UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

"VARIATIONS OF THE RAINBOW": MYSTICISM, HISTORY AND ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA IN PATRICK WHITE

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Variations of the Rainbow: Mysticism, History and Aboriginal Australia in the novels of Patrick White

Colleen Jane Taylor

This study examines Patrick White's Voss, Riders in the Chariot and A Fringe of Leaves. These works, which span White's creative career, demonstrate certain abiding preoccupations, while also showing a marked shift in treatment and philosophy.

In Chapter One Voss is discussed as an essentially modernist work. The study shows how White takes an historical episode, the Leichhardt expedition, and reworks it into a meditation on the psychological and philosophical impulses behind nineteenth century exploration. The aggressive energy required for the project is identified with the myth of the Romantic male. I further argue that White, influenced by modernist conceptions of androgyny, uses the cyclical structure of hermetic philosophy to undermine the linear project identified with the male quest. Alchemical teaching provides much of the novel's metaphoric density, as well as a map for the narrative resolution.

Voss is the first of the novels to examine Aboriginal culture. This culture is made available through the visionary artist, a European figure who, as seer, has access to the Aboriginal deities. European and Aboriginal philosophies are blended at the level of symbol, making possible the creative interaction between Europe and Australia.

The second chapter considers how, in Riders in the Chariot, White modifies premises central to Voss. A holocaust survivor is one of the protagonists, and much of the novel, I argue, revolves around the question of the material nature of evil. Kabbalism, a mystical strain

of Judaism, provides much of the esoteric material, and White uses it to foreground the conflict between metaphysical abstraction and political reality.

In Riders there is again an artist-figure; part Aboriginal, part European, he is literally a blend of Europe and Australia and his art expresses his dual identity. This novel, too, is influenced by modernist models. However, here the depiction of Fascism as both an historical crisis and as a contemporary moral bankruptcy locates the metaphysical questions in a powerfully realised material dimension.

Chapter Three looks at A Fringe of Leaves, which is largely a post-modernist novel. One purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how it responds to its literary precursors and there is thus a fairly extensive discussion of the shipwreck narrative as a genre.

The protagonist of the novel, a shipwreck survivor, cannot apprehend the symbolic life of the Aboriginals: she can only observe the material aspects of the culture. Symbolic acts are thus interpreted in their material manifestation. The depiction of Aboriginal life is less romanticised than that given in Voss, as White examines the very real nature of the physical hardships of desert life. The philosophic tone of A Fringe of Leaves is most evident, I argue, in the figure of the failed artist. A frustrated writer, his models are infertile, and he offers no vision of resolution.

There is a promise, however, offered by these novels themselves, for in them White has given a voice to women, Aboriginals and convicts, groups normally excluded from the dominating discursive practice of European patriarchy.

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"But this dedication is for others to read:

These are private words addressed to you in public."

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Bibliographic entries and footnotes in this thesis conform to the latest international scholarly standards, that is to say the 1984 *Modern Languages Association Style Manual*. Following this now generally accepted system of documentation, brief parenthetical citations in the text refer to a list of works cited at the end of the thesis. This list of works cited thus eliminates the need for a cumbersome bibliography and the number of footnotes is also reduced.

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INTRODUCTION

Patrick White has an impressive corpus of works, as the author of twelve novels, a number of plays and short stories, some poetry and an autobiography. Given this various catalogue, it may appear somewhat idiosyncratic that, for the purposes of this thesis I have chosen to examine just three of the novels, novels which span White's creative output. However, the choice is a deliberate one, for I have concentrated on the works which deal extensively with Aboriginal Australians: Voss, Riders in the Chariot and A Fringe of Leaves. Apart from a shared focus on the depiction of Aboriginal communities, these novels also reflect two major thematic concerns. The first of these is an interest in the role of history, and in the intersection of historical moments and metaphysical issues. The second arises out of the first, and is a meditation on the role of the artist as an intermediary between the material and the transcendental worlds.

White's individual novels are, in a sense, all part of a larger oeuvre, for the works refer to one another, are modified by each other to an unusually high degree. Symbols from one novel are picked up and used as a kind of shorthand in another; an idea which is a fragment of one novel may become the central thesis elsewhere. However, all of the works are characterised by the notable differences between them: this is largely a consequence of the varying metaphysical schemes employed. In Voss, the dominant paradigms are those of alchemy and Aboriginal

myth, while in Riders in the Chariot Kabbalism provides the organising principle. While previous critics have at times pointed to the mystical influences in White, there has been no thorough investigation of how he has reinvigorated many of the great mystical concepts by yoking them to Aboriginal philosophy. Further, he himself challenges the teachings of mysticism, by considering their usefulness in the face of contemporary history. One of my major intentions, therefore, is to consider, in some detail, White's treatment of hermetic alchemy and Kabbalism. In A Fringe of Leaves, by contrast, there is not the same sense of a coherent external frame, and the novel thus suggests a departure from the method and attitude in the two previous works.

In Voss, the earliest of the novels under discussion, the Aboriginal community is clearly in possession of the vast bulk of the Australian continent. Their spirits and gods stalk the landscape, unsettling the dreams of the conquerers, and hinting at the spiritual complexity of Aboriginal culture. Language, always something of an obstacle in White's view, is here largely swept aside, and people communicate through symbol.

Voss, in style and subject matter, is effectively a modernist novel, with its skilful manipulation of inter-subjectivity and parallel narratives. There is, further, a powerful critique of nineteenth century philosophy through the undermining of the Romantic explorer. The exploration narrative, a myth of male aggression and action, is challenged by repeated encounters with individuals who represent the "other": women, convicts, Aboriginals. These are the groups which have

been excluded from the tales of colonial conquest; they are an increasingly powerful presence in White's novels.

The resolution of Voss is provided by the merging of the alchemical paradigm with Aboriginal mysticism, a merging that is made possible in part because of the visionary Le Mesurier, who, in dream, adopts the Aboriginal gods as his own. It is thus through their mystical traditions that Aboriginals and Europeans have access to one another. Although this is a quasi-historical novel, metaphysical issues dominate and Good and Evil are conceived along the lines of the Blakean contraries, as essentially metaphysical concepts.

Riders in the Chariot, as we shall see, displays an increasing sense of history which, in turn, produces an awakened awareness of the material nature of evil. White's use of Kabbalistic teaching is not archaic as has been suggested by previous critics, but is in fact particularly appropriate here because, in the Kabbalistic texts, evil is treated not so much as an abstract concept but as a blighting and destructive force in the world. Himmelfarb, a Holocaust survivor, is first threatened with death and the annihilation of his culture. He flees as a refugee to Australia, only to find that he is compelled to try and retain his faith in the face of the crass bourgeois materialism that he encounters. The Aboriginal whom he befiends, Alf Dubbo, a visionary artist, has had his own cultural heritage exorcised by a mission school education, and Himmelfarb and Dubbo establish a tentative but profound alliance through their struggle to retain a sense of the sacred, in the face of urban development and debased institutionalised

religion.

With A Fringe of Leaves White once more gives us a quasi-historical novel, and again he uses it to investigate how histories are constructed by the powerful in order to exclude the stories of the powerless. The novel is set in the 1830's, at which point there had been little prior contact between indigenous Australians and the colonial community. Ellen Roxburgh, the protagonist who is shipwrecked and taken in by a local Aboriginal community, has no access to their myths, although she is vaguely aware that they are potent. As an observer, however, she is able to provide a record of many of the material aspects of Aboriginal culture.

The three novels to be discussed in this thesis reflect White's energetic defence of the outsider figures, the shadows on the edge of dominant Australian orthodoxy. It is worth noting that each of these figures in turn poses a threat to the stable conservative social formation. Women, Aboriginals and convicts all have, historically, been represented as aligned with the libido and the irrational, and thus are socially dangerous unless restrained or moulded. The visionary artist, often an anarchic and erotic figure, gives voice to those who do not speak, and is thus an ally of these groups. However, in A Fringe of Leaves, we see the diminution of the efficacy of the artist: here there is no visionary genius, only a sympathetic but emotionally needy individual. Hence there can be no great synthetic art work which testifies to a vision of hope. It is through pondering these elements that one becomes aware that Voss, Riders in the Chariot and A Fringe of

Leaves form a unity which allows one to consider White's purposes in an original and challenging way.

It is tempting to consider to what extent the change of mood evident in the novels is a reflection of White's loss of faith in his own influence as a writer. Nonetheless, any comments which one may venture on this question must be qualified by the reminder that White himself continues to write, that subsequent to A Fringe of Leaves he has produced two novels and an autobiography. There must be, somewhere within him, purpose enough to sustain the project.

