of a crystal chandelier hanging resplendent in the hallway: ". . . as he stood underneath, looking up through the glass fruit and

flickering of broken rainbow, he knew all about a chandelier, from perhaps dreaming of it, and only now recognizing his dream" (25). This chandelier, as we shall see, becomes a strong motif in Hurtle's aesthetics. As Patricia Morley writes, this object comes to represent the artist's "power to express his vision of truth and beauty" (212). At this point, the young boy's artistic experience exists primarily on the level of sensory perception. His childhood is a great sensual intaking of the physical objects he encounters in his surroundings. However, we can discern that, even on this initial visit to a relatively more cultured environment, Hurtle's aesthetic sensibility is more than a merely passive acceptance of what he observes; he has as well an innate critical awareness. Viewing the paintings of nudes displayed on the walls of the hallway, the young boy voices his dislike, remarking that they look like "old cold pudding" (25).

The boy's artistic inclinations soon require an outlet.

On his first day at school he draws a picture of Death ("an elephant in a lion's skin" [41]), much to the annoyance of his teacher who chides him for being arrogant. For a penance she requires him to write a composition about himself. What follows is an astonishing document of precocity (despite its spelling), a prelapsarian manifesto of artistic yearning for communication and expression:

I am Hurtle Duffield age 6 . . . . My father and mother who are old . . . do not understand what I tell them so I have just about had to give up

telling. . . . I like to watch the sky till the circles whirl, these are white. . . . [I] am drawing a picture which will be a chandelier with the wind through it. . . . I would like to draw everything I know. (42)

It is the chandelier at the Courtneys and, by association, the family itself that come to represent aesthetic growth for Hurtle. He realizes, in his precociousness, that, although "he had inside him his own chandelier" (53), he nevertheless needs the stimulation that cannot be found at the Duffields. On a subsequent visit to the mansion this artistic yearning becomes so palatable as to be realized as a literal hunger. Hurtle is left alone to look at a painting by Boudin: "By reaching up, his fingers slithered over the ladies' full old-fashioned skirts. . . . He would have liked to lick the tempting paint. . . ." (61).

The clash between Hurtle's two worlds is abruptly ended when the young boy's parents reluctantly agree to the Courtneys' offer to adopt their artistic son. What this entails for Hurtle on the level of human relationship will be discussed later, but, on the level of his aesthetic development, the move to the more artistically conducive environment can be viewed as a golden opportunity for him. On the night before he leaves his real family, in the shed where he sleeps with his brother, Hurtle executes his last drawing at home, a farewell to his family and the past. White describes the painting: "Over all the chandelier. The Eye too: what Mamma called 'the Mad-Eye - it looks right

through you.' Aiming its arrows the bow-shaped eye was at the same time the target, or bull's-eye" (76). This is the first indication of the predominating motif of Artist as Vivisector. At this point, the image is still only mildly aggressive, the threat from the arrows being an unsettling undercurrent. The artist here is principally voyeur and, implicitly, analyst. And yet, even in this early manifestation, the artist's eye is also seen as a potential victim possessing a vulnerability which also exposes the voyeur as a target.

When he comes to live with the Courtneys, Hurtle feels he has achieved the chandelier, the goal of his first quest.

However, he soon realizes that he has achieved only its outward representation. When the young boy shows Mrs. Courtney a portrait of her he has done, her first response is: "But is it a likeness? I don't think so" (94). Like the chandelier, she is all dazzling surfaces and her reaction to his art is in kind. Nevertheless, she recognizes Hurtle's potential: "Fancy if our son should turn out to be a genius" (94). Just in case this may be true, she engages a drawing teacher for him. The tutor, Mr. Tyndall, "was slow and clean and dedicated to perspective. Nice families commissioned him to draw portrait heads" (94). The innovator in Hurtle rebels against this restraint of form, and he embarks upon his lessons in technique with barely suppressed hostility.

The importance that art has assumed for Hurtle is strikingly demonstrated by his reaction to the suicide of

Mr. Shrewcroft, the boy's Latin tutor. Despite the Courtneys' futile attempt to cover up the matter, Hurtle intuitively that his teacher has killed himself and the young boy is stunned by the event. In a highly emotional state, he paints a ghastly mural on his bedroom wall. When he is finished, he stands back to look at "what his desire had driven him to do" (100), and feels a sense of fulfillment that a necessary act has been performed: "not a game of his own imagination, but a wrestling match with a stranger." Yet, as the initial emotional outpouring wanes, Hurtle, Tyndall's pupil in technique in spite of himself, begins to look at his work with a critical, detached eye: "He had been led astray by the brilliance of the live red; whereas 'Jack' Shrewcroft's suicide should have been black black" (100).

With this incident, the burgeoning dialectic between Hurtle's artistic sensitivity and his aesthetic judgement becomes important. He is driven to paint from what he calls an overwhelming emotional "desire" to express an inner state of turmoil, and yet he already realizes that within his chosen means of expressing this state exist limitations and rules which ultimately must be self-imposed. He is also aware that, without adherence to these restrictions, his work will in the end not satisfy him. He has begun to leave the world of "The Innocent Eye".<sup>1</sup>

When Hurtle is twelve, he embarks with the Courtneys upon a tour of Europe which becomes an exciting aesthetic initiation for this Australian boy. In Europe he makes a careful study of the paintings "which showed him a reality

more intense than the life he had so far experienced" (126).

Hurtle's responses on this journey are significant for two reasons. In the first place, White, in this novel, depicts Europe not as the crucible of the individual and collective holocausts of The Aunt's Story and Riders in the Chariot, but instead as a treasure trove, a site of cultural heritage capable of instilling in the proper recipient artistic experiences of great scope. Secondly, we see from the above quotation that Hurtle realizes that it is reality he is being shown through this display of masterpieces. An important equation is then set in place for the aspiring painter: Art can equal life. This equation becomes the fundamental principle of both Hurtle's aesthetics and his existence and, paradoxically, his perceived inactivity to make his art truly represent the reality he is experiencing becomes a lifelong frustration.

The First World War serves as a break between Hurtle's youth and maturity. He enlists and travels once again to Europe. The war itself is treated as an interlude (significantly, White does not mention any of Duffield's paintings from this period), an off-stage occurrence during which the boy comes of age. The break up and disintegration of the Courtneys is described in a series of letters Hurtle receives when he is overseas. When he arrives back in Australia after the war, all his family ties have been irrevocably broken, the watershed of his independence crossed.

In human, social terms, the major conflict in Duf-



field's art still involves the Eye that has signified his talent since his life with his original family. On the one hand, the tremendous marshalling of resources and creative energy for his art requires that he accurately and effectively investigate the reality he experiences so that his work will accurately represent the truth of these experiences. Yet, as he strives to do this, he becomes the Vivisector, dissecting his human and natural environment objectively to analyze their essence. The greater the triumph over the material, the greater the potential destruction to his subject. This struggle is repeated time and again in Hurtle's development. The first detailed history of this destructive curve in the painter's relationships with his human subjects is told in the story of his affair with the prostitute Nancy Lightfoot, whom he encounters shortly after he returns to Australia from the war. A strong component of artistic fascination is present in his initial attraction to her. After the first night spent with her, Hurtle attempts a portrait of her which falls far short of the reality he is trying to depict: "He would have liked to splash amongst the gasping, sucking, tropical colours which had flooded them both" (189).

Nancy soon becomes the focus of both his aesthetic and physical attention because he realizes that "at least he loved and needed her form" (189). Hurtle repeatedly attempts the Sisyphean labour of capturing Nancy's reality in his art. He sees his goal to be "to recreate the body as he saw it without losing the feel of the flesh" (199). Noel

Macainsh writes that "for the aesthetacist Duffield reality becomes a feature of the subject; it is made up of the purely ideal, mental projection of meanings, which leaves the external world 'unchanged' (78). The frustration for Hurtle is not that he is unable to depict reality "realistically," but that these depictions give rise to two major problems. First, the artist is acutely aware of the tremendous gap between the "purely ideal, mental projection of meaning" for which he is striving and the "external world unchanged" which exists beyond and in a sense indifferent to his art. Second, while this process of creation is taking place, the painter is at the same time aware of the appalling toll this operation is taking upon his model and correspondingly on his relationship with the woman. As he paints her, he knows that "like all human vegetables she was offering herself to the knife she only half suspected" (200).

With Nance serving as inspiration and catalyst of his art, it is ironic that Hurtle soon becomes confident enough to break with her and to move to the outback in order to concentrate exclusively on his work. As his painting begins to occupy a more central position in his life, his relationship with the Sydney prostitute begins to fade rather quickly. The rejected woman makes several desperate attempts to retain some hold on Hurtle by visiting him several times at his shack. On her last visit, the two of them realize that their relationship has foundered and died. Hurtle alone intuits the precise nature of this death: "he

had disembowelled her while still alive; he had watched her no less cruel dissection by the knives of light" (246). When, shortly afterward, Hurtle discovers Nance's shattered body lying at the foot of a gorge, the Vivisector appears to have triumphed over the Artist.

During the next stage of his artistic development, Hurtle encounters what is potentially his greatest foe: his own success. The question of an artist's fame inevitably implies the question of the relationship of that artist to his audience. White first addresses this relationship through his depiction of Alf Dubbo, the young aboriginal painter in Riders in the Chariot. Dubbo consistently hides his work and when he does finally reluctantly show his work to a dealer, the painter instantly regrets his decision and refuses to let the prospective agent exhibit it. The exasperated man tells Dubbo: "Paintings which nobody looks at might never have been painted" (361). Dubbo counters with: "I will look at them." Hurtle overcomes the self-consciousness which cripples the young aborigine and allows his art to be exhibited and sold. Yet, throughout his life, he cannot overcome a strong sense of contempt and revulsion for the public which purchases and honours his work.

The relationship between the artist and the public is linked inextricably for White with the connection between the creating of art and the sexual act. In the last chapter, we have seen that for Alf Dubbo painting carries with it a strong sexual component (see p. 46). In The Vivisector, White explores this idea in greater detail by

setting up a conflict between art as masturbation and art as procreation. The parallel is obvious: masturbatory art is work created for the artist alone; art as procreation is a gift to the world, this gift carrying with it the potential to effect change in the very society of the artist who spawned it.

As a young boy, Hurtle's artistic failures leave him with a sense of overwhelming frustration: "the thought that he may never be able to convey something that was his and nobody else's brought such an intense despair he masturbated into the quilt" (158). If he cannot convey his message to others, he will have to be content with an inferior satisfaction. However, many years later, his artistic development has reached such a stage that he can admit to himself: "God knew he had multiplied, if not through his loins; he was no frivolous masturbator tossing his seed on to the wasteland" (508). Ultimately, then, Hurtle is aware that he needs his audience to complete his artistic legacy. Still, throughout his life he is never able to confront comfortably that audience on terms other than giving it his art. Encounters with the public leave him feeling shattered and painfully inept because he realizes what exactly he has shown these people: "the windows to your actual, willed life, your every iridescent tremor and transparent thought" (572). When he was a small boy he painted the artist's eye as a bulls-eye, a target; as an established and honored artist, he still feels his art makes him overwhelmingly vulnerable, that it is a threat to his privacy and self.

This sense of exposure spills over on to all his social relations. After every public outing he rushes back to the safety of the rambling, dilapidated house that has become his home in Sydney.

### III

Hurtle Duffield's self-imposed isolation introduces a theme which has been touched on by White in previous novels but which achieves prominence in The Vivisector and becomes even more important in subsequent novels: the protagonist as exile from the human community. In the previous novels, this very isolation was a mark of the elect: the chosen ones remain outside society because of the purity which they must keep unsullied from contamination by the world. To be saved means automatically to be exiled, rejected, removed. In The Aunt's Story, Theodora Goodman must leave her homeland and family to begin her journey of self-realization. The end of this voyage, as seen in Chapter One, results in her complete withdrawal from any kind of social connection. In Riders in the Chariot, each one of the four elect is an exile from a society depicted as mediocre, materialistic, and luridly evil. A clue that White's tone has shifted with The Vivisector can be noticed for example by his changing description of the city of Sydney. In Riders this metropolis is a neon nightmare. However, in this later novel, White explains that he:

wanted . . . to paint a portrait of my city; wet, boiling, superficial, brash, beautiful, ugly

Sydney, developing during my lifetime from a sunlit village into this present-day parvenu bastard, compound of San Francisco and Chicago.

(Flaws 151)

An example of this moderation can be seen when Hurtle returns to Sydney after the war. One evening he wanders down to the harbour, eating prawns and chips:

The slow sea and the long tongues of oily light make half the feast: the silence too. . . . In the deserted park at that hour the sounds of Sydney were solider than the shapes of night: opaque florescence of a foghorn somewhere in the harbour; drawn-out squeal of a leaping train; empty bottle slapping fat water; a smoker's cough.

(180)

The environment is indeed still flawed but the patina of corruption induced by the description of the Sydney suburb of Sarsaparilla and of the Flack/Jolley covey has been superceded by the bungling innocence of the affectionately drawn Nancy Lightfoot.