CHAPTER ONE: VOSS

Voss is arguably Patrick White's most visionary novel. Many of the preoccupations which emerge more subtly and covertly in his other novels are explored here with an almost extravagant delight. In fact the novel is something of an encyclopaedic text for it unlocks many of the mystic resonances in White's later works. White takes advantage of its symbolic density, for it provides him with a kind of repository of private and public symbols, symbols which can be picked up at various later points, bringing with them an accrued meaning.

The symbolic fabric of Voss consists of a number of distinct but interwoven threads, amongst the most important of which reflects on the redemption of the actors in the narrative. Redemption, for the English reader, is generally conceived along Judeo-Christian lines. In Voss, the Christian paradigm is certainly evident, and has provided the substance of much of the critical material on the novel.[1] However, what is unusual in this novel is the way in which the Christian allegory is patterned against the model of alchemical redemption, the generation of gold from base substances. This has been largely ignored by critics, and one of the major purposes of this chapter is to demonstrate just how closely the narrative is determined by the alchemical paradigm. Voss is also an undermining of the male quest, the arrogance of which is seriously challenged. Further, I shall demonstrate the philosophic purposes behind White's decision to blend Christian orthodoxy with mystical heterodoxy.

I suggest, then, that Voss is a useful novel to open an inquiry into White's work, because it provides the reader with a key as to how the novelist employs symbolic material. Further, Voss is also important as White's first quasi-historical novel. There is evidence of what begins to emerge as a concern in later works, that is, White's attempts to give history back to the voices that have been silenced by the drive to produce one solid Australian orthodoxy. Women, Aboriginals, and convicts are all active agents in Voss, and I shall demonstrate how White uses representatives from these groups to complicate and undermine the great colonial adventure which provides the backdrop to the narrative of the novel. In this way White examines and criticises the male quest, characteristically conceived both temporally and spatially as a linear project.

My final purpose in this chapter is to discuss White's attempts to reconcile two contradictory metaphysical systems, European and Aboriginal philosophy. This is, on White's part, no simple undertaking because of the inherent differences between the two ontological models. The conquest of Australia was indeed made possible not only because of the economic and technological opulence of Europe, but also largely due to the confidence and assertiveness of nineteenth century empiricism and Romanticism. The colonial explorer, as bearer of such philosophy, is necessarily convinced that time and distance are teleological projections, that the future is something which he will bring into being. This is what White will have us recognise when he has his fictive explorer, Voss, comment that "Future . . . is will" (64). By

contrast Aboriginal philosophy has developed a notion of time as circular. The difference in interpretation has profound effects on such concepts as discovery and originality, and the implications of this difference will be discussed.

I shall suggest that, while dominant European philosophical models are at odds with the Aboriginal, this is not true of various branches of European mysticism, which celebrate a cyclical concept of time and renewal. It is partly for this reason that Western mysticism, from the Renaissance alchemists through Boehme and Blake, has historically been associated with philosophic radicalism, as an undermining of the orthodoxy upon which society is structured. The alchemical paradigm, which, as indicated, provides much of the symbolic material in Voss, is just such a radical tradition and is itself conceived as a pattern of regeneration, repetition and transformation. Thus White can use an Aboriginal deity, the Rainbow Serpent, as a significant character in the process of alchemical redemption which provides one of the critical moments of the novel.

The reconciliation of European and Australian spirits is further facilitated by the artist-figure, Le Mesurier, a mystic who through dream and imagination can bridge the cultural divide. I shall pay particular attention to the artist's role in this novel, for it suggests something of White's own purpose, and also provides a dominant motif in the three novels under discussion. Aboriginal myth is, through the artist's interpretive understanding, incorporated into the alchemical process, and the productive exchange generated by these two philosophic

systems suggests that European mysticism in some way provides colonial Australians with a point of access to the peoples and spirits of their adopted land.

I: The Alchemical Paradigm

In the twentieth century, what little interest in alchemy has survived is due almost exclusively to the work done by its most provocative interpreter, C.G. Jung. Patrick White has repeatedly asserted that he was first consciously influenced by the work of Jung just prior to his writing of The Solid Mandala (1966), at which point he was given a copy of Psychology and Alchemy (Flaws 146). Yet there is abundant evidence even in Voss (1957) that White was already working with an alchemical model in mind. If White was as yet unacquainted with Jung, then much of the manifest correspondence must be attributed to the fact that Jung and White are, in certain of their writings, both interpreters of a similar mystical tradition, that of hermetic philosophy. Further, both see the pattern of alchemical transformation as a correlative for psychological and metaphysical impulses toward the reconciliation of antagonistic forces.

Jung's extensive research into Renaissance alchemy culminated in his thesis on Psychic Individuation, which can be interpreted as a kind of psychological androgyny. This, as can be seen from Memories, Dreams, Reflections amounts to both a theoretical conviction and a personal credo. White's own androgynous vision is reflected, similarly, in his fictions as well as his autobiography. In this White manifests an

evident affinity with what was a dominant modernist preoccupation, for much of the writing of the early twentieth century displays an intense interest in the concept of androgyny. One of the fundamental modernist statements on the subject can be found in Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, her 'manifesto' on women and writing:

> And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating. If one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. (96-97)

Similarly, for White, a reconciliation of the antagonistic aspects of his own psyche is vital to his purpose as a writer. "I see myself", he muses, "as a mind possessed by the spirit of man or woman according to the actual situations or the characters I become in my writing" (Flaws 81). Although it is fair to say that White is, in some sense, modernism's heir, his understanding of androgyny and, by implication, the problem of resolving opposites, is rendered much more complex because his situation as a colonial placed him in the invidious position in which he was neither wholly Australian nor wholly foreign. The

problem of resolving oppositions takes on an added cultural dimension. As J.J. Healy notes:

> [His] consciousness was sharpened by a sense of the two primal elements within which Australians had to work out a sense of themselves: Greece and Aboriginal Australia. (144)

The difficulty which White experienced in trying to reconcile the apparently insurmountable differences of his Australian and his European heritage is clearly apparent in the early pages of his autobiography, Flaws in the Glass, in which he describes himself as " a despised Colonial attempting to pass myself off as an English schoolboy" (Flaws 33). These early years, and those of adolescence and young adulthood, are described as contributing to "the black in White" (Flaws 33). The colonial situation, in other words, is one which relies upon the perception of a fundamental difference between the coloniser and the colonised, and thus reinforces a binary vision: the struggle to find an integrated identity is therefore part of the characteristic legacy of colonial rule. Thus for White the notion of androgyny is not confined to the arena of gender; it has a far broader, more metaphysical application and is set up, very often, as a response to the Manichean habits of thought which dominate nineteenth century European philosophy.

As a "despised Colonial" White inherits the orthodox Judeo-Christian tradition, a tradition based upon a philosophy of dualism. This is evident even in the initial movement of the Book of Genesis, where God's great creative work is conceived as a work of separation, of division. Prior to God's intervention, we are told, the

earth was without form and chaotic. At some unspecified but nonetheless specific moment, the abstract and infinite God separated light from darkness and thus initiated the linear history of the Hebrew peoples. From this original impulse followed the division of land and water, day and night, sun and moon, man and woman, good and evil. God further legislated which life-forms should inhabit each of these spheres: the fowls were given to the air, fish to the waters and beasts to the land. For the Renaissance alchemist, Paracelsus, the creation of the universe is thus a moment which is coincident with the Fall, rather than prior to it, as the act of creation is fundamentally divisive, calling things up into discrete being out of an undifferentiated chaos (Abrams 158-159).

There is some suggestion that the introduction of Christ into this philosophical tradition was an attempt to reintegrate its antagonistic elements. Since Christ is both God and man, omnipotent but limited, Mercy and Justice are no longer irreconcilable. However the New Testament is dominated by its brilliant interpreter, the apostle Paul. Obviously inspired by something of this new philosophy Paul can assert that there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, man and woman, slave and free man. Yet Paul is himself so clearly a child of patriarchal Judaism that his doctrines ultimately stress the polarities: men and women have distinct roles, the spirit is at war with the flesh; light is at war with darkness.

As has already been noted, this dualism is the bias of the orthodox Judeo-Christian tradition, however, such dualism is inadequate to White's imaginative purposes, and he turns to mystical, unorthodox

models which suggest a different orientation. A brief summary of certain select mystical teachings will suggest something of the philosophic alternatives which the heterodox paths make available to White; more specifically, it will demonstrate how alchemical teaching is aligned with the major mystical schools of thought.

Many of the great mystical precepts are implicit within the Judeo-Christian canon, and have been elaborated and celebrated through the Kabbalah, a suppressed strain of Judaism. The original being of the Kabbalah is the androgyne, Adam Kadmon. Eliade notes that this is the portrait of Adam in many of the midrashim:

> According to the Bereshit rabba, "Adam and Eve were made back to back, joined at the shoulders; then God divided them with an axe stroke, cutting them in two." (The Two and the One 104)

The Kabbalistic writings are important because they demonstrate a distinct link with other mystical writings. Plato, in his Symposium, discusses a third sex which is both male and female. Further, he notes that the original human was round, with two faces, one looking in each direction. These beings had tremendous strength, and in order to subordinate them, Zeus split them in two, instilling in each half a great craving for re-integration. When two such halves find one another, their time is spent celebrating their regained unity, and their love is no ordinary desire but is "something else which the soul of either evidently desires and cannot tell, and of which she has only a dark and doubtful presentiment" (Singer 110) .

Eliade, the philosopher of world religions, explores the

implications of the theme of androgyny. It is not simply an attempt to reconcile male and female. Rather, it is an expression of the desire to find the _coincidentia oppositorum_ or "the mystery of the totality." In his analysis he discusses a myth, from the teachings of Tantric yoga, which is structurally identical to the story recounted by Plato; however, in the oriental version, the broader metaphysical implications are made evident. According to Tantric yoga, the moment of creation is that moment in which the original unity is fragmented, and the resulting dualities are expressed in the personalities of Shiva and Shakti. The goal of Tantric yoga is the ultimate reconciliation of these poles: "As a result of this union of opposites the experience of duality is abolished and the phenomenal world transcended" (_The Two and the One_ 118).

Jung, as the interpreter of diverse world mythologies, comes to a similar conclusion, that the tendency towards dualism is a sign that the universe is in a fallen state, and that the great work to be undertaken is a work of reintegration. For Jung, however, that work has to be undertaken at the level of the human psyche.

According to Jung, Western teaching, in its rigorous prescribing of certain attributes to each of the sexes, has forced the male to supress his _anima_, his feminine self, and has similarly forced the female to suppress her _animus_, or masculine self. Much psychic illness, Jung tells us, is the result of this suppression, and the work of psychology is to reestablish the balance within the individual. Androgyny is, at the level of the psyche, a kind of Utopian ideal; the liberation of the

latent aspect of the self is achieved through the process which Jung terms Psychic Individuation.

Jung arrived at many of his conclusions about individuation as a consequence of his work on alchemy. In Memories, Dreams, Reflections he claims that:

> alchemy formed the bridge on the one hand into the past, to Gnosticism, and on the other into the future, to the modern psychology of the unconscious. (201)

The peculiar value of alchemical teaching, for Jung, lies in its equal emphasis on not only the masculine, but also the feminine principle. The krater, the alchemical mixing vessel, is seen as "a kind of a uterus", the feminine counterpart of the phallus. In Jung's evaluation the krater "is a feminine principle which could find no place in Freud's patriarchal world" (201). Jung's enthusiasm for alchemical teaching culminated in his revelation that the work of individuation had its analogue in descriptions of alchemical redemption.

In The Psychology of the Transference Jung provides a detailed analysis of a cycle of drawings from the Rosarium. These illustrations, in turn, provide us with a useful introduction to the logic of the symbolic matrix employed by White in Voss, and it is therefore useful to consider them in some detail. (See Figures 1-11.) The drawings make explicit the correlation between alchemical redemption and sexual union. Figure 1 shows the alchemical krater, the bath of mercury. Sol and Luna observe in anticipation. In Figure 2 the contrary elements, Sol and Luna, are personified as king and queen/brother and sister who contract,

under the spirit-dove, to participate in the alchemical process. Shedding their garments (Figure 3), they enter the bath of mercury (Figure 4). The following two illustrations are refreshingly candid in their depiction of sexual union. Jung's defence at this point is worth noting:

> As to the frank eroticism of the pictures, I must remind the reader that they are drawn for medieval eyes and that consequently they have a symbolic rather than a pornographic meaning. Medieval hermeneutics and meditation could contemplate even the most delicate passages in the _Song of Songs_ without taking offence and view them through a veil of spirituality. Our pictures of the _coniunctio_ are to be understood in this sense: union on the biological level is a symbol of the _unio oppositorum_ at its highest. This means that the union of opposites in the royal art is just as real as coitus in the common acceptation of the word, so that the opus becomes an analogy of the natural process by means of which instinctive energy is transformed, at least in part, into symbolical activity. (_Collected Works_ 16: 250) [2]

The union gives rise to a 'new body', the hermaphroditus, which is an emblem of the "long-sought rebis or lapis", but the work cannot be completed until the old is putrefied and destroyed (Figure 7). In Figure 8 we see the soul ascend: there is but one soul as the two have become one. Once purification has taken place, figured in the drawings as a heavenly rain (Figure 9), the new body can embrace the returning soul (Figure 10). The final illustration (Figure 11) shows the triumphant androgyne, part Sol, part Luna, holding all contraries in

perfect balance.

Although there is an apparent product at the conclusion of this process, the alchemical transformation is nonetheless seen as part of a cyclical movement. It is in part for this reason that the substance which precipitates the _coniunctio_, the mercury in the krater, is itself depicted in the ancient texts as hermaphroditic. Mercurius is the most evasive figure in the notoriously various and inconsistent alchemical writings. He is, on the one hand, quicksilver itself. Partaking of the natures of both liquid and metal, quicksilver was readily identified with the resolution of moist and dry elements. Further, as quicksilver was known to rise in the form of vapour, Mercurius was also held to incorporate, in his own being, the contraries of spirit and flesh. Mercurius thus both provides a catalyst for and is a promise of the integration of contrary impulses.

While the final end of the alchemist's work has always been the production of gold, the terminology employed to describe the process has also been obviously metaphorical, the metallurgical corresponding to the spiritual, culminating in 'redemption'. Abrams, in his _Natural Supernaturalism_, explains:

> But since matter and spirit were held to be related by a system of correspondence, and since the aim of all alchemy was to transform each thing, whether material or human, to the perfection of its own nature, the language of physical and of spiritual alchemy were interchangeable; so that the description of the laboratory operation served as objective correlative for the human regimen of religious

> redemption. Furthermore, since the opposing yet generative powers in this fallen physical world were conceived on the model of sexual opposites, chemical union was equated with a sexual coupling; and the entire physical *operatio* was frequently imaged as the *coniunctio*, or "chymical wedding" of the prototypical male and female opposites - identified in alchemical symbolism as sulphur and mercury, or Sol and Luna, or king and queen. (160)

As is apparent from Abrams, the alchemists attributed different characteristics to the different metals. (It is worth noting that, as Eliade demonstrates, this 'sexualising' of the mineral world is not exclusive to European alchemy. The Kitara have traditionally distinguished between male and female ores: the former are hard, black surface ores, the latter are soft and red and found underground. The Mesopotamians divided stones into masculine and feminine classes, determined by shape, colour and brilliance.)

Alchemy is thus a powerful philosophic system conceived as the reconciliation of antagonistic forces through the use of symbol. White exploits the potential of this system in *Voss*. If there is a correspondence between the animate and inanimate, then whatever transformations are taking place in the animal or vegetable realm have their equivalents in the mineral. The mineral world thus provides a system of symbols for the human world, and White can integrate alchemical transformation into what is at times a strikingly realistic narrative. This is one of the features of the style of *Voss*, and yet it has been largely overlooked by previous critics. Consider the following

example of the way in which White employs his symbolic framework:

> 'Dying is creation. The body creates fresh forms, the soul inspires by its manner of leaving the body, and passes into other souls.'
> 'Even the souls of the damned?' asked Voss.
> 'In the process of burning it is the black that gives up the gold.'
> 'Then he will give up the purest,' said Voss.
> He pointed to the body of the aboriginal boy . . . . (356)

This conversation epitomises the use of alchemical symbolism in the novel as a whole. According to alchemical teaching, each of the stages of the *opus* is associated with a colour. Black is the colour of the body as the redemption is beginning. The gold is produced once the substance has decayed and then burned away. This is the transformation suggested in the passage above, where Frank Le Mesurier's meditation on metempsychosis and salvation by suffering is relatively modest and does not draw much attention to itself; it is an example of the way in which the alchemical paradigm provides a pattern of symbol for the novel. Further, though, there is a hint here of the way in which alchemical structures actually determine the narrative resolution: Voss, the expedition leader, discovers, as he is overwhelmed by his project, that he must wrestle not with an external landscape, but with the contradictory impulses within himself. His growth into selfhood follows the cycle of disintegration into chaos and reintegration into wholeness.

The explorer's crisis and renewal correspond to the alchemical work of redemption, during which process the precious gold is generated.