In the main, Hurtle's social connections are dismaying failures. As we have seen, the painter experiences strong feelings of estrangement from the Duffields, his first, biological family. These working-class people have little aesthetic sense and are intimidated by the growing artistic inclinations of their son; the young boy's mother tells him: "You're what Pa and me knows we aren't" (22). When he is taken to the wealthy Courtneys whose laundry his mother

does, he experiences at first a sense of belonging which is really only a strong attraction for the artistic ambience of the surroundings. Soon his sense of estrangement returns. As early as the first day at his new home he realizes "he didn't belong anywhere: that was what frightened" (86). Throughout his childhood, this sense of distance increases as he becomes more aware of the differences between his adoptive parents and himself (the importance to Hurtle of his adopted sister Rhoda necessitates a more detailed analysis and will be discussed below). This sense of alienation continues until the outbreak of the First World War which serves as an opportunity for escape, and he enlists. As he is about to return to Australia after the gap of the war years, he ruminates about the Courtneys he no longer knows:

how could he ever be a Courtney? However intense the nostalgia, he was no longer a member of his "family" . . . . He had gratified at least some of the desires of all three. If he had left them bearing a grudge, it was because total love must be resisted: it is overwhelming like religion.

(177)

This statement is interesting for two reasons. For the first time in the novels studied, we have the protagonist actively rejecting love instead of being rejected by others.

There is an implication here that love would necessarily exclude the vivisectionist objectivity Hurtle feels he requires for his art. The second point of interest is the

juxtaposition of the terms "total love" and "religion" in the above quotation. Both are described as being similar in their capacity to overwhelm. We have seen in Riders the role which overwhelming religious experience plays in the lives of those open to its power. And, in the figure of Harry Rosetree, we have seen the tragedy of the man who turns his back on this bestowal of grace. In The Vivisector, the nature of grace has changed: Hurtle feels that the choice he must make lies between his artistic integrity and the giving and receiving of "overwhelming love." He must choose one or the other, and he knows that he cannot live without his art. Patricia Morley has described this dialectic as Hurtle's "dual personality (as ideological artist and moral leper)" (212).

Hurtle's first adult relationship, as we have seen, is with the prostitute Nancy Lightfoot. Along with his appreciation of her as a model, Hurtle experiences what for him are disturbing longings for companionship. At one point while they are out walking together he asks her: "Isn't it possible for two human beings to inspire and comfort each other simply by being together?" (205). However, Hurtle's uncharacteristic expression of need is tinged with ambiguity. His fear of losing his artistic integrity through loving is still his controlling motivation: "He was so quick to lock the intruder out, he might have felt lonely if it hadn't been for his thoughts" (188). For the painter, others are intruders who have to be kept away. Out at the shack in the outback where he has fled to pursue his work,



Nance, on her last visit, tells him the story of her life. In the dark recriminations indulged in by the two of them which follows the knowledge of the total collapse of their relationship, she points at the self-portrait that has occupied his complete attention for the last several days and tells him: "there . . . that's Duffield. Not bad. True. Lovun 'imself" (248). The next morning she is dead.

Hurtle flees back to the comforting anonymity of the city, to the shambling house which will be his home for the rest of his life. He is more alone than ever, his only contact being with the art dealer Caldicott who constantly tries to bring Hurtle into the society of the patrons who are eager to meet this controversial artist.

Hurtle's most important encounter during this time is a bizarre meeting with the grocer Cecil Cutbush. This scene carries with it parodic reverberations of previous protagonist-prophet episodes in the earlier novels. Cutbush here utters no words of wisdom. Yet, in spite of this, Hurtle does respond to the grocer on a level deep enough for the painter later to describe the night they meet as "this evening of some significance" (267). The important point about this encounter is the fact that Hurtle so uncharacteristically talks to Cutbush of his innermost thoughts. The grocer, hoping to contact the painter on a physical, sexual level, instead, in a superbly ironic subversive moment, exacts from Hurtle a painfully emotional response. Cutbush realizes the mistake he has made: "the stranger wasn't prepared to reveal more than his naked thoughts" (257). The

revelations which Hurtle makes, while not of a nature the grocer desired, are still powerful enough to arouse Cutbush so that, after Hurtle leaves, Cutbush must relieve himself by masturbating. The painter, on the other hand, leaves the park exhilarated by post-confessional relief. What he actually relates to the grocer (his guilt for Nance's death, his belief in a Divine Vivisector) is not as important as the fact that he is experiencing human contact for the first time.

The residue of the meeting haunts Hurtle so deeply that he must rationalize its repercussions: "If he had exposed himself to someone he was only faintly disturbed: it was doubtful he would ever see that person again . . ." (265). The painting that results from the evening is described as "the big-arsed moon aiming at the dislocated lovers; the crypto-queer grocer-councillor machine-gunning them from the Council bench" (267). This painting, called "Lantana Lovers by Moonlight," is an outsider's sour version of love. Both nature and the "crypto-queer" (and, of course, implicitly the painter himself) view the lovers with overt hostility, if also in the voyeur's case with a form of alienated desire. It is a cynical attempt by Hurtle to use the potent antidote of "reality" to restore the balance he feels he has lost through his divulging of himself to the grocer.

After this episode, Hurtle once again withdraws into his work until he meets the Greek woman Hero Pavloussi. At the beginning of their relationship "he realized he had never been in love, except with painting" (321). This is a

new insight for Hurtle: for the first time he has an opportunity to seek meaning for his life through another person rather than solely through his art. However, this affair is doomed for several reasons. Just as "Lantana Lovers by Moonlight," the painting he creates after his encounter with Cutbush, signifies that somewhat abrasive episode, the painting "Infinity of Cats," a study of drowning kittens in a bag, comes to be the leitmotif of his experiences with Hero.

On his first visit to Hero, Hurtle comes upon a gardener with a bag of kittens that Hero's husband Cosmos has ordered him to drown. The image of the kittens' desperate struggles inside the bag haunts the painter and he begins to work on "Infinity of Cats": "Most of the condemned animals were still noticeably furred, but their writhing despair and the action of the water made some of them look skinned, human" (355). Hurtle tries to give this painting to Hero who is appalled by its naked despair and rejects it: "It is a pornography! Are you trying to kill me?" (360).

Analysing their situation, and attempting to clarify the negative tone so prevalent in it, Hurtle thinks to himself: "as far as he could fathom, his fault lay in loving her more in her drowned condition" (359). It is a clue to Hero's depressive nature that she feels a strong connection with the stark cynicism of the Lantana painting as soon as she sees it. The grocer's frustrated envy of the lovers, the masturbating fantasy with the incipient violence (machine-gunning the lovers), and the victimization of the

humans by the Divine Destroyer: all these images resound powerfully within her. Characteristically, she immediately offers to buy the painting. She tries to possess her despair as she has already tried in vain to possess joy.

It is not surprising then that the romantic relationship founded upon the dark canvas of "Lantana Lovers" must be relatively short-lived. Hero is seeking salvation as desperately as Hurtle is but she does not have his aesthetic outlet to provide fulfillment. She has convinced herself that she can be saved only through a pilgrimage to a Greek island which had once inspired her in the past.

Hurtle's lack of enthusiasm for Hero's voyage begins to create almost insurmountable distances between the couple. When she rejects his gift of the painting of the drowning kittens, the painter realizes: "His repeated downfall was his longing to share truth with somebody specific who didn't want to receive it" (360). As questionable as this statement may be, given Hurtle's singular inability to open up to anyone, this feeling in him is strong enough to cause him once again to withdraw. Although he accompanies Hero on her futile pilgrimage to her Greek island, the acid of indifference has already begun to eat away at their relationship. At this point in his life Hurtle has become aware of the role his despair and neuroses have played in the creation of his works of art. While Hero is journeying to the shrines of Perialos in order to purge her demons, the painter tells her: "I'm an artist . . . I can't afford exorcism" (374).

He can only stand by, the objective voyeur and vivisector

once again, and watch Hero's pilgrimage shatter against the shabby reality of the island. Hurtle continues throughout to observe the landscape of the island, the idiosyncrasies of its inhabitants and finally the disquieting behaviour of his companion. The Greek woman senses the failure of her mission and becomes enraged at the way her last hope for salvation has died. In her anger she can only spit out: "Dreck! Dreck! The Germans express it best. Well, I will learn to live with such Dreck as I am: to find a reason and a purpose in this Dreck" (392). This nihilistic response effectively sounds the death-knell to their relationship. Hurtle returns to Australia and his work; Hero to Greece and her husband.

While all of these encounters with his fellow humans may seem utter failures, nevertheless Hurtle, through these experiences, is inching towards what will be the ultimate and most intimate connection he will make with another human being, his adopted sister Rhoda Courtney. As with all the other people with whom he becomes involved, Hurtle has depicted his young relationship with Rhoda through a painting, "Pythoess at Tripod." Based on a childhood incident when the Courtneys and their adopted son were travelling through Europe, the pythoess painting is an attempt to render the combination of pity and revulsion the young boy feels when he stumbles upon the young hunchbacked girl standing naked over a bidet.

The reintroduction of Rhoda into Hurtle's life is ushered in by an encounter which Hurtle describes as his

only brush with "masculine friendship," and it will be the only one he will make in the novel. He runs into the printer Mothersole on a Sydney ferry. Mothersole, much in the same way as Cutbush before him, begins a conversation with the taciturn Duffield. The printer's motivation springs from a desire for simple human companionship, not from the tangled miasma of needs and desires which prompted Cutbush to approach the painter. However, as in the previous encounter, Hurtle uses the occasion to express a depth of feeling that has had no other outlet outside his art. He bares his soul to the mother in Mothersole. The painter himself is aware of the ramifications of these revelations and recognizes the parallels of this meeting with the one he had with the grocer Cutbush:

He remembered another occasion when he had risen from the dead, by seminal dew and the threats of moonlight, in conversation, repulsive, painful, but necessary, with the grocer Cutbush; and now was born again by grace of Mothersole's warm middle-class womb. (405)

Mothersole reintroduces the theme of the family which had become of minor importance in the novel since Hurtle's flight from the Courtneys to the war in Europe. The printer is on his way to visit his sister who has polio, and he tells Duffield: "Don't you find at our age . . . a man grows closer to his family" (399). The painter can only weakly explain that he has lost track of his own. However, this motif becomes central to the novel shortly afterwards when

Hurtle accidentally meets Rhoda again.

This relationship, the most important one in Duffield's later life, is characterized by a frustrated ambiguity largely caused by the abrasive personalities of both the brother and sister. The middle-aged woman reluctantly accepts the painter's invitation to move in with him. For Duffield, "Rhoda was to be employed as a moral force, or booster of his conscience" (443). Seeing his sister in these terms necessarily and paradoxically entails that he is in constant battle with her.

As Morley states: "Rhoda typifies for Hurtle the inevitable, unsought relationship between man and his archetypal brother, every other human being" (226). Hurtle's hostility to exactly this type of relationship in the past, and his fear that it may crush his artistic response, is the basis for much of the antagonism he often feels for Rhoda. As, in France as a young boy, he had stumbled upon and painted his sister in her naked and deformed vulnerability, Hurtle feels similarly exposed before Rhoda once she comes to live with him. However, there is a sense of expiation implied in Hurtle's wish to have Rhoda live with him, a payment for all the years of vivisection. There is a sense that, if he risks the rigours of this relationship, there will be a more reconciled ending to his life.

Unlike Hero, who has been associated with the murder of cats, Rhoda instead provides food for all the cats of the neighbourhood, trundling the streets with a cartful of

horsemeat. It is therefore a positive sign when Rhoda, with several cats of her own, comes to live with Hurtle, bringing these nurturing powers with her. The painter realizes that, in spite of the pain and discomfort each one ultimately provides for the other, the two of them must cling together in the wreckage of their lives: "When she sent for them to come and stuff him in his coffin, that was where Rhoda would take over: wind up the Punch-and-Judy show with her own little song-and-dance act" (608).

Duffield's meeting on the ferry with Mothersole is significant for the introduction of another motif which soon becomes important in the novel. The two men begin to discuss children and, after the meeting, Hurtle reflects:

Why had he never painted a child? . . . Sitting with his hands locked, he was fidgeting to create this child. Or more than one. Or many in the one. For after all there is only the one child: the one you carry inside you. (405)

As we have seen previously in this chapter, Hurtle considers his art his progeny; yet at this late stage of his life he becomes aware of the more human aspects of the parenting instinct. At this point Hurtle meets the child prodigy Kathy Volkov whom he comes to regard as "his spiritual child of infinite possibilities" (422). As her surname implies, she is "of the folk," reminding the painter of his own class origins, and also reminding him of the desperate yearning for the expanded horizons which he sought in vain through the Courtneys.



All Hurtle's relationships are crippled because of his overriding fear of closeness, his self-consciousness and general gloom. His relationship with Kathy is subject to these same negative aspects of his character. He resents his own interest in her: he purposely stays away from her important concerts (or at times pretends to), he refuses to say goodbye to her or welcome her back when she returns from her tours. In spite of this apparent disinterest, at the core of Hurtle's involvement with Kathy lies an incestuous yearning against which the painter counts on Rhoda's presence as a buffer. The young pianist is undismayed by Hurtle's turmoil; indeed she seems to blossom under the old man's patronage. After her career has been firmly established, the young girl tells him: "I prefer to think of you as the father of anything praiseworthy in me" (540).

Hurtle has found each attempt to establish some kind of human contact to be exceedingly painful. Simone Weil has written that "pain is the root of knowledge" (First and Last Notebooks 69). Indeed each painful experience Hurtle undergoes with another person is yet one more step towards that knowledge of life for which he is constantly striving in his art. Yet there is still the impenetrable silence within which Hurtle is encased and which is finally and dramatically emphasised by the stroke which hits him while he is out walking one day. The God which has existed until now in the novel as fringe-dweller and Divine Vivisector, having (literally) "stroked" Hurtle into a newer level of awareness, becomes the all-consuming subject of his last

series of works: "the God paintings."