Voss himself, before his death, begins to transform: his eyelids become "a pale golden" (382-383). The metaphoric association of gold and the state of perfection is clearly not unique to alchemy; it has in fact become something of a commonplace. It pervades classical Western writings: Hesiod's Theogony tells of a lost Golden Age in which beings, subjects of Cronos, had easy access to the fruits of the earth, and the Roman conception of the Golden Age, derivative of Hesiod, is outlined in Ovid's Metamorphosis. Philosophies and faiths which posit a pre-historical fall from a state of grace generally anticipate an ultimate return, a reintegration and a re-establishment of union with some ultimate reality. For this reason Christ, as the type of the new man, is figured in Christian alchemy as the desired gold, product of the union of contraries.

The degeneration from an original state of perfection is a central motif in Voss. Frank Le Mesurier's journals outline the fall: "There was Man deposed in the very beginning. Gold, gold, gold, tarnishing into baser metals" (375). Humanity's re-entry into the sacred realm, that of golden perfection, is, in this scheme, dependent on a diminishing of the ego and an increased sympathy with the cosmos. This impulse toward reintegration is most frequently expressed through the metaphor of the quest. As M.H. Abrams explains:

> The poet or philosopher, as the avant-garde of the general human consciousness, possesses the vision of an imminent culmination of history which will be equivalent to a recovered paradise or golden age. The movement towards this goal is a circuitous journey and quest, ending in the

> attainment of self-knowledge, wisdom, and power. This educational process is a fall from primal unity into self-division, self-contradiction, and self-conflict, but the fall is in turn regarded as an indispensible first step along the way toward a higher unity which will justify the sufferings undergone en route. The dynamic of the process is the tension toward closure of the divisions, contraries, or "contradictions" themselves . . . . [T]he achievement of the goal is pictured as a scene of recognition and reconciliation, and is often signalized by a loving union with the feminine other, upon which man finds himself thoroughly at home with himself, his milieu, and his family of fellow men. (255)

It is significant that Abrams points to the integration of sexual "contraries" as a metaphor or symbol of psychic and spiritual wholeness, for in Voss the explorer is united, in a dreamscape, with his female counterpart, Laura Trevelyan. This union is described in specifically Jungian terms in Flaws in the Glass, where Laura is characterised as Voss's 'anima' (103). The designation is not strictly accurate, and is more the effect of hindsight on White's part than a description of the scheme to which the work was written, for in the novel itself White does not reduce his male and female protagonists into dichotomised principles or masculine and feminine essences. Laura Trevelyan is an energetic and contradictory character; at the outset she suffers from much the same pride and wilfulness as her dream-lover. White himself has commented that in writing Voss, a fictive work, instead of being bound by the historical facts of Leichhardt's biography, he introduced a woman who

was Voss's "obsessive equal" ("Patrick White speaks" 100-101). Thus the archetypal paradigm outlined by Abrams is rendered as more complex, more psychologically sophisticated in White's novel, though the impulse toward psychic reintegration remains intact.

II: Undermining The Male Quest

M.H. Abrams identifies the quest as a powerful literary figure for the masculine impulse to conquer the unknown; to identify that unknown with the self through an extension of the ego into new territories (143-324). This motif, complex as it is in literature, is complicated even further when translated into action. Individual psychological dynamics and material historical exigencies impose severe limitations on imaginative projects, as was so frequently discovered by eighteenth and nineteenth century explorers. Courage failed, the body faltered and, most shocking of all, the virgin landscape was found to be already peopled. In Voss, White provides us with a juxtaposition between the abstract concept of the quest and the actual distress suffered by the party as they cross the desert. This distress emanates both from the personality of the leader and his grandiose sense of his historical mission.

Voss is based loosely on the story of Ludwig Leichhardt, the German explorer who disappeared without trace while on an expedition in 1848. From his journals it appears that Leichhardt was a man of wide-ranging interests, something of a naturalist and something of a philosopher. He

was, however, also an obsessive and egotistical individual who had little tolerance for the fallibility of others. His personality actually became a matter of public debate, due in part to the zealous activities of one John F. Mann, who had travelled with Leichhardt between 1846 and 1847, and who subsequently felt obliged to give his own account of the expedition in an attempt to redress historical inaccuracies. In January 1866, approximately twenty years after Leichhardt's disappearance, the Sydney Morning Herald published a letter from Leichhardt to his brother-in-law in Germany, in which, according to Mann, he "attributes the whole of his misfortunes to the bad conduct of his companions" (Mann i). Mann immediately replied to the letter, seeking to amend the version of the story given by Leichhardt. However, in December 1881, when the Leichhardt story was again discussed in Athenaeum, the failure of the expedition was once more attributed to the crew. Stirred to defend himself, Mann then decided to write a full record of the trip: "For the sake of my children, myself, and the memory of my former companions, I now publish a true version of this journey in as brief a form as possible" (Mann i). The document which follows is indeed brief, yet it gives a fairly vivid portrait of the circumstances of such an undertaking: the constant preoccupation with food and water, the condition of their livestock, outbreaks of illness, the celebrating of Queen Victoria's birthday with a sweetened pudding and a mug of greasy tea, all evoke the duress and the mutual dependence of the group. However, in his final summary of the saga, Mann is bitter in his judgement of Leichhardt:

> It is difficult to comprehend from Dr. Leichhardt's point of view what constitutes a companion? [sic]
>
> If he is supposed to be one who, while exerting all his energies, risking his health, and possibly his life, in forwarding the leaders [sic] views, is, at the same time, to consider himself as nothing better than an abject slave, without any self respect; not daring to express an idea, or to hold an opinion, to be taunted and looked upon with suspicion, to be called upon to perform duties when prostrated by illness, &c. No doubt a difficulty will be found in obtaining such a person.
>
> If, on the other hand, young men of health, strength, and intelligence are required, men who will go heart and soul into any enterprise, they can be readily obtained. Of such men Dr. Leichardt's second expedition was composed. Unfortunately the leader did not appreciate their qualities. . . .
>
> The hero can do no wrong. (78)

Although, finally, it is difficult to determine to what extent Mann's depiction is an accurate one, his sardonic observation that "the hero can do no wrong" is a reminder of how powerful the whole romantic myth was, and what degree of narcissism and self-absorption it tolerated.

White has commented on how the idea for Voss germinated while he was serving in the Western desert, during World War II. Clearly there is for White some confluence, although not a crude identity, between the personalities of Leichhardt and the fictive Voss:

> Nourished by months spent trapesing backwards and forwards across the Egyptian and Cyrenaican deserts, influenced by the arch-megalomaniac of

> the day, the idea finally matured after reading contemporary accounts of Leichhardt's expeditions and A.H. Chisholm's Strange New World on returning to Australia. ("Prodigal Son" 39)

There has been considerable debate about the relationship between the historical figure, Leichhardt and the character Voss. Marcel Aurousseau's assessment is that "Voss comes nearer to a just appreciation of Leichhardt than anything else about him that we have produced" (467). The question of the treatment of Leichhardt in history and in fiction is raised again by Harold Orel in his essay "Is Patrick White's Voss the Real Leichhardt of Australia?". Although the enquiry is an interesting one, it has little to do with White's express purpose. White has never confined himself to a literal recreation of historical episodes and historical figures; rather, he takes key encounters as paradigmatic and representative, and examines the dynamics generated by these situations and personalities. Further, as we shall see later in this study (particularly in the chapter on A Fringe of Leaves) White takes the past out of the hands of orthodox historians, and recovers it for those excluded from official history.

Voss, like his factual counterpart, is a supreme egoist, a self-styled Romantic hero. His similarity to the Nietzschean ideal is one of the points most constantly acknowledged by the critics. Ann McCulloch, in her reading, traces the correspondences between Nietzsche and White and equates Voss's struggle into being with the quest of the Superman. In this, her observations are valid; however she argues that this quest is endorsed by White, and that the task of the man of genius

is to 'dethrone god'. McCulloch describes the "Nietzschean superman [as] a being in whom the will to power is sublimated into creativity, and whose finest creation is himself" (317). While this may be true of Nietzsche, it is clearly not true of Voss, despite McCulloch's claims. Nietzsche's hero makes himself; Voss comes into being by submitting his will to the higher powers of love and humility. McCulloch's interpretation of Voss is based on a highly selective reading which ignores a great deal of the substance of the novel. Further, White's own avowal of faith in some divine power (albeit undefined) should alert the reader to be suspicious of an interpretation which argues for a vision of "the omnipotence of man without God" (317). Although White's later novels have incorporated an increasingly social dimension, it is still accurate to reiterate his assertion that "[W]hat I am interested in is the relationship between the blundering human being and God" (McGregor et al. 218).

Far from celebrating Voss's megalomania, White makes his protagonist undergo considerable change before allowing him heroic stature; these changes are described in terms of various metaphysical systems. For example, before he can be a saviour and a god he must submit to becoming a man. Allusions to the Christian ethic of humility are apparent throughout the novel, and are most evident in the journals of Le Mesurier. At the same time, learning to accept his humanity is, for Voss, accompanied by his learning to accept the 'feminine' in himself. He must submit to his counterpart, Laura, who herself has had to undergo a considerable education in humility in preparation for her

role as Voss's spiritual companion. In order to realise himself, Voss must surrender his ego and submit himself to a greater whole, recognising himself as an element in a vast scheme rather than as an isolated integer. The metaphors used to depict his loss of identity are those of decay and putrescence. This is the traditional trial by suffering, the 'descent into hell' of the via negativa; it is at the same time the alchemical dissolution. Putrefaction brings forth the new being which is imaged as the philosopher's stone and the androgyne, and is the desired end of the alchemist's work. The resurrection, the emergence of the brilliant from the base, is the final vision of the novel, and Voss's transformation thus provides both the narrative structure and the dominant pattern of metaphors.

Because of the fine set of symbolic equivalences in the novel, White can use an evolving set of metaphors to portray the spiritual and psychological growth of his characters. The metaphoric cluster which accrues around Voss is particularly dense. He is never associated exclusively with any one element but is, in turn, "of nervous splinters, and dark mineral deposits" (132), even, "the first, the burning element" (237). Despite the diversity of these images it is nonetheless clear that, at the start of the novel, Voss is identified with unyielding forms. As he moves across the desert, he takes on an increasingly vulnerable nature. This is in part a response to the emerging relationships with his fellow travellers, but it is due primarily to his developing identification with Laura Trevelyan.

The meeting of Voss and Laura is a fortuitous accident: she is the

niece of Voss's patron, Bonner. Their relationship in Sydney is brief and seemingly slight, yet the significance of the acquaintanceship soon becomes apparent through their conversation. Laura, like Voss, is a proud individual, and as a result the two can confront one another with candour. Laura recognises that Voss "accused her of the superficiality which she herself suspected" (7). She, in turn, rebukes him for his arrogance. Realising that his pride will destroy him, she forsakes her own in order to save him. In a moment of revelation she realises the joy in an honest humility and finds that "her weakness was delectable" (86).

In spite of the obvious sympathy between them, Voss holds himself back, withdraws because of his great 'vision'. White points to the narcissism of this act of self-denial:

> Such beautiful women were in no way necessary to him, he considered, watching her neck. He saw his own room, himself lying on the iron bed. Sometimes he would be visited by a sense of almost intolerable beauty, but never did such experience crystallize in objective visions. Nor did he regret it, as he lay beneath his pale eyelids, reserved for a peculiar destiny. He was sufficient in himself. (11)

Voss sees himself from the outside, as though he were an autonomous aesthetic construction. He becomes both the artist and the artifact, in a closed, self-gratifying system; the incorporation of anything extraneous will violate the austere integrity of his purpose. His venture into the Australian interior is thus not only the culmination of

his plans, it is also a flight from the threat of an imminent human transaction.

Voss's belief in the potency of his isolation is repeatedly challenged as the novel progresses, and his transformation is reflected through the pattern of alchemical change. The metaphoric equivalences used are, as already noted, made possible because of the alchemist's lack of differentiation between the animate and the inanimate, and White exploits this to render a landscape which is almost hallucinatory in its vividness:

> Heavy moons hung above Jildra at that season. There was a golden moon, of placid, swollen belly. There were the ugly, bronze, male moons, threateningly lopsided. (172)

As gold represents the ultimate, and thus the merging of all contraries, it is significant that there is but a single golden moon. By contrast, there are many distinct, "lopsided" bronze moons warring with one another, "shaking their bronze fists at any threat to their virility." Bronze, as an alloy, is not one of the elements specified by hermetic teaching, but White has established an identification between bronze and masculine energy early in the novel. Rose Portion's seducer, Jack Slipper, is first introduced in association with bronze: "Now the whole house was booming with bronze, for Jack Slipper had come in from the yard and struck the great gong, his arms tensed and wiry" (19). We see here that White's use of the alchemical model is not a rigid nor a formulaic one; in fact, it is frequently an original and revitalizing blend of conventional and private symbolic systems.

Voss's transformation in the desert is often imaged as putrescence. Like a waxen image, he too must melt. It is clear that dissolution is linked to the loss of ego, and a breakdown of the assertive, aggressive self. It signals an entry into the realm of human frailty, and is thus also indicative of spiritual evolution. The self must dissolve and decay before it can have access to the eternal, and White establishes a pattern of association between wax and human vulnerability:

> Pious peasants wore their knees out worshipping similar effigies, Voss remembered with digust. The face of Laura Trevelyan, herself waxen amongst the candles, did reproach him for a moment during the orgy of mortality at which they were assisting, but he drove her off, together with the flies, and spoke very irritably, for flesh, like candles, is designed to melt. (338)

Similarly, when on the brink of death, Voss recognises that he is after all a "frail god upon a rickety throne" (384) and calls out to Christ. He is visited by the vision of "the arms, or sticks, reaching down from the eternal tree, and tears of blood, and candlewax. Of the great legend becoming truth" (384).

Images of putrescence and reference to melting wax are thus signs that Voss's transformation has begun; however the alchemical processes are also indicated through the complex use of colour symbolism. In a rather dense web of ideas, White links Voss's acceptance of his own frailty with the colour green. In traditional alchemy, green has a specific significance as the colour associated with decay, as is clear from the <u>Rosarium</u>:

> Our gold is not the common gold. But thou hast inquired concerning the greenness, deeming the bronze to be a leprous body on account of the greenness it hath upon it. Therefore I say unto thee that whatever is perfect in the bronze is that greenness only, because that greenness is straightway changed by our magistry into our most true gold. (qtd. in Jung, CW 12: 159)

Green is thus the colour of the substance at the moment of dissolution, just prior to the transformation into gold. It is emblematic of the breakdown of all previous form, and thus it is that White uses green to suggest Voss's entry into mortal vulnerability. One night in the desert, when Palfreyman observes Voss walking in his sleep, the German is described as if "his skin had erupted in a greenish verdigris" (173). Boyle, on hearing of this episode the following morning, welcomes Voss "through the gate of human weaknesses". This rather ironic observation refers to Voss's sleep-walking; nonetheless there is an association, by contiguity, of human weakness and the colour green. Verdigris, further, is the coating that forms on bronze as it succumbs to the elements, and bronze, as we have seen, is identified with masculine energy in the novel. The image therefore suggests that Voss's transmutation coincides with the relinquishing of his masculine purpose.

The arduous journey across the desert makes tremendous physical demands, and the men succumb to boils and diarrhoea. These symptoms function as the literal equivalent of the putrescence and corruption in the alchemical procedure. Laura, back at the Bonner's home in Sydney, undergoes similar transformations. She is stricken by an indefinable

illness, as she vicariously experiences all that Voss and his men suffer. White carefully establishes the credibility of this scheme by asserting that Voss's journey into the heart of Australia is at once a literal and a metaphysical one. Further, Laura's quest is not geographical: it is her project to penetrate the soul and psyche of Voss. "You are my desert" she declares to him (84). White demonstrates the characteristic plight of the Victorian woman of genius who, limited by the circumscribed possibilities of her sex, either constructs a realm in the imagination in which to express herself or lives vicariously through the public life of a male partner. Such, for example, was the lot of George Eliot's Dorothea Brook, who in her first marriage is little more than her husband's amanuensis. Her second marriage does not offer a great deal more: her husband becomes "an ardent public man", and Dorothea reconciles herself to her lot with the belief that she "could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them and that she should give him wifely help" (Middlemarch 894).

White orchestrates the narrative in order to show that what is happening to Voss and his companions in the desert, has its equivalence for Laura, who has been left in Sydney. At first, the chapters alternate loosely between the town and the wilderness. As the action becomes increasingly climactic, these two axes move closer together until Laura is literally portrayed as taking part in the expedition. She is observed as a real presence, not only for Voss, but also for the narrator. This compression of the two worlds, as Laura's and Voss's

experiences collapse into a single pool of travail, culminates in a linguistic sleight of hand, with individual images used to refer to both realms: "So the party rode down the terrible basalt stairs of the Bonners' deserted house, and onward" (353). The trick is also a visual one, because "deserted", although pronunciation initially conceals the fact, is both a participle derived from the verb "to desert" and an adjective derived from the noun "desert". The metaphor of the Bonner household as a desert is a completely fitting one; Laura is isolated from those around her because of her heightened sensibility and her depth of perception. As the flesh of the men in the desert begins to suppurate, an inexplicable, sweet odour fills the Bonner home. It is no more than the smell of some forgotten pears, as they start to decay, yet White uses this snippet of realistic trivia to demonstrate that Voss and Laura, the would-be saints, are experiencing a common purgatory.