Flannery O'Connor, in answer to the critics who disparaged the grotesqueries of her fiction, explained that

Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them.

(Mystery and Manners 112)

A similar view regarding White's work can explain the sudden shift in the direction of the novel. This literal deus ex machina deflects Hurtle suddenly and significantly from his preoccupation with Kathy and Rhoda. The Chariot of the Riders looms once again in a flash, but then suddenly disappears, leaving the stricken painter with only its reverberation, a shadow on his mind. It is this shadow that he tries to depict in his last paintings. In his last work of all he reaches as close as he has ever come to his goal:

All his life he had been reaching towards the vertiginous blue without truly visualizing, till lying on the pavement he was dazzled not so much by a colour as a long-standing secret relationship. (616)

This new relationship is signified by Hurtle's last thought and what is the final word of the novel: "indi-ggoddd" (617). At last his art and salvation are one.

#### IV

Frederick Hoffmann writes: "the disorder of life is

conquered in the aesthetic forms which the mind of the exile, removed from it, chooses for the act of observing it." (The Mortal No 397). For Hurtle, the problem of exile co-exists with the problem of conquering aesthetic form. The painter struggles to express himself through his art, to find the laws and boundaries within which it is possible to realize his vision. This struggle is carried on against the background of his own continuous exile, first from his natural family, the Duffields, and their deprived existence, then later from his adopted family with their threat of stultifying him with their love and superficialities. The last phase of his exile encompasses the years of alienation when he turns away from the men and women who brush up against him, scarring and being scarred in return.

Although the world of The Vivisector is often sordid, still it is not the chronically evil one of Riders in the Chariot. Jill Ward points out: "With the Dreck motif in The Vivisector we are being reminded that the sordid may still contain the potential to bring illumination" (410-11). Hurtle Duffield has created aesthetic form out of the barren rocks of the Australian outback, from Nance Lightfoot's dissipated body, out of Rhoda's deformities. Finally, as John Docker writes: "Hurtle himself now becomes conceived as a work of art" (60).

Does White then escape in The Vivisector the ambiguous unease which characterizes the final outcome of The Aunt's Story and Riders in the Chariot? There are several problems with the concept of aesthetics as a strategy for salvation

in the novel. The elitism which was such a strong component in the make-up of the four protagonists of Riders on a spiritual level is repeated in The Vivisector in the form of Duffield's prodigious talent and acute sensitivity. This talent is a gratuitous quality, unasked for and undeserved, the mark of what John Colmer calls "a privileged visionary" (56). The tale of Duffield's struggle then cannot easily be generalized to represent the human condition. His relationships with his family, and those he encounters, as well as his later meetings with his public, are marked by extreme discomfort and anguish. Finally, it is only with Rhoda that he is able to reach a semblance of tranquility in an awkward truce few readers would be willing to take as worthy of emulation.

The sudden incident of Hurtle's stroke creates an unsettling denouement in a novel where theology has been remarkably absent, given its central thematic importance in the novels written immediately before this one. At the point in the novel where the stroke occurs, there is a sense of a dead end reached: neither Hurtle's art nor those who love him can give the painter the ultimate justification for his life. However, White's imposition of a supernatural solution strikes one as a somewhat contrived exit to this dilemma. While in Riders the vision of the Chariot is an integrated motif throughout the entire novel, the Divine Vivisector who "strokes" Hurtle into the transcendence he fails to achieve through his art or his humanity is an element that does not fit thematically or organically into

the pattern of the novel. We are left with the impression that grace through aesthetics cannot work unless given a supernatural nudge. White is making the same statement he made in Riders, but his conclusion now is more tentative, less certain.

## Endnote

In his essay, "The Innocent Eye and the Armed Vision," Roger Shattuck uses this term, not as a cry of despair for a prelapsarian state, but instead as a designation of a positive and informed state of aesthetics:

Yes, we have all lost our innocence long since. The important thing is to be able to find it again, and not by going back. . . . The most exhilarating quality of art in its truest forms is to enable one to come to it again and again and to find oneself a virgin every time. (424)

## Chapter IV

### The Eye of the Storm: Achieving the Final Function

"Rebelling against the tyranny of time, the absurdity of his lot, the ignominy of death, the modern hero as victim achieves no culminating moment of transfiguration or redemption" (Glicksburg, The Tragic Vision 8).

As we have investigated in previous chapters, White's protagonists have endeavoured to instill meaning into their lives through various quests for enlightenment: Theodora Goodman's search for self-discovery, the Company of Riders' transcendent voyage into mystic unity, and Hurtle Duffield's final gasp of vision as his aesthetic fulfillment at last unites him with God.

In The Eye of the Storm (1973), Elizabeth Hunter operates with little apparent interest in the salvation of her soul. In fact she seems to exist in a singularly nihilistic void where occasional glimmerings of potential meaning edge into her consciousness and then quickly flicker out. The old woman's attention is instead occupied principally with the people who surround her on her deathbed and with those others in her past who have played significant roles in her life.

In The Vivisector, Hurtle Duffield's crippled relationships with both his real and his adopted family and with the various people he encounters throughout his life compose a vast panorama of broken and painful events which play only a secondary role in the painter's primary search for meaning through aesthetic achievement. However, in The Eye of the Storm, analyses of relationships, the study of the loves and

hates of the major characters, constitute the foreground of interest in the novel.

Nevertheless, as we have seen before in White's work, this exploration of the vagaries of the human condition does not necessarily lead to an unambiguous resolution. As R. Shepherd writes:

There appears to be deliberate mystification in White such that whenever the author's commitment to some particular idea threatens to become too apparent he will deliberately resort to a rhetoric of uncertainty to vitiate any glib conclusion.

(32).

Because the novel presently under study does not adhere to White's usual pattern of the protagonist in search of salvation, The Eye of the Storm seems particularly to participate in this "rhetoric of uncertainty." What conclusions are to be drawn from the long barren life of Elizabeth Hunter?

In order to understand the ramifications of the old woman's life and death, it is necessary to look closely at the events in her life, the major players in these events, and how all of these have been affected, if at all, by their relationship with the sour bed-ridden woman who exists as the focus of the novel. In turn, we must examine the pivotal event in Elizabeth Hunter's life, her transcendental, visionary experience in the eye of the storm, and determine both its importance in her life and its significance in the novel.



As with The Aunt's Story, the present novel opens at the deathbed of an old woman. In the earlier novel, the death of Mrs. Goodman, Theodora's cantankerous mother, signals the liberation of her daughter and the beginning of the younger woman's long journey into self-discovery. In The Eye of the Storm, the deathbed itself becomes the locus of the protagonist's journey, a throne of reminiscence where a retrospective spotlight shines back upon the myriad people and events whose images coalesce in the mind of the dying woman.

# I

Elizabeth Hunter's experience on Brumby Island where she survives a tropical cyclone serves as the underpinning of all her mental meanderings while she awaits her death. Therefore, we must begin our study with a look at this event.

Mrs. Hunter, who is seventy years old at the time of this occurrence (the cyclone), accompanies her recently divorced middle-aged daughter Dorothy on a visit to their friends, the Warmings, who own a place on Brumby Island, a locale characterised by its "primordial rainforest" (336). White immediately sets up the same mythical reverberations we have seen him use previously in the case of the Goodman estate at Meroë and the mansion of Mary Hare at Xanadu. The house occupied by the Warming family "had resisted the throbbing, the threats, the apocalyptic splendours of an ocean perpetually unrolling out of an indeterminate east"

(337). Indeed, the house, isolated and immune, may be seen as a representation of Elizabeth herself, who has remained oblivious to any mystical stirrings from what White calls the "indeterminate east."

The reader views Elizabeth, in the first section of the visit, primarily through the eyes of her disgruntled yet envious daughter Dorothy. At this point in the novel, Elizabeth's character has been clearly enough delineated to give full credence to Dorothy's antipathetic reaction to what she sees as her mother's manipulative seduction of the entire Warming family. In spite of her daughter's jealousy, Elizabeth is still depicted in relatively apothestic terms.

To her daughter's chagrin, the old woman shamelessly exploits her allure while on the island. Mrs. Hunter charms everyone she meets, walking around possessing an "aureole . . . of what again appeared as palest purest gold" (338).

Because of an accident on the mainland in which their son has been injured, the Warmings must leave their guests on the island to fend for themselves. There is another guest staying with them, a marine biologist named Edvard Pehl, whom Dorothy correctly suspects her mother has set out to conquer and subdue. The tension of this triangular situation increases hourly until Dorothy decides for the sake of her own sanity to leave the island. Pehl embarks on his own on an exploratory mission, and Elizabeth, unaware that she is now alone, is left by herself to confront the approaching storm, its eye, and her revelations.

Unaware at first of the threatening weather, the

deserted woman wanders off into the forest and there receives an initiation into the primitive which brings to mind the spectacular encounters in the bush around Xanadu wherein the eccentric Mary Hare in Riders underwent her transcendental experiences. For a moment, Elizabeth Hunter also visits this terrain of primeval innocence. She spots some flowers in a clearing: "Overjoyed at her find she got down on her knees: to insinuate herself into secrets, to pick, to devour, or thrust up her nostrils" (374). However, she is no Mary Hare waiting for the Chariot. Her pragmatism eliminates any chance of transcendence: "By allowing her inescapably frivolous and, alas, corrupt nature the freedom of its silence, the forest had begun to oppress her: she could not believe, finally, in grace, only luck" (374).

This initial intrusion of grace a failure, Mrs. Hunter returns to the house and at last notices the signs of the encroaching storm. Realizing that the ramshackle house could not withstand the strong winds, she runs for shelter to an old cellar nearby and there awaits what soon develops into a terrifying onslaught of wind and rain. While huddled in her shelter, she experiences a revelation, perhaps having been more influenced by her time in the forest than she had first imagined: "Perhaps it is you who are responsible for the worst in people" (380). Yet, like the objects whizzing by her in the tumult, she cannot hold on to this thought for long and she soon falls asleep.

She awakens in stillness: the eye of the storm. White intends the reader not to miss the analogy between the peace

in the eye of the storm and the state of the soul of Elizabeth Hunter.

She was no longer a body, least of all a woman. .

. . She was instead a being, or more likely a flaw at the centre of this jewel of light: the jewel itself, blinding and tremulous at the same time, existed, flaw and all, only by grace, . . . .

(381)

The grace that she had earlier contemplated, then lost, in the forest clearing has now once again been presented to her with a vengeance. One is reminded again of Flannery O'Connor's description of the necessity for the violent intrusion of grace in the lives of contemporary human beings (see p. 84).

Many years later, looking back at this episode, the old woman realizes: "If you could describe your storm: but you could not. You can never convey in words the utmost in experience" (371). The author at this point seems to be labouring under the same problem: how to describe "the utmost in experience" that his protagonist undergoes.

During the calm, Elizabeth leaves the shelter of her cellar to see the shattered land and a sea presently becalmed; she sees seven black swans serenely gliding by and, in the midst of this unnerving tranquility, decides that complete submission to fate is undoubtedly the solution to the mystery of life, perhaps at last allowing herself exposure to the mysticism of the indeterminate east: "she would lie down . . . and accept to become part of the

shambles she saw . . .; to be received into the sand along with other deliquescent flesh . . . is the most natural conclusion" (382). However, as was the case with her previous revelations prompted by the flowers in the clearing, and the consequent one at the beginning of the storm, she does not long remain in this atypical passive state. Immediately, she spies a gull "skewered to the snapped branch of a tree" (382) and the sight of this creature, frozen in a pantomime of death "gave back her significance" (382). Awakened once again to her former self and with a renewed determination to survive and better the storm, she hurries back to shelter to await the second part of the storm and her subsequent rescue.

White takes us no further with this episode. Although of central importance in Elizabeth's life, her experience in the storm paradoxically leaves her unchanged. When she returns to civilization she retains little other than a surprisingly detailed memory of the events experienced, a memory which casts its shadow over her, but one which she has no desire to analyse. What, then, was the point in undergoing "the utmost in experience"?

Perhaps by exploring the specifics of the old woman's life it will be easier to determine the significance of her unwillingness to benefit from her experience on Brumby Island and therefore easier to determine what, in the end, her life and death are all about.

## II

The Eye of the Storm contains White's most detailed and closely rendered portrait of a family. The portraits drawn of the Courtneys in The Vivisector seem relatively superficial and externalized when compared with the intimate depiction of the Hunters, dissected and analysed with agonizing thoroughness. The dying woman, unwilling to use any of the strategies White has explored in his previous novels for his protagonists to establish meaning in their lives, focuses instead on her son and daughter to provide her with solace in her dying days. The situation which occurs when her son and daughter arrive forms an ironic counterpoint to the peace Mrs. Hunter found on the storm-ravaged island.

Elizabeth Hunter's husband Alfred, long deceased when the novel opens, is one of a series of "busy" diminutive husbands and fathers prevalent in White's novels. These figures, always standing slightly in the wings, self-conscious and inept at displaying their emotions, extend from the inveterate romantic Mr. Goodman in The Aunt's Story to include Judge Twyborn, the bewildered paterfamilias to be discussed in the next chapter. The relationship between Elizabeth Hunter and her husband Alfred is accurately represented in the portraits of each which hang in the hall of their home: "Mr. Hunter's portrait was smaller than his wife's, it must have cost considerably less" (21). The comparative sizes of the portraits is a sign of the dialectics which characterize the roles each was to play in the

marriage: on Elizabeth's side, vanity, arrogance, and leisure; on Alfred's, humility, abnegation, and labour.