The communication between Laura and Voss is a mystical transaction, but, further, it is White's reworking of the modernist conception of inter-subjectivity. As part of the attempt to redress the positivist tendencies of nineteenth century philosophy, modernism sought to undermine the Victorian notion of laissez faire individualism. The universe was no longer seen as a collection of isolated and discrete entities, but rather as a collective of inter-relating forms, constantly transformed by consciousness. In part this philosophical shift is due to the contribution made by the phenomenologists. White's debt to phenomenology, although indirect, is productive. It reflects a move away from empiricism's emphasis on classifications of difference and

separateness, and reasserts a revitalised coincidentia oppositorum, the reconciliation of opposites through the interdependence of the perceiver and the perceived. Merleau-Ponty's comments reflect something of the philosophic overlap I am indicating here. His suggestion is that it is through language that we have been taught to believe in the fragmented nature of the universe. There is some resonance of Paracelsus in this: for Paracelsus, the act of 'naming' is itself a divisive act (Abrams 159), and Merleau-Ponty comments that:

> It is the office of language to cause essences to exist in a state of separation which is in fact merely apparent. (78)

Phenomenology strives to define our universe as we live and experience it:

> all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status. It is the search for a philosophy which shall be a "rigorous science", but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we "live" them. (69)

Phenomenology, in other words, wants to reinvest our experience of the world with a "direct and primitive contact". This experience, furthermore, is an experience of the interrelatedness of consciousness and material reality; as Merleau-Ponty notes, "my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them" (71).

Despite White's reluctance to impose interpretations on his work,

he is, in one interview, unusually candid on the question of inter-subjective communication:

> Q. How important in a novel are principles like plausibility and verisimilitude? For example in the "telepathic" communication of Laura and Voss?
>
> A. ESP research in recent years has surely proved that telepathic communication does exist. I'm continually receiving evidence of it myself.
> ("A Conversation" 138)

Laura can thus, through faith and sympathy, partake of the suffering of those with whom she is in spiritual and mental contact. She is, too, a register of the whole process of transformation as it takes place.

III: The Philosophical Resolution

While it is through his relationship with Laura that Voss is transformed, it is in his relationships with his companions on the journey that this transformation is materially and practically expressed. Voss's egotism persuades him of his self-sufficiency: he is described as "indifferent to other men" (17). Convinced of his own potency, he is suspicious of the weakness of others. Further, he is reluctant to share the glory of conquest and is thus resentful of the fact that Bonner has provided him with a party of companions. The expedition team is composed of a significant grouping of individuals; however I shall focus in particular on the convict, the Aboriginals and the artist, three groups of outsiders used by White to challenge the assumptions which govern Voss's quest.

Accustomed to travelling alone, Voss cannot admit the necessity for a fully equipped and well-manned expedition. But Voss must learn humility; he must accept and appreciate the ministrations of others. Inverting the traditional doctrine that 'it is more blessed to give than receive', White suggests that for Voss it is actually easier to give than receive: "the act of giving is less humiliating than that of receiving" (264). He must allow himself to be not only the servant, but the served, and it is thus particularly significant that he submits to being nursed by Judd.

From the moment of their first meeting, Voss recognises that Judd is an impressive and powerful character. An emancipated convict, Judd is described as having passed through the trial of hell and is resurrected to a new life. The ordeal has refined and purified him; however Judd's gift is for living in the material world, not the transcendental. He is one of those types repeatedly celebrated in White's writing, an individual redeemed through honest labour. He says of himself "my gifts are for practical things" (132) and he becomes "the master of objects" (285) as he takes charge of the physical needs of the group. Judd, like Voss, is also a "stone man" (190), however he is not of "nervous splinters" as the German is; rather, he is of a more yielding element. Looking at Judd, Voss "recalled finding on his previous journey a mass of limestone, broken by nature into forms that were almost human, and filled with a similar slow, brooding innocence" (131).

The strength that Judd manifests is the strength of humility. His

capacity to minister is evident from Voss's first meeting with him, for at the Sandersons', when Palfreyman collapses from fatigue, Judd restores him by watching over him. It is Judd, furthermore, who tends to Voss's own physical needs when the latter is gashed by a branch and kicked by a mule. The attentions humiliate and disturb Voss, who detects in the man a "great power" (208). Such minor incidents anticipate the greater confrontation between the two men. It is suggested as inevitable that there be conflict bewеen them, for "stone cannot come together with stone, except in conflict" (132). The challenge is at first over the control of the navigational instruments (177), but in truth this is a metaphoric equivalent of the true battle, which revolves around the question of spiritual guidance. The conflict is made evident on Christmas day, for it is Judd who reminds Voss of the significance of the date, and urges Voss to allow some celebration. There is the clear suggestion that Judd is beginning to assume spiritual responsiblity, some authority for the souls of the group.

Judd clearly has incorporated into his own strength the weakness-in-compassion that Voss mistrusts. He is capable of admitting love, and it is this which attracts the childlike Harry. Jostling across the lonely desert, Judd is reminded of his sons and, compelled by his need for affection, he attempts to woo Harry. Having nothing else at hand, the emancipist offers the boy a piece of gum which he plucks from the bark of a tree in passing. In a moment of communion, he himself takes a similar piece, and puts it in his mouth. White

highlights the symbolic power of the insignificant action, for he notes "they were both to some extent soothed and united by its substance and their act" (241). The sharing of the gum is an act of communion, reminiscent of the sacrament; the "knot of gum" is actually referred to as a "token". Further, it is worth noting that in alchemical language, 'gum' is a metaphor for mercury, and as such has a prime part in the union of elements. Jung elaborates:

> "Marry gum with gum in true marriage." Originally it was "gum arabic", and it is used here as a secret name for the transforming substance. (CW 12: 161)

It is not important to determine whether White is making a particular allusion at this point. Rather, it is interesting to note the way in which the alchemists understood the significance of gum. The glutinous nature of the substance was seized upon as it makes literal what is essentially a spiritual transformation: two unlike substances can be seen to be wrought together by a third. In a similar way, White's use of gum gives a literal dimension to the metaphysical communion which Judd is offering to Harry.

Harry is almost seduced. However, looking up at Voss he notices that his leader is "at the point of splintering into light" (242). Realising that to betray Voss now would be to abandon the German's vision at a most critical moment, Harry rejects Judd's offer of friendship and spits out the gum. His commitment to Voss's purpose is thus made concrete, and Judd is isolated, with only the dubious Turner and Angus as confederates.

The final inevitable rift takes place when Judd determines to give up the expedition. Angus and Turner join him in an attempt to return to 'civilization' while the others stay faithful to Voss. White describes the split in metaphors which are rich in alchemical allusion:

> By some process of chemical choice, the cavalcade had resolved itself into immutable component parts. No one denied that Mr. Voss was the first, the burning element, that consumed obstacles, as well as indifference in others. All round the leader ranged the native boy, like quicksilver, if he had not been bronze. (237)

Here the psychological and spiritual dynamics of the group are registered, symbolically, as various mineral elements, demonstrating that principle of equivalence identified as characteristic of alchemical texts.

Strikingly, Judd is the only member of the expedition to survive. It is he who, on returning to Sydney, tells of Voss's achievement, and describes the German's death. Voss clearly assumes the status of a type of Christ, as Judd recalls the spear which had pierced the leader's side (437). The reader is aware that this is not a literal truth: the spear had in fact entered the side of Palfreyman. There is a suggestion here that it is unimportant who provides the substance for myths, as long as the myths are available and satisfy the emotional and spiritual needs of the people to whom they belong. There is also the implication that Voss's psychological and moral energy is such that legends will inevitably accrue to him. This is perhaps the first suggestion of a motif which is evident in later novels, particularly in <u>A Fringe of</u>

Leaves, that history is not so much the stable and fixed record of events as a narrative which is spoken. It is evident that part of White's purpose is to make that narrative available to new voices. In this instance, the opportunity to interpret the event is afforded to the liberated convict. Judd had been absent from Voss at the time of the German's death, but by insisting that he was in fact present, Judd is the only witness and has the power of interpreting Voss's final actions to all future generations. With characteristic generosity and reverence, and just a touch of lunacy, Judd deifies the man that Voss was to become, and forgets the demon that Voss had been.

Unlike Judd, Frank Le Mesurier, the poet-mystic in the novel, remains faithful to Voss, even though he does not share Voss's vision. Le Mesurier does share certain of Voss's characteristics: he is relentless and scornful, and at the start of the novel is shown taunting the man-child Harry. He has a certain fastidiousness and is repulsed by his own physicality. Unlike Voss, however, he is obsessed from the outset by a sense of his own failure, and this has fermented into a cynicism which borders on despair. His cynicism prompts him to suspect that this journey will lead to self-destruction. When invited by the German to participate in the expedition, Frank replies "I am not sure that I want to cut my throat just yet" (31). This is, of course, a prophetic utterance, as Frank does finally cut his own throat.

Through Le Mesurier, White investigates the character of the self-conscious mystic, and thus inevitably raises the question of whether such a posture can lead to true visionary insight, for

Frank's mysticism is expressed initially as a sort of style, a lived expression of an artistic pose. Yet the writings that are produced in the desert are fiercely private. They do not anticipate (or even tolerate) an audience, and this gives them that quality of incoherence which threatens Voss. Frank describes his craving to write as his "oyster delusion" (95) and this metaphor is particularly apposite. The jewel is produced in some secret place and the opaque, rough surface will not disclose that which an internal agitation has created.

Both Voss and Le Mesurier share a dread of the past, both are taunted by recollections of their childhoods. Voss, as a man of action, flees his origins in a literal journey. In a passage reminiscent of both Oedipus and Prometheus, Voss is described as having to "tread with his boot upon the trusting face of the old man his father" (10). The image conveys Voss's renunciation of the servitude which is associated with his past. In an attempt to dissociate himself from the cloying security of the familial and the familiar, Voss ventures into a landscape on the opposite side of the world. Ironically, the geography of Australia provides constant reminders of Germany: he observes to Laura Trevelyan that the countryside around Sydney is like that of the Mark Brandenburg. The Sanderson's home is named, significantly, Rhine Towers (124) and memory floods in upon him. The past is a constant menace to Voss; it threatens to overpower the man he has made himself, and reassert the boy he had been, in the grasp of the nuclear family. He recalls "the stovey air of old winter houses, and flesh of human relationships, a dreadful, cloying tyranny" (108). He is comfortable

only in dreams of the future:

> He was rather sickly when moved by recollection of the past, as he was, in fact, when collected and in the present. (77)

The future is equated with distance, and hence with the possibility of conquest and the will. Thus it is that Voss's project is conceived of as a linear projection into space, a flight into the grandiose idea and away from banal memory.

For Frank it is different; he triumphs over his past through his writing. By writing he can control and reinterpret experience, can, in the imagination, become the agent instead of the victim. This is the privilege afforded the artist: through his or her craft, the artist can overthrow the tyranny of the past. The nature of this tyranny is articulately observed by Nietzsche:

> This, indeed this alone, is what revenge is: the will's resentment against time and time's 'it was'.
> . . . .
> To redeem those who lived in the past and recreate all 'it was' into a 'thus I willed it' - that alone should I call redemption . . . . The will cannot will backwards; and that he cannot break time and time's covetousness, that is the will's loneliest melancholy. (qtd. in Bloom 3)

Autobiographical writings are frequently an expression of this craving for revenge. They are produced by the desire to be in control of the events in one's life. Further, the selection of detail and the privileging of some material over other allows repressive and negating

mechanisms to express themselves. With this in mind, Frank's need to write can be seen as akin to Voss's need to penetrate the landscape, as both are manifestations of the Will. The difference lies in the fact that the paradigm for Voss's quest is that of linear progression, reaching into the future and the distance, whereas Frank's quest is imaged as a circular journey which approaches ever closer to the centre of the self.

The increasing conviction in Frank that "[d]ying is creation" (356) is dependent upon a cyclical notion of time, in which life and death are but two aspects of a single great motion. Such a circular conception of time posits that there is no absolute end, no final achievement, no complete fulfilment. Eliade refers to this philosophy of recurrence as "the myth of the eternal return" and in his work of the same title (also known as Cosmos and History) he notes that it is characteristic of many oriental and traditional faiths (Cosmos 17-20). By contrast, he suggests, Judeo-Christian teaching, with its emphasis on one single regeneration and renewal, has established a sense of history as linear, and thus all lived experience moves towards an inevitable point in the distance. So Voss and Le Mesurier, at the start, undertake separate journeys, plotted and represented as fundamentally different. However, the two men do travel upon each other's paths: Frank is taken into the heart of the desert, as Voss is drawn into the heart of himself, and they are linked by both their shared physical suffering and their growth into self-awareness.

Voss's drive to escape the tyranny of time's 'it was' is what

impels him into the future; in fact a sense of time as a linear projection is integral to the colonial adventure. However, his purpose is dramatically at odds with the spirits of the land he wishes to conquer. There has been considerable anthropological research actually demonstrating that traditional Aboriginal philosophy is dependent on a notion of time as cyclical. Action, even great action, is not conceived as original, but as a repetition of action performed in past great times. This fundamental opposition is pointed to by Liberman:

> World-historical time is public time; time which is objectively . . . identifiable, by everyone. For Euraustralians, world-historical time is that of History, a legacy of human epochs which recedes indefinitely into the "past". But History is also interpreted in terms of a "future" potentiality for mankind as a species, and it is the expressed concern of contemporary Western social philosophers and/or ideologues to shape that future. Aboriginals have no "past" and no "future" in this sense. They have no recorded History, nor do they have any notion of there having been preceding societies. (163)

This passage is useful in spite of the fact that it exposes some of the perennial problems with anthropological writing. The convention of using the present tense renders the Aboriginal community as a static subject, and thus readily available to accurate scientific scrutiny. Complexity and diversity are ignored for the sake of structural clarity, and very often what is observed is a tendency although it is given the status of an absolute. It is useful to be aware of these difficulties

as this study relies on a number of such problematic texts.

Liberman does not intend to suggest that Aboriginals have no history; rather, he claims that they have a different relationship with the past. Because time is rendered as cyclical, the past is recoverable, and there is not the same sense of moving away from a vanishing moment. Spatial metaphors for time are pervasive in our language, and they reflect our preoccupation with time past as time lost. As Mitchell comments, "we experience time in a variety of ways and . . . we consistently use spatial imagery to define these experiences" (274).

The difference between the Aboriginal and the European time schemes is carefully charted in Voss and can be represented by two brief episodes. When Dugald, the Aboriginal guide, is given a letter to deliver to the settlement at Jildra, he cannot identify the script as a gesture of communication, and so destroys the letter, or, in a sense, liberates it and goes off with a passing group of Aborigines. As they walk off we are told that "the present absorbed them utterly" (215). By contrast, right at the start of the novel, when Voss is planning for the trip he reclines on his bed, speculating about the future: "Knowing so much, I shall know everything, he assured himself, and lay down in time, and was asleep" (23). That phrase "lay down in time" means something like "finally lay down" or "lay down eventually", but the idea carries the suggestion that Voss is a temporal being, that every act, even that of lying down, takes place "in time".

Unlike Voss, Frank conceives of his project not as linear and

horizontal, but as a venture into the depths of his own being. Further, as the type of the modern artist, he is willing to submit to foreign metaphysical influences. These factors combine to make him singularly open to Aboriginal spirit beings, and he undergoes a dramatic transformation in which, through dream, he resolves in himself the antagonistic forces of Europe and Aboriginal Australia. The transformation is again represented in terms of the scheme of alchemical redemption, but now this paradigm is complicated by the incorporation of Aboriginal myth.

Frank's metamorphosis is first suggested when, during a storm in the middle of the desert, he is transformed into a 'green man'. As he rides through the rain to take a message from Voss to Angus and Turner, he is tinged with a green light as the lightning flashes across the plains. For some inexplicable reason this journey assumes tremendous significance for him and, as he rides, he submits to the rain, embracing it as a kind of baptism. "At once his matted hair began to stream out, and as the wind encircled the pale upper half of his forehead, he seemed to be relieved of some of the responsibility of human personality" (244). He becomes "immersed in the mystery of it", and begins to dissolve:

> he was dissolved, he was running into crannies, and sucked into the mouths of the earth, and disputed, and distributed, but again and again, for some purpose, was made one by the strength of a will not his own. (245).

The breakdown of the unredeemed Frank is preliminary to his

reintegration; as has already been noted, it is clear from the Rosarium that green is the colour linked with the final stage of the opus. The body takes on a greenness prior to its transformation into the philosopher's stone or the sanctified gold. Frank, who is now described as "the green horseman" (245), conceives a poem which is laden with the language of alchemy and androgyny. He envisages the union of Sun and Moon, fire and ice, the traditional antagonistic poles, the Yin and the Yang.