The life and death of Alfred Hunter occur before Elizabeth's time on Brumby Island. However, one must remember that all of these events are passing through the mind of the sometimes comatose dying woman, lying on her bed as if it were the altar of her death, being ministered to by her round-the-clock nurses. Therefore, the guilt the old woman experiences in her reminiscences about her husband has a strong eschatological tinge. The actual marriage itself was marked by constant and lengthy separations. On the one hand, there was the physical separation, with Alfred out at Kudjeri, the farm they owned in the country, while Elizabeth and the children remained in Sydney at their house on Moreton Drive. On the other hand, and much more significantly, there was the emotional estrangement, a vast gulf Elizabeth deliberately constructed to keep the saintly Alfred unaware of her true nature. An innocent, Alfred was completely lost in the complexity and subterfuge of his wife who herself was in complete control of the situation: "he was not aware that she had never been the person he thought her to be" (27).

It is only because of his approaching death that Alfred is emotionally united with his wife. The time Elizabeth spends at his deathbed was one of the two times in her life where a type of mystical union is reached with another person (the other occasion, discussed later, is with her night nurse, Mary de Santis). As the wife sits beside her

dying husband, "There were moments when their minds were folded into each other without any trace of the cross-hatching of wilfulness or desire to possess" (59). The great engine of her will has for a time stalled in the face of her husband's silent drift toward death. For a brief moment Elizabeth is transported away from the concerns of her self-centred life to experience the stillness as Alfred lies in the eye of his own life's storm. She realises that at this death "she was involved in a mystery so immense and so rarely experienced, she functioned . . . by reverence" (185). Yet, as is typical of her nature, this brief glimpse of vision seems to fail to make an impression serious enough to influence her in any way once she leaves the heightened atmosphere of Alfred's final moments. By the end of the long night of his dying her experience already begins to drift away from her. She once again becomes concerned with life's trivialities, especially her own appearance. Immediately after she leaves the vigil at her husband's side, she looks in a mirror and says: "My God, what a fright you can look" (185). Her experiences of mystical union has evaporated. Much later, on her own deathbed, she can only look back on her marriage and mourn the distances she has created.

Mrs. Hunter admits that her two children, Basil and Dorothy, are "hardly Alfred's, except by the accident of blood" (28). The implication here of course is that Elizabeth herself is the victor of the struggle and now completely possesses her two offspring. She says to herself



at one point: "Oh, I got them from him. But I made them into mine" (473). The irony of the situation is that her children are as little hers as Alfred's. One of the most striking features of the novel is the complete antipathy that exists on her son and daughter's part towards their mother, an apparently unbridgeable gap that has widened through the years.

This distance is most remarkable in the relationship of Elizabeth to her daughter Dorothy. The Princesse de Lascabannes (she has been married to and divorced from a French nobleman), awash in self-consciousness, seems bent on being as miserable as possible. She says to herself: "I have never managed to escape being this thing myself" (47), a remarkable statement of self-alienation. The hatred she feels for herself extends outward to include almost all aspects of her life: the French relatives of her ex-husband, Australia and Australians, humanity in general. On this return home, she narrows the focus of her loathing to her own family members, her brother Basil and her mother. It is part of the cynicism in which she takes great pride that Dorothy feels she can nakedly admit to herself the real reason for this trip back to Australia: "Let's face it: I've come back to coax a respectable sum of money out of an aged woman" (194). As we have seen, on a previous visit Dorothy has fled from her then still powerful mother just before the latter experienced the cyclone on Brumby Island.

Interestingly enough, Dorothy herself experiences a storm on her way to pay her mother this last visit. On the

flight to Australia, over the Bay of Bengal, her plane experiences severe turbulence. Dorothy begins to confide her fear to a Dutchman sitting beside her. This passenger is of course one of White's mystical travellers (a flying Dutchman?) who exist to teach and comfort: "she sensed an uncommon spirit. . . . He had something austere, monastic about him" (65). Like a character from Conrad ("My experience is only of the sea" [66]), he describes his own experience with the eye of the storm. The storm through which the plane is flying abates, and, on landing Dorothy loses track of the Dutchman, never to find him again. Dorothy's failure to benefit from this experience is judged harshly by her mother when she hears about it. "Dorothy had wasted her Dutchman" (186), Elizabeth thinks impatiently to herself. Yet, there is no apparent reason for Dorothy's lack of success, just as there is also no apparent reason for the granting of Elizabeth's own vision on Brumby Island.

It can also be reasonably concluded that Elizabeth has equally wasted what she has been given in that experience. Dorothy cannot be considered with Harry Rosetree who, in Riders, actively rejects the grace he is offered. She tries to reach out for it, but cannot make the connection.

The Princesse de Lascabannes has a relationship with her mother that, although partly characterised by an overwhelming hostility, is also mixed with a complex amalgam of awe and fear. It is only on Brumby Island that this hostility becomes pure enough for the daughter to act upon it by leaving her mother by herself to face the oncoming

storm. The basis for much of the contention between the two women is the older woman's insistence upon seeing her daughter as a rival. Dorothy is neurotic and passive enough to introject her fear and dislike of her mother and thereby develop the classical neurotic response to aversive situations -- migraines and, ultimately, flight.

During their stay on the island, Elizabeth relates a dream she has had to Edvard Pehl, the marine biologist, and to Dorothy, in which she is "walking on the bed of the sea" (361). This epitomises Elizabeth's method of working in life, below the surface and hidden from view, the better to achieve her goals. Characteristically, she tells Pehl that she never dreams of invertebrates: there is no place in her universe, whether awake or asleep, for anyone without a backbone..

Dorothy has felt her mother's cold regard often turned upon her and by now it has shrivelled her soul. As a young girl, the daughter would wait at the gates of their house on Moreton Drive looking in vain for "the arrival she had always half expected: of the person in whom beauty was united with kindness" (327). Dorothy never forgets those hours of waiting, nor has she outgrown that little girl looking forever outward, away from the startling beauty and vivacity of her mother behind her in the house. The young child continues to stand, desperately looking for the person who possesses that same beauty as her mother possessed, but along with it, who also had the rare and absent gift of kindness.

Elizabeth's son, the knighted actor Sir Basil, arrives at the deathbed of his mother later than his sister Dorothy.

It is significant that both siblings refuse to stay at Moreton Drive during their visits. In fact even their visits to their dying mother are kept to a polite minimum. The mother-son relationship does not have the complexities that exist between the mother and daughter. However, just as Dorothy has wrapped herself in a protective cloak of self-deprecation and pseudo-aristocratic noli me tangere, Basil has used his acting to distance himself from the people and events of his life. When he appears on the "scene" at Moreton Drive and sees his mother,

Sir Basil hesitated the tick of a second, as though he had found an understudy waiting on the spot where his leading lady should have been; then (your performance is what matters; curse the management only after the curtain calls) he continued across the carpet. (111)

Throughout all the scenes between mother and son, this pose is never dropped. The aging actor is involved in his own crisis, the falling away of his art, the fear of ridicule from his audiences, and so he is little disposed to pay attention to anything that is happening to his mother. In any case, Elizabeth's icy manner of raising her children has almost guaranteed this lack of feeling in both her offspring. Like Dorothy, Basil sees his mother more as a source of funds than as a source of solace.

However, Basil does not escape feeling a sense of guilt

because of his antipathy towards his mother. This distance between child and parent leads directly into the many allusions in the novel to King Lear.<sup>1</sup> The image of the old king stalks not too far off-stage throughout Eye. Of course, there is a danger in too closely drawing parallels between the novel and the play. The connection is one of resonance rather than allegory. There is a sense that Elizabeth, because of her age and her children's animosity towards her, should be seen as the Lear figure. Yet she fails utterly to benefit from her experiences in the storm.

After his own exposure to the elements, Lear's relationship to his kingdom changes, in Northrop Frye's words, from transcendence to immanence (On Shakespeare 116). Elizabeth's relationship with those around her after the storm is still characterized by the egocentricity which is her dominant trait before her trip to the island.

In another context, Basil feels that his life as an actor is incomplete until he is able to "present the Lear who has so far evaded almost everybody" (116). However, instead of achieving Lear, he finds himself playing the role of one of the old king's treacherous children. In the solicitor's office where Basil and Dorothy have met to inform Arnold Wyburd of their intention to confine their mother to a home, the actor looks at his sister and sees in her "a Regan of a horse. Did it mean he was cast to be a drag Goneril?" (236). Throughout the novel, one of the few issues which unites Elizabeth's children is their sense that they are betraying her.

Basil, wanting somehow to come to terms with his own past and realizing the impossibility of a reconciliation with his mother who is preoccupied with her own journey towards death, attempts instead a rapprochement with his dead father. His nostalgic voyage out to Kudjeri, the farm once owned and run by his father, is not only an archetypal quest to regain the past, but it is also for Basil a journey away from Elizabeth into his father's arms. This dialectic is clear in the actor's mind: "What he craved was confirmation of his own intrinsic worth as opposed to possibly spurious achievement" (427). The flight from the superficial urbanity of Moreton Drive and Elizabeth's overweening desire for the trappings of "possible spurious achievement," towards the values of "intrinsic worth" in the county, repeats the original voyage of Alfred Hunter who implicitly knew he must remain out at Kudjeri in order to save his soul.

The extensiveness and length of the episode at the farm indicate its thematic importance in the novel. Indeed, it is the only extended episode that does not include Elizabeth, although her presence hovers mightily in the minds of both her middle-aged offspring. For Basil and Dorothy this visit is a climax of a long travail of isolation. Abandoned by the mother, they are finally also unable to tap into whatever may remain of their father's gentle spirit. In desperation, feeling "not quite grief, passion, despair, horror, but something of them all" (470), the two turn to each other, hoping that the act of physical union will give

them some kind of solace. Through their incestuous union, the two realize that "Love can freeze the limbs; affection thaws the instincts" (471). This insight has been denied Elizabeth, despite her time in the storm. It is directly after their act of affection, this ultimate act against the possessiveness of Elizabeth Hunter, that the telephone rings in the old homestead to relate the news of the old woman's death.

Typically, in this novel of failed vision and unbridgeable distances, the reconciliation between Basil and Dorothy is ephemeral and short-lived. They are left with the residue of the memory of their experience which is not of sufficient strength to transform either of them. The couple resumes the identities and roles they had momentarily shrugged off and returns to Sydney to explore the ramifications of their mother's death. Significantly, neither one attends her funeral.

### III

Isolated on her deathbed from the son and daughter she has done so much herself to estrange, Elizabeth instead has surrounded herself with a coterie of servants who are frequently referred to as her acolytes. She has continuous nursing in the persons of Flora Manhood, Sister Badgery, and Mary de Santis, as well as a German cook named Lotte Lippmann. The family solicitor Arnold Wyburd is not a servant, but he is still someone who constantly ministers to her and always obeys every summons to her side.

De Santis and Manhood, respectively the night and the day nurses, form a dialectic against which the suburban ineffectiveness of Badgery (who has the afternoon-early evening shift, obviously a transitional time of day) causes barely a ripple. It is the former couple who rules the final days and nights of Elizabeth Hunter.

Flora Manhood, the nurse of the daylight hours, is sensuality incarnate: "What she herself liked she sometimes wondered: rich, yummy food; sleep; cosmetics; making love . . ." (78). Through her, Elizabeth experiences the final clinging to matters of the flesh. The old woman takes a proprietary, almost leering, interest in Flora's ongoing affair with Col Pardoe as an extension of the sensuality in which she is no longer able to indulge. Ironically, Flora herself is disenchanted with this affair and decides instead that she should have a child by Sir Basil, whether the aging actor consents to this or not. Emblematic of the procreative instinct (as Elizabeth is not, nor are her children, neither of whom have children of their own),<sup>2</sup> the nurse feels that any offspring she has must also have great status, a fact which causes her to decide that Basil is more fitting in this respect than is the working-class Pardoe.

Of course, looming significantly over all these thoughts and plans lies the shadow of Elizabeth Hunter. Every day Sister Manhood must return to the house on Moreton Drive to perform her rituals for the care of the sick woman.

Intimidated by what she feels is Mrs. Hunter's preternatural awareness, the nurse bears the burden of her



presumed pregnancy, her "sense of her own deceit" (294), with a guilt which approaches paranoia. Only the death of her charge finally releases her from the illusion of her pregnancy: "Shriven by her menstrual blood, she was reconciled, she believed, to what had been a shaky vocation" (493).

Realizing now that a union of any kind with the Hunters is absurd, Flora reaches a kind of enlightenment, or at least a serenity, quiet and unobtrusive. Now content with her career, she returns finally to Col Pardo, the lover she had rejected for the glittering world of Sir Basil Hunter.

Flora's relationship with her employer is marked by a quiet contempt on the part of the nurse. Yet during her ministrations over the dead body of Mrs. Hunter, she "came closest to expressing the love she might have been too absorbed to feel for Elizabeth Hunter" (507). It is only after death that the old woman is able to receive the love she might have coldly rejected when alive.

As her name suggests, Mary de Santis, the night nurse, claims the spiritual, mystical realm of Elizabeth Hunter's dying days. White describes the parameters of the nurse's kingdom:

Doubts seldom arose at night, because love and usage will invest the most material house with numinous forms and purposes, from amongst which an initiate's thoughts will soar like multi-coloured invocations. (18)

As Flora Manhood administers to the physical needs and desires of her patient, even to the elaborate ritual, of

making up the old woman, Mary de Santis acts as high priestess, looking after the more spiritual concerns of Mrs. Hunter. Other than at the fleeting instants of her husband's death, it is with Sister de Santis that Mrs. Hunter experiences what most closely approaches a spiritual union.

Unlike the experience with Alfred, the times of unity with Mary occur more often and are of a less transitory nature.

Mary de Santis has worked for her employer for about fifteen years, having been hired just after Mrs. Hunter's return from her experience on Brumby Island. She stays on with the old woman, a physical manifestation of the grace that has so quickly subsided in the soul of Mrs. Hunter. Occasionally, when she is with de Santis, the old woman is able to re-experience her moment of transcendence in the eye of the storm, to live in what she calls "this state of perfect stillness . . . she enjoyed in her relationship with Sister de Santis" (59).

On her part, the gentle de Santis serves the irascible Mrs. Hunter with the same quality of spiritual quietude and equanimity that Ruth Godbold displays to humanity in Riders in the Chariot. However, the night nurse is a much more fully developed character, drawn with a complexity missing from the archetypal earth-mother of the earlier novel. De Santis herself is allowed a crisis of faith of her own as she finds herself physically attracted to Sir Basil. She weathers this, her own storm, and senses that by serving the dying woman, something of value is being done for herself. She describes Elizabeth Hunter "like an electric bulb going

on and off, and perhaps, if you're lucky, you may throw a light on something that hasn't been noticed before --, by you or anybody" (190). De Santis is content to stand by and watch where the light from her charge may fall.

The quiet presence of the night nurse serves as an antithesis to Elizabeth Hunter's grasping vanity. The old woman's deathbed, far from being the eye of the storm as one may suppose, is instead a source of virulence and contention, from which ripples of distrust and anguish emanate outward; ripples from which even de Santis, long-suffering and saintly, is not spared. Contrasting with the bitterness in the old woman is the night nurse's constant striving for good, her efforts to acquire a worthiness which she has set up as her goal. Viewing the crippled relationships of the Hunters, de Santis tells herself that "love is a kind of supernatural state to which I must give myself entirely, and be used up, particularly my imperfections -- till I am nothing" (147). Such self-abasement could never enter the mind of Elizabeth Hunter, before or after Brumby Island.

Ironically, despite their times of closeness, the death of her patient has little effect on Mary de Santis. Although she has what is arguably the closest relationship to Mrs. Hunter of any character in the novel, because of the spiritual tranquility of the younger woman, the death of her employer merely closes a chapter in her life of service. She quickly receives another position, one which is as challenging as the duty just ended, that of taking care of an embittered crippled girl named Irene.

De Santis then is the novel's true eye of the storm. Fittingly, it is with the image of her calm serenity that the novel closes. After arranging the laying out of the body of Elizabeth Hunter, the nurse goes out into the garden and watches the arrival of dawn, experiencing what she calls "her own unmanageable joy" (544). The privileging of de Santis and her transcendental feeling of joy so soon after the death of the protagonist of the novel must lead us to question the place of that death in White's thematic framework. In the next section of this chapter, I will investigate the meaning of the death of Elizabeth Hunter.

#### IV

In The Death of Virgil, Hermann Broch has the dying poet realize:

submerged in every human soul there is some function, sheerly unreachable, a function that is greater than himself, greater than his soul, and only he who achieves himself in this final preparation for death discharges his special function. (225)

There is no doubt that Elizabeth Hunter, at the moment of her death, does indeed discharge what Broch calls her "special function," and thereby at last achieves an enlightenment which has eluded her her whole life. Although her death comes to her as she sits upon her commode (an ironic device typical of White), the episode is nevertheless depicted in terms of baptism, salvation, and reunion. The

old woman realizes suddenly that she is about to die and that she must have "will enough" to walk towards this death and not to fear her "first experience of precious water" (492). She visualizes the seven black swans she had originally seen on Brumby Island and communicates with them that, rather than battle each other and her, they must all instead "enfold." Her last thought is one of ultimate reconciliation: "Till I am no longer filling the void with mock substance: myself in this endlessness" (492). The tone is one not merely of resignation but of joyful culmination.

The terms by which White describes the death of Mrs. Hunter recapitulates the woman's experience in the eye of the storm almost two decades before. As we have seen, the proximity of her death at that time was sufficient to grant her a momentary glancing "stroke" (to use one of White's favourite terms). However, this flashing moment faded until it was only memory, leaving the old woman unchanged and able to continue her cold and distancing behaviour to all those around her.

Yet it is precisely this failure to benefit from the bestowal of grace that makes the transcendence at her death so remarkable. For the first time in the novels a character who cannot be considered as one of the mystically elect (such as de Santis would definitely be) is granted final salvation.

Elizabeth Hunter is certainly noteworthy and interesting for her ambition and her vivacity, yet these qualities do not merit her inclusion in White's elect. The old woman,

always a member of Sydney society, cannot be considered part of the group of bereft outsiders who are saved at times by their very isolation. Although Hurtle Duffield has been granted his vision only at death, as has Elizabeth Hunter, his life-long commitment to his art serves as a substitute for his failure to achieve spiritual grace during his life.

The protagonist of The Eye of the Storm has no such substitute. There is some indication that at one time the family itself may have been looked upon by the old woman as a source of comfort but, as we have seen, these relationships were in a shambles and caused more pain than pleasure.

Therefore, finally we have in Patrick White's work a character who achieves grace in spite of her significant "flaws" (another favourite term of the novelist). The message here is more encouraging: each one of us, flawed and/or fugitive as we may be, may yet attain salvation.

The darker, reverse side of this development in White's fiction is that this salvation can only come with death, a point which may understandably dismay. For Elizabeth Hunter, the proximity of death has led to her experiencing transcendental moments: with her husband Alfred when he is dying, on Brumby Island in the eye of the storm, and finally at the moment of her own death. However, as Martin Buber writes: "What does it help my soul that it can be withdrawn anew from this world here into unity, when this world itself has of necessity no part in this unity" (I-Thou 87). For all her possessiveness and grasping, Elizabeth Hunter has indeed withdrawn from life, and caused those around her in

turn to withdraw from her. Hers cannot be seen to be a triumphant life, and it could be argued that the vision she experiences at the end is therefore somewhat useless. To repeat Reimer's statement from my Introduction: "There is always a suggestion present that her death is merely death, and that, as an extension of this, her experiences . . . contain little, if any, trace of absolute truth" (262). The absolute truth she has been avoiding her entire life comes crashing down upon her at death, a stirring moment of sufficient strength to apparently wipe away the detritus accumulated during her years of "spurious achievement." Perhaps that is a comforting message in its way, the fact that even a non-strategy for salvation will ultimately lead to the same goal as all the others we have been investigating here and which have led to questionable and ambiguous success.

After this novel so concerned with death and dying, White returns to the examination of the living self as a key to one's own "will-to-meaning." This strategy had first been explored three decades before with Theodora Goodman in The Aunt's Story. However, the new novel, The Twyborn Affair, although touching upon the themes discussed in the earlier novel, strikes out into unexplored and quite remarkable new territory.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Two works of Western literature are mentioned constantly throughout the novel, King Lear and The Charterhouse of Parma, the latter novel being primarily associated with Dorothy. While exploring the ramifications of these references would be an interesting piece of research, it is outside the scope of this present study.

<sup>2</sup>Sir Basil, in fact, is credited with having one child, a daughter named Imogen, but he learns from his wife that the child has not been fathered by him.



## Chapter Five

### The Twyborn Affair: Living out the Promises

"Today we reveal the reality that is behind visible things, thus expressing the belief that the visible world is merely an isolated case in relation to the universe and that there are many other, latent realities" (Paul Klee, qtd. in Tacey 35).

In his 1979 novel, The Twyborn Affair, Patrick White investigates one man's struggle to uncover the roots of his own psyche and subsequently to live with the results of his discoveries. With this novel, White abandons the former strategies used by his protagonists in their quests for meaning or salvation. Here he returns to the idea that the unbuttressed search within oneself may provide the searcher with the required answers. This approach recalls the one used in The Aunt's Story, his novel of more than three decades before. We will notice, however, that although the territory being explored is the same, the landmarks and the messages they convey have changed considerably.

#### I

The Twyborn Affair, in dealing with themes and motifs which run through the thirty years of White's writing, forms what Manly Johnson terms "a fictionalized retrospective over his life -- a pause in the summoning up of materials" (161). Eddie Twyborn, the protagonist, repeats the same inward journey of the standard White pilgrim, in this case even repeating some of the geographical travels of Theodora Goodman. His original flight from Australia to a Southern

France threatened by an imminent war (in this case World War I) directly recalls Theodora's stay at the Hotel du Midi before the outbreak of the Second World War. Eddie finds that he too must leave Australia for Europe in order to search more deeply into his being.

Eddie pursues his journey in terms and images which will be familiar to those who have read White before. In The Twyborn Affair, three major motifs become crucial elements in the protagonist's quest for identity: fragmentation/mirrors, the mythos of the bourgeois Australian, and androgyny. White has developed the idea of fragmentation and the flawed image in the mirror throughout his work, most extensively in his autobiography significantly titled Flaws in the Glass. Although the nationality of his characters has been of fluctuating importance in his work, White has not spared the Australian middle class some of his most scathing satire. In Twyborn, the issue of bourgeois values becomes an important component in Eddie's struggle for self-acceptance. The androgynous nature of the human being has always been a central motif in the novelist's work. John Colmer believes that in Twyborn White has reached a position concerning androgyny which "seems a humanistic solution to a problem that lies at the heart of all his fiction" (84).

An analysis of the novel in terms of these recurrent motifs should lead to an understanding of the reason for White's return to the strategy used and left behind in The Aunt's Story. We should also be able to conclude whether Eddie Twyborn merely repeats the voyage of Theodora Goodman

or sets out upon an entirely new quest.

## II: Eudoxia

In The Eye in the Mandala, Peter Beatson's study of White, the critic writes: "Fundamental to White's characterization is a sense of discrepancy between the core of being and the temperament through which it must express itself" (87). The story of The Twyborn Affair is the story of Eddie Twyborn's search for reconciliation between his temperament(s) and his own intuited core of being.

As is often the case in White's work, the novel begins with the main character offstage. At the beginning of The Twyborn Affair, the point of view is that of Joanie Golson, a wealthy middle-aged Australian tourist, who is staying with her husband in the South of France in the spring of 1914. She becomes obsessed by a couple she accidentally encounters on one of her chauffeured drives through the countryside, an "elderly man" and a "charming young woman" (14). A few pages later, the point of view shifts dramatically to the journal of this same "charming young woman." This sudden transition in the consciousness of the novel, from the superficialities of Joanie Golson's concern with the right tone to use with her English chauffeur and her frivolous curiosity about the intriguing couple she has decided to spy upon to the self-absorbed ruminations of the protagonist, hurtles the reader abruptly into the essential centre of the novel, the "psychic quest" (Colmer 79) of the writer of that journal. White continues to manipulate the

perception of the reader, only revealing, one clue at a time, and well into the novel, that Eudoxia, the charming young woman and journal writer is really Eddie Twyborn, son of the curious older woman's best friend Eadie.

These shifts in perspective recall the "Jardin Exotique" segment of The Aunt's Story, an impression reinforced by several parallels between Twyborn and the earlier novel.

As I have mentioned, the central episode of Theodora Goodman's story takes place at a hotel in Southern France on the eve of a European war (in this case, World War II). The later novel begins with a similar setting, the impending threat of war creating an atmosphere of uneasiness and expectancy for the occupants of the hotel.

The essential difference between the situations in the two novels lies in the quality and degree of the fragmentation experienced by each of the protagonists. In The Aunt's Story, Theodora is herself a guest in the hotel and therefore becomes completely absorbed into the lives of the other guests she encounters. Eudoxia lives a considerable distance from the hotel in Twyborn. She is staying at a decrepit villa with her elderly Greek lover Angelos Vatatzes and only occasionally visits the hotel. The difference is one of control: the characters and events surrounding Theodora in the Hotel du Midi ultimately sweep over her, molding her experiences in preparation for her grand gesture of freedom on the American prairies. She must live the lives of her fellow guests before she can achieve the integration that will give her the strength to finish her

quest. Eudoxia, on the other hand, refuses to involve herself in the experiences of others. She and Angelos have created their own world of virtually Byzantine complexity complete with hagiographies, isolated and, they hope, immune from the world erupting outside their gates. The fragmentation which Eudoxia experiences cannot, she feels, be integrated with the world through any connection, but must be achieved by turning away from it. The irony is that she cannot wholly withdraw because she is still a prisoner of what, in an earlier reference, we have seen Beatson refer to as "temperament," that outward representation of her being which expresses itself through appearance and behaviour, and which can only be maintained through the attitude of others, the real and imaginary mirrors of her life.

In her journal Eudoxia admits that it is only her lover that can give her anything close to an authentic sense of identity. It is only through Angelos, "this persuasive Greek" (27), that she can "appear consecutive, complete" (27). In the same entry she writes: "[I] can enjoy my reflection in the glass, which he has created, what passes for the real one . . ." (27). For the moment, Eudoxia is content to rest within the reality of Vatatzes' perception of her, and in that world she finds a stability which is shattered by the arrival of Joan Golson and her husband Curly, representatives not only of the outside world, but, of more significance and danger to Eudoxia, larger-than-life manifestations of Australia and the Twyborn family.

While this is not the first time White has addressed

the issue of the Australian temperament, it is the first time he has addressed the question as a central issue in his protagonist's search for identity. Up until this point, the national identity of the seekers after wisdom was relatively unimportant. It was the search itself which preoccupied most of the pilgrims. However, with Eddie in The Twyborn Affair, we have a protagonist who, among the fragments, is also sifting through his national identity for clues that will finally integrate the various dimensions of his psyche.

At the Hotel du Midi in The Aunt's Story, Miss Goodman's nationality was largely unremarked by the other residents. She is there to experience the traits of other nationalities (Russian, Greek, American, etc.), not to explore that of her own. By experiencing the character traits of the other nationals, Theodora begins to understand the common threads that tie them all together. On the other hand, Eudoxia has fled her native country and its characteristics, and the disguise she has assumed she feels is an effective burial of her cultural as well as her gender origins. Theodora's journey from Australia is an attempt to experience and engage the world. Eddie leaves his native country because of what he feels to be the stultifying nature of a rigid structure imposed on him, and which coalesces in his approaching marriage to Marian Dibden. Theodora goes forth to embrace the world while Eddie retreats from it into the arms of Angelos in his pursuit of an idiosyncratic strategy of disengagement.

Joan and E. Boyd (Curly) Golson are, for Eudoxia, the

quintessential Australians, and are seen as threatening for exactly that reason. This danger is augmented by the fact that Joanie is Eadie Twyborn's closest friend. Surprisingly, White uses only moderate satire upon the Golsons. The fact that a great deal of the events of Part One are presented from the Australian woman's viewpoint effectively tempers the parody. The bourgeois couple, despite their crudity, gaucheries and materialism, are finally depicted as warm and rather open-hearted. Eudoxia, despite her fear that they will discover her secret, grudgingly feels an attraction to them, admitting their virtues which gleam out among the surrounding sophisticated Europeans. When Joan comes to the aid of Eudoxia who has just sprained her ankle, the latter writes in her journal: "as an Australian she was probably more competent to take the matter in hand than any of those standing round expressing formal sympathy" (49). The contrast between Angelos and Curly, two men of vastly different temperaments and backgrounds, is described as the difference between "the Emperor of Byzantium and the raw Colonial Boy" (63). Although Eudoxia recognises the basic virtues of the Golsons ("Oh, we Australians are pretty good in a crisis!" [59]), this admiration does not alleviate the threat they pose to the world she has built up with Angelos.

The affectionate tone with which Eudoxia writes about the Golsons in her journal belies the fear they cause in her. It is Joanie Golson's insatiable curiosity in particular which arouses the expatriate's anxiety. For the older Australian woman is attempting what Eudoxia only thinks she

is herself embarked upon achieving: the search for her own core of being. Joanie is attracted to the young woman's disdain for society and her highly romantic life with the enigmatic Vatatzes. Her interest in Eudoxia is all the more obsessive because she has abandoned all hope of a similar life for herself. Looking critically at her life, she realizes that "she had probably lost. She would be carried back out of the iridescence into a congealing of life. . . .

One would never be able to conclude, never live out the promises" (59).

The Australian woman has become the psychic explorer out to penetrate Eudoxia's carefully built and exquisitely maintained disguise. Indeed, the young woman seems at one point about to yield her mystery. After an evening with the Golsons, Eudoxia is showing her garden to Joanie when "Madame Vatatzes seemed on the verge of making some declaration or appeal" (111). However, nothing is said. The next day, the object of Mrs. Golson's obsession has fled with her consort in an attempt to preserve her fragile fantasy from the older woman's investigations. After hurriedly leaving the district with Angelos, Eudoxia confides to her journal: "Shall my will ever grow strong and free enough for me to face up to myself?" (122). She possesses enough self-awareness to know the nature of what she is running from: the curiosity of Joanie Golson, the inbred Australian characteristics of the couple, and the relationship that couple has with her own family, all combine to show her what is in effect a mirror-image of herself. Eudoxia is fleeing



her own reflection in the glass.

Another component of Eudoxia's nature and a major motif of the novel is androgyny. Again, The Aunt's Story contains embryonic references to this theme. As noted in Chapter I, there are passing glimpses of Theodora's androgynous traits.

With her "long strides that made them say as Theo Goodman was some bloke in skirts" (62), and her expertise with guns, the young woman has little trouble at the Hotel du Midi in assuming the identities of both the male and female hotel guests. With The Twyborn Affair, this subject develops into a central issue.

Eudoxia writes in her journal, "The difference between the sexes is no worse than their appalling similarity" (63), a judgement that, although it is made early in the novel, she spends the rest of her life trying to prove incorrect.

As the novel opens, there has already been one change of gender for the protagonist: from the Australian Eddie Twyborn to the European Eudoxia Vatatzes. This first change is a strategy for stabilizing his identity. Eudoxia writes in her journal: "I would like to think myself morally justified in being true to what I am -- if I knew what that is. I must discover" (63). Eddie believes that differences in gender do outweigh the similarities. Therefore, he tries to find the truth about the core of his nature by living as a female. There is a certain amount of disingenuousness here in that the figure of Eudoxia is ultimately a disguise, in other words, a mask to hide behind, rather than a tool for the exploration of self.

Eudoxia's lover, the old Greek Angelos, partakes in the same vacillating androgyny as his partner. When he sees himself in the mirror he sees "the face of an old woman and peasant" (94) and thinks that the aged "tend to pass from one sex to the other in some aspects of their appearances" (94). The relationship of the couple is characterized by sudden shifts in bipolar attitudes: parent-child, as well as male-female.

In contrast, Joan and Curly Golson, as well as being stalwart bastions of the Australian spirit, are also undaunted representatives of their own genders. Although terrified of committing colonial faux pas, Joan is nevertheless supremely confident in her own femininity. She thinks of herself as "an innocent woman whose only vice was a need for tenderness, romantic sunsets, and emotional conceits of a feminine nature" (108). Eudoxia, seen beside this sublime figure of achieved Edwardian womanhood, is a feeble, tentative imitation of femininity. Curly Golson is no less an exemplar of his gender, although, being male, he would of course never reflect on these matters. Faced with the complexities of the Pinteresque undercurrents passing between Eudoxia and Angelos when the Australian couple unwisely accept an invitation to visit, Curly withdraws stolidly "into a male despair" (105), unable to comprehend what is happening around him. Eudoxia's attitude to what can be called the "male principle" and its connection with the Australian temperament will be discussed further in the next section of this chapter, which deals with the protagon-

ist's work (now as Eddie) as a jackeroo in the Australian outback.

An interesting episode dealing with confusion of sexual identity occurs in this first section of the novel. Early one morning, Aristide Pelletier, a newspaper vendor with a kiosk near the sea, spies a swimmer along the beach some distance away. He is unable to determine the sex of the swimmer (not surprisingly since it is Eddie/Eudoxia), merely that it is someone "sombre in its long cape, either black, or of a very deep green" (72). Green and black, the colours of the swimmer's cloak, become the dichotomous motifs of this passage. The landscape of the coast is rendered in these tones, with its "oily black" sea, the "black asphalt" of the beach, and the "dead green" of the tamarisks (72).<sup>2</sup> The repetition of these colours emphasizes the primal dialectic within Aristide himself, where the polarities of black and white, male and female, blend to form the basic opposition of life versus death. Pelletier, who has almost succumbed to tuberculosis which has abated since his moving to this coast, thinks of this shore with its mixture of black and green tints as "a spiritual refuge . . . because it had returned him to life" (72).

The news vendor, having just left his wife in the "tortured sheets" (71) of their marriage bed, becomes aroused by the sight of the swimmer, sex still indeterminate, who is now striking out to the open sea. As the swimmer leaves the shore, Aristide begins to masturbate.<sup>3</sup> Two new elements enter the dialectic already in place: the

swimmer's actions are described as "so strong yet so poetic, so hopeful yet so suicidal" (74). What has now become quite a long list of opposed principles explodes into synthesis with the voyeur's orgasm. This uniting of both sides of this extended bifurcated image causes Pelletier's world to flash into meaningfulness. His ejaculation is described as "a triumphant leap into the world of light and colour such as he craved from the landscape he knew, the poetry he had never written, . . . the love he had not experienced" (76).

When he is brought back to reality by finding out that the swimmer is indeed female and "the young wife of that crazy Greek" (76), he is relieved but soon uninterested. Fantasy fades back into reality, black and green separate, and the direction of the dialectic reverses.

This episode is significant because it is a microcosm of the novel's theme. We see in Aristide's experience the poetry or transcendence that results in the merging of oppositions, the exultation arising when the frontier of the unknown is crossed. Eddie will not be granted this revelation until almost thirty years later when he encounters his aged mother on the streets of London.

After the death of Angelos which follows closely on the escape of the couple from the Golsons, Eddie decides to try to further his exploration of his nature by a return to his psychic roots:<sup>4</sup> his masculinity, his family, and Australia.

In order to piece together the fragments, de-mist (demystify?) the mirror, purge the feminine from his character, he returns, as a male, to Australia.

Perhaps it would be appropriate here to comment on the nature of Eddie Twyborn's transformations. In an article entitled "Costumes of the Mind: Transvestism as Metaphor in Modern Literature," Sandra Gilbert comments that the changes experienced by the eponymous hero/heroine of Woolf's Orlando are "primarily a fantasy of wish fulfillment" (208). White purposely avoids an unambiguous description of Eddie's gender changes and, rather than indulging in the wish fulfillment present in the Woolf novel, instead attempts to use these changes as stages in Eddie's psychic quest. Because these changes mirror significant interior landscapes, White has characteristically left the exterior details to the imaginations of his readers.

### III: Eddie

In Voss, an earlier novel, White writes: "The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming" (269). Eddie Twyborn, now a decorated war hero, returns home for a struggle which will be yet another episode in the tale of his failure at integration. He lands in an Australia that Theodora Goodman could not, finally, face. The spinster leaves Europe ostensibly to return home but instead ends her journey on the American prairies, preferring the freedom of her fragmented fantasies there to the reality of life back in Sydney.

Eddie completes Theodora's interrupted journey. After living out the promise of life as Eudoxia, his arrival back

home seems an "exorcism" (133). He tells a man he meets in a Sydney bar: "I'm a kind of mistake trying to correct itself" (143).

Unlike Hurtle Duffield in The Vivisector, who returns from the war resolved to a course of independence and isolation, Eddie realizes that it is essential for him to encounter his mother and father as part of the rebirth he is trying to accomplish. The scene of Eddie's homecoming is a typical White portrait of the strained undercurrents existing within the family. Eadie, the mother, dominating and possessive, rules the household, while the father, Judge Edward, is stern, distant, and yet maintains for his son an air of lovable innocence.

In Eadie we see the precursor of Eddie's androgynous bent. Throughout the novel we are told several versions of the story of Eadie's exploit when she dressed as a man with a "corked moustache" and went out on a date with her giggling arch-feminine companion, Joanie Golson. Now, in this late meeting between mother and son, each quickly recognizes and just as quickly represses the knowledge of the bond between them: "it might have been unbearable to realize that the son . . . had become the mirror-figure of the mother" (149). It is much too early in either character's long journey to accept this recognition. Both flee this discovery and must wait many years for the opportunity to occur again.

Eddie is primarily concerned on this visit with the painful distance between the Judge and himself. Although he

is acutely aware of his affection for this "dry, self-contained man" (156), he is afraid of displaying this love, of crossing a boundary which may seem "too unreasonable for one who put his faith in reason despite repeated proof that it will not stand up to human behaviour" (156). Therefore, his true nature blocked for different reasons in his relationship with his mother and father, Eddie realizes that his search must continue elsewhere. His desire to become a jackeroo in the Australian outback can be seen as a test to find out if he possesses those qualities of masculinity and Australian toughness which may enable him to more closely approach Judge Twyborn. Like Basil Hunter's nostalgic return to Kudjeri in The Eye of the Storm, Eddie's decision to work at Bogong is an attempt at reconciliation with the father.

Eddie's wish for "escaping from himself into the landscape" (161) is only partially realized. As David Blamires writes: "Australia allows no room for Eddie's precarious sexual needs and ambiguities" (83). The new jackeroo discovers that the mask of masculinity he has donned for this adventure is just as fragile as was the one used for his more ornate rôle as Eudoxia. Peggy Tyrrell, the old woman who will be acting as his housekeeper, immediately penetrates his disguise, telling him that the two of them are "allies" (180). She later tells Eddie that it is a comfort to have him around: "you an' me 'ull get on like one thing. . . . It's the girls I miss out here" (185).

Even though Mrs. Tyrrell remains undeceived about Eddie, most of the others he meets at Bogong are willing to judge him as the person he is trying so hard to represent. In fact, the new jackeroo is quite comforted by the ease with which he has assumed his new identity: "At least people were more ready to accept material façade than glimpses of spiritual nakedness" (183). The ominous corollary implied by this smug impression is that Eddie is already regarding his new identity as merely another façade (as when he was "Eudoxia") and thus is still not approaching the original goal of his experiment, the encounter with the core of his being.

The owners of Bogong, Greg and Marcia Lushington, each for different reasons fails to penetrate Eddie's disguise. The young man re-enacts with them the emotions and neuroses that have characterized his relations with his own parents.

The reconciliation with Judge Twyborn which Eddie is seeking is partially realized through Greg Lushington; yet the relationship between the two men remains ambiguous. Denied a son and heir for his land, Greg becomes attached to the younger man, sending him cryptic postcards from his travels. The same mixture of diffidence, affection, and frustration which marks Eddie's dealings with his father is repeated in his meetings with Greg Lushington. This highly complicated affiliation is rendered even more problematical on Eddie's side by the fact that he and the landowner's wife Marcia have embarked on an affair.

His affair with Marcia allows Eddie the seduction of



the mother figure and allows him to escape relatively unscathed. The two older women have many similarities and indeed are quite interested in as well as hostile to one another. Although existing in Eddie's mythos as maternal types, neither woman fulfills that role in life. Mrs. Lushington's children never survive infancy, and Eddie tells her that his own mother "would have preferred to be barren" (182). Both lead independent lives alongside husbands of remarkably similar natures and surrounded by beloved pets. After Eddie has once again disappeared from the lives of both, his mother writes Marcia to commiserate with her on the death of the latter's infant son. In fact, the letter gives little consolation: "What I would like to convey to you is that losing a child in death is so much better than losing a grown . . . reasoning child to life" (301). What Eddie cannot or refuses to acknowledge is the fact that Marcia has now lost both.

Although some critics such as John Colmer have seen in Marcia Lushington the figure of the female principle, and therefore view the failure of Eddie's relationship with her as the breakdown of his attempt at heterosexual experience, this cannot be the case. If Eddie were truly looking to explore the heterosexual part of his nature, he would not have struck out for the outback where, as is apparent in the novel, his chance of meeting females would be severely limited. Instead, his quest is taking place on a different level altogether: he is seeking out the underpinnings of the core of his psyche. In this realm, his affair with Marcia

Lushington represents an attempt to break through his own knotty commitment to his mother, an attempt which is finally a failure and indeed is one of the components of his decision to leave Australia again.

Before investigating the climactic episode in the Bogong section of the novel, a word must be said about the most successful aspect of Eddie's sojourn in the outback: the peace he finds in the landscape when he is experiencing it alone and therefore unselfconsciously. At one point he flees the Golsons (for the third time, always a signal that final leave-taking is imminent) and goes out into the country. Here is the naked face of Australia, unmasked. Eddie experiences the rapture of the wild: "he could not remember ever having felt happier" (272). Yet he finally realizes that this isolated expanse is too foreign to his nature to ever give him lasting solace: "he knew that his body and his mind craved the everlasting torments" (272). He knows that he must return to carry on the quest in the battle-field of the world, not in the no-man's land of Australia. As he has said to others when explaining his battle decorations: "Courage is often despair running in the right direction" (138).

The figure of Don Prowse, the foreman at Bogong, embodies both the mythic male principle and that quality of Australian toughness which Eddie is exploring in his own nature.<sup>5</sup> When the foreman meets the newcomer at the train, the former is described as full of "the rights he enjoyed as a native" (175).

Don is principally an "ostentatiously virile" (211) figure who intimidates Eddie with his display of male traits. Eddie himself partakes in the myth, finding himself attracted to the overwhelming presence of his new acquaintance. The young man is first impressed by the sheer physicality of Don who "took up a stance, legs apart, hands on hips . . ." (175). Eddie finds himself noticing with pleasure the foreman's "well-developed calves" and "muscle-bound shoulders" (175-76). He is so impressed by this specimen of unalloyed masculinity that he "felt the complete misfit in Don Prowse's aggressively masculine world" (179).

However, as he becomes more acclimatized to the foreman, and more adept at the ranch's routines, Eddie is able to win a grudging acceptance from the older workmen and even from Prowse himself.

The possibility of a bond forming between these two men is destroyed by an episode which echoes the Aristide Pelletier episode in Part One. Eddie breaks the rigid Australian male code by swimming naked in a river in front of Don and another workman. Ironically, he has jumped into the river to avoid displaying himself, but Don, out of a complex series of motives to be looked at later, sees in the act an intentional flaunting of Eddie's desirability. Even though by this time Eddie's body has become hardened and rough because of his work on the ranch, there is still enough ambiguity surrounding his sexuality to prompt Don to say: "Better watch out, Ed. If you flash yer arse about like that, someone might jump in and bugger yer" (250-51).

The tension between the two men increases until Don finally corners Eddie in a barn and rapes him. This act is a last desperate attempt at triumph by the unalloyed male principle, the climax of several episodes in which both men find the masks they have donned (Eddie for the duration, Don for life) to be in danger of slipping. Don has begun to open up to Eddie soon after the new jackeroo arrives. The younger man finds it difficult to reconcile this complex and hurt individual to the rampant representative of masculinity that each, in a mythic sense, wants Don Prowse to be. In describing the traumatic effects of his failed marriage and his early life, the foreman effectively drives a knife through the image Eddie has delightedly constructed of larger-than-life rugged barbarism. There is a subliminal warning against this wanton mythologizing when Don shows his friend a picture of his parson father, saying: "My old man warned me against getting bogged down in any sort of myth" (202). Although the original context of this remark was aimed at the mythmaking propensities of organized religion, it can be seen thematically as a warning concerning the rigidifying of any roles. Prowse's rape of Eddie is their own created myth's last gasp.

Because his transgression is in the realm of this masculine mythos, Prowse's expiation must involve the submission of his own masculinity after the failure of its last attempt at victory. His passive submission, occurring on both the emotional and sexual level, is, for the foreman, a complete reversal of gender roles. Eddie's reaction is a

confused dichotomous mixture of "feminine compassion" and "male revenge" (296). These two elements of his androgynous nature ultimately prevent a resolution of this act one way or the other. He realizes however that it is now time to leave Bogong.

As Don and Eddie drive out to the train which will take the latter away, the young jackeroo, instead of gloating over his victory over the submissive foreman, instead thinks affectionately of him as "a human being exposed in its frailty and tenderness" (298). His last sight of Don is of a "man [who] looked every bit a puzzled, panting, red ox" (299). At Bogong, Eddie has explored the ramifications of the male role and its accompanying mythos, and in so doing has come to realize its rigidity, its artificiality, and its potential for stultification. All that is left of the ithyphallic Prowse is a shell of bewildered animalism surrounding his human anguish.

Another goal of Eddie's stay at Bogong is the exploration of the nature of the Australian temperament, the quality he feels as a stigma when he is abroad. On the ranch Eddie comes to realize the basic paradox of the Australians: their brash openness coupled with an equally strong wish to keep others at bay. He sees this principle reflected even in the architecture of the countryside: "Australia country architecture is in some sense a material extension of the contradictory beings who have evolved its elaborate informality, as well as a warning to those who do not belong inside the labyrinth" (212). Completely separa-

ted from his parents and their circle, Eddie is able at last to divorce the emotional antagonism he feels for them from the fundamental truths that he discovers about the country itself. As Hurtle Duffield in The Vivisector goes to the land to experience a fuller expression of his inner self, Eddie also reaches a calm centre within the landscape but, as we have seen, feels he must turn away from it.

At the end of his time at Bogong Eddie finds himself bereft of two potent myths which have affected his life: the myth of the male principle and its roles, and the myth of the bourgeois Australian. He has exposed the former and penetrated the latter enough to come to understand its nature. He has thus reached further into that unfragmented self that has always been the goal of his search. His attempt to clear his life of illusion may be at the price of his own happiness. At one point in Bogong he reflects that: "Happiness was perhaps the reward of those who cultivate illusion, or who . . . have it thrust upon them by some tutelary being, and then are granted sufficient innocent grace to sustain it" (249). After the death of some of his illusions, Eddie, during the next phase of his life, will become the brothel-keeper Eadith, the explorer of the terrain between innocence and illusion.

#### IV

"Hail to the spirit who can link  
us: because we live in symbols"  
(Rilke: Sonnets to Orpheus).

This section of the novel, termed "venturesome" by David Blamires (83), is dominated by yet another persona of Eddie Twyborn, this time the brothel madame Eadith Trist. Outwardly flamboyant ("Mauve was her colour when in full panoply" [310]), she is intentionally austere in her private behaviour, one reason being because "she was too disgusted with herself, and human beings in general" (311). Her brothel is "her work of art" (322), her whores instructed to obey "what she saw as almost a conventual rule" (322).

This odd admixture of depravity and innocence, this portrait of the propertied and/or powerful indulging in their own fantasies calls to mind the chaotic scenes in Jean Genet's The Balcony. White does not take the role-playing of his characters to the radical lengths of the French playwright, but the following interchange reflects the spirit of the scenes which take place in Eadith's house on Beckwith Street with its clientele composed of "the politicians, the civil servants, the Law, the Church . . ." (420):

The Queen: You're presenting the people with a false image. I won't tolerate . . . .

The Envoy: It's a true image, born of false spectacle. (88)

Eadith believes that truth is what is happening in her brothel, that illusion or fantasy is what happens outside: she and her girls are providing the fabric of reality and consequently, as servants of the truth, the girls can indeed be thought of as nuns and Eadith herself as the Abbess.

Yet Eadith's life does not possess the stability it at

first appears to have. Much unhappiness lies beneath the surface of Eddie Twyborn's latest incarnation. The brothel manageress not only has decided that sex is untenable in her present circumstances, but also has resigned herself to the absence of love: "Her every attempt at love had been a failure. Perhaps she was fated never to enter the lives of others, except vicariously" (374). Eadith is about to enter the Hotel du Midi.

She has many opportunities to change this condition but refuses. Her closest emotional tie at this point in her life is with Roderick Gravenor, a rich nobleman who helps her to establish her enterprise on Beckwith Street. Their meetings are characterized by a persevering struggle on Gravenor's part to have a sexual experience with the frustratingly coy Eadith. The irony here is that the madame is considerably attracted to Roderick but her terror that her disguise will be discovered precludes all intimacy.

For Eddie, intimacy has always implied exposure, and any exposure he believes would inevitably lead to a disastrous rejection he would be unable to countenance. He begins his long journey by fleeing Australia because he fears the discovery that the intimacy of marriage would bring. Hiding his ambisexuality beneath a feminine veneer, he finds acceptance in Angelos Vatatzes. This relationship is ultimately dissatisfying also, since the old man is clearly in love with Eudoxia, one of Eddie's fantasy creations, not with Eddie himself. Back again in Australia, Eddie realizes that exposure of his androgyny in that



"aggressively masculine world" (179) presided over by Don Prowse would lead to devastating consequences. Ironically, the shattering of the phallic mythos of Prowse leads, as we have seen, to a situation more complex than outright rejection, but it is one which Eddie finds just as threatening. By ~~that~~ time he assumes the role of Eadith Trist he has resolved to keep all his secrets to himself. Consequently, she can never have sex with her beloved Gravenor: "She was prepared to accept his silences, his censure, the disturbing aspects of proximity and repressed physical attraction" (351). As she dwells upon this decision, the mirror she is looking into for a moment divulges the reality she has buried in fantasy: "In the glass a ravaged mess, a travesty no amount of lipstick and powder and posturing would ever disguise to her own satisfaction" (351).

Eadith does break her rule of abstinence and isolation on one important occasion. Roderick Gravenor one night brings his nephew to Beckwith Street. Philip Thring, the young boy, is labelled "diffident" (398) and expresses only "aesthetic" interest in the activities of the house. Roderick makes a special appeal to Eadith to have one of her girls "take it from him" (400). The madame herself turns her attention to Philip and sees "the tremulous mirror he was offering her" (400).

The recognition of the young confused Eddie in the young boy leads her to decide to initiate him. Walking together to her room through the hallway of this thriving hive of heterosexual fantasy, the couple notices the mirrors

there which reflect and distort them so that they are "melted into one image, and by moments shamefully distorted into lepers and Velasquez dwarfs" (400). In spite of the overwhelming negativity of this image which clearly indicates the level of discomfort Eadith feels about both her façade and her inner world, this episode is ultimately one of reconciliation, temporary though it may be. David Blamires comments on this encounter: "Eddie once more is the bestower of happiness, of self-acceptance and the way to confidence and hope" (80). Despite the mixed feelings Eadith brings to this moment, her encounter with Philip Thring results in an openness in her which makes possible a much more important development in the brothel-keeper's life, the discovery that her mother is now in London.

World War II has begun to intrude upon the occupants and customers of Beckwith Street. At this time there is a significant increase in the tension and passion in those visitors who are now keenly aware of the threat of sudden death. As usual, Eadith finds herself at odds with the general temperament of the times. She is becoming more disaffected with the running of the brothel, detached from its everyday life. Feeling restless and determined to look into the rumours that her mother is in London, Eadith leaves the running of Beckwith Street in the hands of her deputy Ada. White describes the final episodes in Eddie's life against the heightened tension of the London blitz. Amidst the disarray and confusion of the city streets, we see the shifting undercurrents of doubt and dissatisfaction that

have increased in Eddie so that they now undermine the foundations of the control he has always assumed he possessed over his roles. The breakdown of this pattern is signalled by two significant episodes.

The first episode is the dire Dream of the Children. Eadith has this dream when she is staying in the country with Gravenor before he leaves for the war. In this dream, she is taking care of a roomful of children, keeping them in a place she feels is safe. Yet the children are trying desperately, sometimes hysterically, to escape from this safety into the outside where sounds of violence are heard.

Eadith feels she must protect the children from these "sounds of gathering confusion outside . . . as some monstrous act, explosive and decisive, was being prepared" (414). During her struggle to calm the children, one lashes out at her, ripping her nightdress and "exposing a chest, flat and hairy, a dangling penis and testicles" (414). At once all the children begin to point at her, "laughing vindictively as their adult counterparts might have" (414).

This graphic dream shows that, at least subconsciously, Eadith is aware that the room she has constructed around herself is a trap, and that, by opting for safety, she has killed off her other potentialities, has failed to live out their promises. She is beginning to realize, as Weinstein says in Vision and Response, that "the immediacy of experience -- even when harmful or destructive -- and the mystery of passion may yield a more authentic picture than the ravenous, often inhuman appetite for clarity" (110). Eadith

now desires to leave this room she has created, but she is still terrified of, and thus controlled by, the consequences of exposure on the outside, that vindictive laughter of those who will watch her emerge.

The second indication of Eadith's rising dissatisfaction with her present situation involves a memory of Eddie's from his time in the First World War. An Australian soldier relates to him a story to show him that "lust can be an epiphany" (417). The tale of a sudden encounter between a rough Australian soldier ("a Prowse before Prowse's advent" [417]) and a young French wife describes a desperate, frenetic coupling the soldier relates ends thus: "I reckon we were both carried, like, beyond the idea of orgasm. . . .

[I]t was as if a pair of open wings was spreading round the pair of us" (418). This episode, with its combination of the unknown, the transcendent, and the sexual, directly recalls the episode of the swimmer and Aristide Pelletier in Part One. The captain, after relating the story, regrets exposing this aspect of himself and suddenly leaves Eddie, shouting back at him: "An' don't think I'm religious! . . . Because I believe in nothun! . . . NOTHUN!" (419). This attitude mirrors the nihilistic isolation Eddie has wrapped around himself as Eadith, a cloak he feels it is now time to doff. Directly after remembering the Australian captain's protestation of unbelief, we read this description of belief:

Eadith believed that sooner or later she must come across Eadie Twyborn again. She sensed that the

conflict of individual destinies was an incapable, and often as fatal, as the all-embracing undertow of war. (419)

Indeed, it is not long before they meet.

One evening when she is out strolling, Eadith sits down on a park bench and is soon joined, "to Eadith's terror" (420), by her mother who proceeds to talk to her. The madame is finally able to see her mother divested of the bourgeois associations of the past: "she was not the traditional Australian looking for a stranger on whom to inflict a life story" (421). The older woman, peering more closely at her companion, writes down in her own prayer-book: "Are you my son Eddie?" (422). The writing is an act of distancing, an attempt to maintain emotional control over a tremendously explosive situation. Eadith responds on the same level, and, for the same reason, writes down her response: "No, but I am your daughter Eadith" (422). This flat statement is Eadith's demand not only for acceptance of the illusion she has created but also for an acceptance of the necessity for creating that illusion.

When Eadie responds by saying aloud: "I am so glad. I've always wanted a daughter" (423), the older woman is signifying her acceptance of her child and the fantasy creation of her offspring.

Ironically, her mother's recognition of her female self results for Eadith in a feeling that the carefully scaffolded structure of illusion she has built may be about to collapse. In The Balcony, one character asks: "Would it

perturb you to see things as they are? To gaze at the world tranquilly and accept responsibility for your gaze, whatever it might see?" (73). Eadith, who is already experiencing serious doubt about her desire and ability to continue playing her roles, feels even more unhappy with her life after she meets her mother: "she remained trapped in this house [the brothel], and the walls of that other prison, her self" (424). Eadith is now on the verge of recognition of a central point in the novel: the self must be able to control the fantasies or they become punishments, not promises fulfilled.

In Eadie, Eadith sees a woman who, to repeat Genet, does "gaze at the world tranquilly and accept responsibility for [her] gaze," a woman White describes as being "of detached calm, of purged emotion" (425). It is toward that peace, that eye of the storm, that Eadith sets off on her last journey. At this point Eadith's disguise has been almost completely abandoned and the genders begin to merge.

"She slunk, or rather he squeaked past . . ." (428). This figure walking the streets of London at the height of an air-raid (echoes of the external danger seen in the Dream of the Children) is ostensibly male, but still uncomfortably so, still with an air of "too much improvisation" (428). He is also still wearing Eadith's make-up, looking now the true androgyne, or, as Manly Johnson states, representing "the principle of universal cross-identity" (165). Typically, Eddie distrusts the very hope he is now hurrying to meet. He sees himself as "a scapegoat again in search of sacri-

face" (428), a position strongly reminiscent of the one taken by Himmelfarb in Riders in the Chariot. Nevertheless, the desire for reunion is foremost in his mind when he is killed by a bomb just outside his mother's hotel. The external danger that has threatened in the Dream of the Children has at last broken into the room only to find its occupant gone.

Unaware of what has happened, Eddie's mother waits for him in the hotel, thinking: "I must not fail Eadith now that I have found her Eadith Eddie no matter which this fragment of myself which I lost is now returned where it belongs" (431-31). In the novel's final scene, Eadie creates a fantasy of pastoral bliss of life back in Australia with her reclaimed offspring: "As she dried her hair and waited, a bulbul . . . shook his little jester's cap, and raised his beak towards the sun" (432).

This last scene repeats the peaceful concluding image of The Eye of the Storm. The important difference between the two endings is that in the earlier novel an outsider, the saintly Mary de Santis, experiences the calm in the garden; all of the Hunters have been excluded one way or another from this beatific vision. In Twyborn, it is the protagonist's mother who experiences this view of paradise, and, because she has already admitted that this "fragment" of herself is now once again with her, Eddie is thus also enfolded (a particularly connotative word, used also to describe Elizabeth Hunter's death).

Despite the apparent negativity of Eddie's death, the

unusually affirmative ending of The Twyborn Affair supersedes the failures of reconciliation that doom the Hunters to dispersal. By achieving this unity, the novel is an effective closure on all the claustrophobic struggles within the family that have been investigated from the opening page of The Aunt's Story: "But old Mrs. Goodman did die at last" (3). The impression of a final "atonement," in the sense used by Joseph Campbell (Hero 130), is final and unequivocal, unlike the many tenuous conclusions of so many of White's other novels that have been studied here.

Manly Johnson believes that Twyborn is meant to suggest definite closure. He explains: "White's real life after 1940 is an extrapolation of Eddie's fictional life which ended in 1940. Hence the surname 'Twyborn,' which clears up the otherwise puzzling numerical signification of that name" (160). There is a clue to this interpretation in the novel's last scene. After Eddie has died, his mother dreams she hears the bulbul, a bird associated with the figure of the poet. In a way then, Twyborn is White's Le Temps Retrouvé, his preceding novels being other volumes in a search for truth that has lasted decades. Wallace Fowlie has written about Proust:

What is imperative in the case of the authentic artist is the need to pass beyond the superficial daily self . . . and discover the true self which subsumes the past. (262)

Like Marcel in the Pinter screenplay of Proust's novel, White has looked back over forty years of his life and,



Borges-like,<sup>6</sup> is able to say to that newly-born self: "It was time to begin" (177).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>For the sake of clarity, pronouns used for the female manifestations of Eddie Twyborn will be feminine, and for the male, masculine. For the integrated or overall character the male pronoun will be used because of Eddie's original and final state of gender.

<sup>2</sup>The black and green landscape, the dead green tamarisks recall the surreal vegetation in the jardin exotique in The Aunt's Story.

<sup>3</sup>This entire episode brings to mind another early twentieth-century voyeur: Leopold Bloom as he gazes with equal desire at the distant figure of Gerty McDowell, also on a beach, in Ulysses. Unfortunately, it is impossible to follow here the intriguing parallel between Gerty's literally crippled and Eudoxia's emotionally crippled femininity.

<sup>4</sup>World War I occurs between the closing of Part One and the opening of Part Two. It is typical of White to refer to the war only in passing and, since Eddie emerges from it remarkably unscathed (in fact he is still intimidated by male company, as we see at Bogong), it will not be discussed here.

<sup>5</sup>For an interesting and thorough analysis of the Australian male's "phallocracy of the tavern and the ken" (175), see The Fatal Shore, Robert Hughes' masterful study of that country's convict origins.

<sup>6</sup>In the Borges story, "The Other," the older Borges, in 1969, meets and converses with his younger self on a bench in Cambridge.

## Conclusion

"Only when you're stranded among the human furniture, the awfulness of life, you've got to set out on a search to find some reason for it all" (Memoirs of Many in One 105).<sup>1</sup>

M.H. Abrams writes in Natural Supernaturalism:

The fact the concept of divided and alienated man is one of the oldest of commonplaces does not controvert either its general relevance to the human condition or its special usefulness as a speculative instrument for examining our greatly troubled era. (146)

White's prevailing theme has been the detailed study of this divided and alienated human being and his or her strategies to attain a form of integration to enable him or her to transcend what Abrams calls "our greatly troubled era."

Despite the various approaches White has explored throughout his career, there is an overriding sense of unity which encompasses his entire oeuvre. Patricia Morley's early study of White, The Mystery of Unity, prophetically summarizes the focus of his writing. Each protagonist suffers a sense of dislocation, a discomfort which he or she attempts to rectify in a manner each one feels will lead to "the life of triumph" (Rorty 12). Theodora Goodman in The Aunt's Story endeavours to piece together her fragmented self, leaves her homeland and family to achieve this, and then slips into a nirvana-like fulfillment, at the cost of total isolation. The Riders of the Chariot abandon the search for self as a barrier to integration and achieve

their salvation through unity on two levels: through their own sense of the communion experienced in each other's presence, and finally through the transcendental embracing vision of the Chariot. Hurtle Duffield in The Vivisector, experiences his dislocation in his relationships with the people around him and in his frustration at his alienation from reality itself. He makes several half-hearted attempts at human contact, but his overwhelming need is to embrace reality through his art. It is only when he is near death, felled by the fortuitous stroke which almost totally disables him, that he is able to unite Aestheticism with God. His human relationships fade into insignificance against the foreground of this final revelation.

In The Eye of the Storm, human relationships are foregrounded, the setting of the storm of the novel's title.

Elizabeth Hunter, center and instigator of much of the novel's turmoil, sees human relationships as the battleground where power may be wielded. She exults in the disunity she causes, resenting any attempts at integration that have not originated through the manipulation of her will. Her experience of the vision on Brumby Island is seed sown on barren ground. Nothing changes. Mrs. Hunter seeks fulfillment through tyranny, and by doing so turns away from a salvation that has been gratuitously offered her. In a compensatory gesture of consolation, White grants the old woman a deathbed baptism which however arrives too late to repair any of the damage she has wreaked during a life of unstinting egoism.

Eddie Twyborn, in The Twyborn Affair, like Theodora Goodman, is attempting to integrate a profoundly fragmented psyche. More daring and aggressive than the diminutive aunt of the much earlier novel, he travels across barriers of gender, mores, and class, as well as continents and seas. However, in the three major episodes which comprise the novel, there is a strong ambivalence regarding Eddie's motivation for his search, a pervading sense of escape rather than exploration. Only in the final pages does the sense of integration arise when Eddie, masks now abandoned and gender stabilized, is reunited with his mother and becomes by his death the progenitor of the artist who will write the works of Patrick White.

It is important to add here that the strategies White has his protagonists attempt do not necessarily occur in a developmental, evolutionary pattern. In The Mortal, No, Hoffman states that "the general attitude to the self has changed from regarding it as a substance to analyzing it as a process" (321). In the same way we may regard each of White's works as a component in an all-embracing portrait of the human struggle to achieve meaning in life. To privilege The Twyborn Affair because it is the most recent investigation of this struggle automatically negates the worth of the novels which precede it, as though they were all faulty attempts at a solution, while only this latest novel contains an authentic blueprint for salvation. In a recent article on Tennyson, Robert Bernard Martin has cogently observed that "it is his search which engages us, not his

solution" (19).. And so it is with White.

Simone Weil, a strong influence on White, writes: "When literature becomes indifferent to the opposition of good and evil it betrays its function and forfeits all claim to excellence" (On Science 109). Each of White's works looks at this struggle in different terms and offers at times somewhat differing outcomes; but inasmuch as they all deal directly with the elements of the battle for good (given that one is willing to grant White the parameters of his world-view), then all merit what Weil calls a claim for excellence.

White has called the central characters in his works his "burnt ones" (he has in fact entitled his first collection of short stories The Burnt Ones [1964]), these people whose very striving to attain meaning has brought them suffering, estrangement, and an exquisitely painful self-consciousness. No matter the strategy chosen, each character battles towards that gnosis defined by Joseph Campbell as "the full awakening to the crystalline purity of the . . . ground of one's own and the world's own true being" (Creative Mythology 66). Each one, burnt in the crucible of his being, is finally granted enlightenment, the passion for unity being the ultimate strategy which has merited salvation.

## Endnote

Unlike Proust, Patrick White has lived long enough to write an epilogue to his Le Temps Retrouvé. In 1986 appeared Memoirs of Many in One by Alex Xenophon Demirjian Gray, "edited" by Patrick White. Leonie Kramer calls this work "a summary which one can think of as both index and appendix to forty years' engagement with the self" (66). Kramer best summarizes the thrust of this novel through the title of her article: "A Visit to White's Sacred Sights." Through the written reminiscences of Alex Gray, the themes of White's fiction of the last forty years are reviewed or "revisited."



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