After the season of rain sets in, the men all begin to suffer from fevers and chills, but Frank, who is described as having "begun the soonest" (263), is the worst afflicted. White here invokes a familiar literary convention, one which recurs in a number of the later novels, most particularly in Riders in the Chariot, through the figure of the artist, Alf Dubbo. (See Chapter Two for a fuller treatment of this.) In literature, as indeed in life, illness is often associated with visionary experience as the sufferer's defences are weakened and the conscious and the unconscious realms have an increased intercourse. Frank, in his state of increased awareness, begins to suspect that he is undergoing a transformation, that the lapis is materialising within his own body:

> He was soon mumbling of . . . some great treasure, great chunks of smouldering ore, that would tear his hands as he tried to fetch it out of his chest, and which he must not lose at any cost. (263)

He begins to take on the appearance of a hairy lily. There is an echo

here of the lily which Palfreyman and Voss had examined, which was bisexual in appearance (182). As the work of transmutation takes place in Le Mesurier there is an implicit reminder that the work of alchemy incorporates opposites into a single essence. The group is surprised at the tender attention which Voss gives to Frank, and, observing the close communion between them, the others are forced to ask themselves "why the supreme power should be divided in two" (264). The suggestion is not so much that Frank and Voss are the two halves of a single godhead, but rather that these contrary figures are a conjoined part of a single transcendental force. In a statement once again reminiscent of phenomenology, we find that a change in the perspective of the observing subject allows what were previously conflicting poles to appear as part of the same whole: "To kiss and to kill are similar words to eyes that focus with difficulty" (264). The insight is facilitated by the exchange between the conscious and unconscious realms.

In an attempt to ward off the penetrating rain, the party moves on, and takes refuge in the caves. The ceiling and inner walls of the caves are criss-crossed with Aboriginal paintings, images which challenge and provoke the foreigners. There are skeleton drawings, which Jackie, the young Aboriginal man, explains as depictions of the dead as transformed into spirits. There is a powerfully phallic kangaroo, which Voss is repelled by, and there is a depiction of a snake, which Jackie explains is "Father my father, all blackfeller" (269). Surrounded by these tokens of an unknown culture, Frank falls into a fitful sleep and dreams of "the great snake, his King" (276).

In Frank's vision, the snake is described as able to "arch itself like a rainbow out of the mud of tribulation" (276). It is quite evident that the snake which is painted on the ceiling of the cave is the Rainbow Serpent, possibly the most significant figure in the Aboriginal pantheon. Known variously as "the great Mother" and "the Father of us all", or simply the "Great Snake", the Rainbow Serpent has existed since the beginning of the world and is associated with creation and procreation.

A great deal of attention has been given to the study of the Rainbow Serpent in recent years because there are suggestions that this mythological figure is bisexual and thus represents an impulse towards a philosophic resolution of opposites. Snakes are linked with water, both the subterranean waters and rain, and thus the Great Snake has affinities with both the heavens and the earth. As bringer of rain, it is the giver of life; however as the bringer of floods, it is also the Destroyer. Further, the serpent, because of its phallic appearance, is associated with male rites, yet there is also a suggestion that it has a womb and Roheim has suggested that the snake, as devourer, prompts anxieties and fantasies "connected with [the] vagina" (196). Eliade comments:

> We have here a characteristic religious phenomonen: a Supreme Being becomes a "totality" by integrating a series of polar and even contradictory attributes and activities. Such a process is encouraged and facilitated by the fundamental religious dialectics of the *coincidentia oppositorum*. (*Australian Religions* 113)

In a recent collection of anthropological papers titled simply The Rainbow Serpent, Kenneth Maddock suggests that a study which examined the figure of the Rainbow Serpent as an emblem of the union of opposites would indeed be a fruitful one (Buchler 14-18). In fact, in a review of the collection, Erich Kolig posits that "the image of the Rainbow Serpent mainly spins out no more nor no less than the eternal Shiva-Vishnu constellation, couched in the Aboriginal idiom of thought" (316). For the purposes of this study, there is evidence of an even more striking association. In the alchemical scripts, one of the personifications of the hermaphroditic mercury is the Spirit Mercurius. This Mercurius is frequently figured as a dragon or a serpent. The description in the Aurelia occulta bears a strong resemblance to the Rainbow Serpent of Aboriginal mythology, and the implication is thus that both are manifestations of a similar philosophic impulse:

> I am the old dragon, found everywhere on the globe of the earth, father and mother, young and old, very strong and very weak, death and resurrection, visible and invisible, hard and soft; I descend into the earth and ascend to the heavens, I am the highest and the lowest, the lightest and the heaviest . . . I am dark and light; I come forth from heaven and earth; . . . by virtue of the sun's rays all colours shine in me, and all metals. (qtd. in Jung, CW 13: 218)

This, then, is the rich complex of ideas which is behind Frank Le Mesurier's dream. As a visionary and an artist he is afforded special status by White: Le Mesurier represents the possibility of a reconciliation between European and Aboriginal cultures. The great work

which Frank produces as a consequence of his dream in fact materialises within his own flesh, and is a variant of the lapis sought by the alchemists. It is described as "some treasure, great chunks of smouldering ore, that would tear his hands as he tried to fetch it out of his chest" (263). Even this drama, so strongly associated with the alchemical paradigm in the novel, has resonances of Aboriginal practice. Future medicine men of the community traditionally underwent a period of ritual preparation, during which time quartz crystals and other precious or magical substances were inserted into wounds in the body. The powers of the medicine men were mediated through these crystals. For a great many communities, the Rainbow Serpent was intrinsic to this ritual, as he vomited up the crystals which the medicine men recovered from the end of the rainbow. In Frank's dream, the Serpent does in fact transmit the precious stones to the poet:

> At one point during his struggles, the sick man, or visionary, kissed the slime of the beast's mouth, and at once spat out a shower of diamonds. (276)

The merging and resolution that is taking place within Frank is echoed by the cosmos. In a passage with clearly metaphysical overtones, fire and water clash in a fight for dominance. Appropriately, this conflict leads not to a conquest but an integration:

> In the struggle that followed, the hissing and dowsing, the sun was spinning, swimming, sinking, drowned, its livid face a globe of water, for the rain had been brought down again, and there

> was, it appeared, but a single element. (277)

It is thus through the artist that the reconciliation is made possible.

In Le Mesurier White has reinvigorated the figure of the poet as mystic and adventurer. Here the author seems to draw on the character and experience of Rimbaud, the symbolist poet who was both alchemical philosopher and gun-runner. Further, it is evident from the epigraph to The Vivisector that White has a reasonable familiarity with Rimbaud's work, and thus some aspects of the poet's writings and philosophy are worth noting.

Rimbaud wrote prodigiously as a young man, and determined very early that he would originate a new aesthetic. This aesthetic focused on the psychic and spiritual evolution of the poet; the poetry which emerged would be a reflection of the poet's confrontation with the self, as is evident from a letter which Rimbaud wrote to Paul Demeny in 1871:

> The poet makes himself a seer by a long, gigantic and rational derangement of the senses. All forms of love, suffering and madness. He searches himself. He exhausts all poisons in himself and keeps only their quintessences. Unspeakable torture where he needs all his faith, all his superhuman strength, where he becomes among all men the great patient, the great criminal, the one accursed - and the supreme Scholar! - Because he reaches the unknown!
> (Rimbaud 307)

Describing the poet as "the thief of fire", Rimbaud likens the poet's work to the crime of Prometheus. It is interesting that Le Mesurier, too, uses a phrase reminiscent of Prometheus, although ironically so.

In punishment for having stolen fire, Prometheus was chained to the rock, where vultures tore at his liver. Frank, in his poem Conclusion, notes that the "spears of failure are eating my liver" (292), casting himself as an unheroic Prometheus.

Rimbaud's most noteworthy literary achievement is his use of the prose-poem, the form which White gives to Le Mesurier's writings. One fifth of Rimbaud's powerful work Illuminations is grouped together under the title Childhood, and there is a marked similarity of mood between this poem and that of the fictional poet. Both writers, in describing childhood, depict it as a season of horrors, using a combination of natural imagery and imagery charged with violence. Dr Enid Starkie has demonstrated the way in which Rimbaud sought to reconcile Christian dogma with alchemical teaching and this same philosophical conjunction is evident in Frank's utterances. On the one hand, in Childhood he celebrates the Man-God, Christ, yet it is also Frank who teaches Voss that in "the process of burning it is the black that gives up the gold" (356). During his so-called 'mystical period' Rimbaud had equated the process of writing with the alchemical redemption. The philosopher Zaehner notes:

> The function of the poet who, for Rimbaud, is identical with the seer . . . is to discover himself, the real self dormant below the busy ego. This is the classic doctrine of alchemy, the search of the lapis . . . . (63)

Appropriately, Rimbaud's alchemy is an alchemy of sound. His alchemical procedure is explained in two of his poems, the sonnet "Voyelles"

("Vowels") and a longer piece, "Alchimie du Verbe" ("Alchemy of the Word"). In these works, Rimbaud ascribes various colours to the different vowels: "I invented the colour of the vowels! A black, E white, I red, O blue, U green" (Rimbaud 193). The Renaissance alchemists had ascribed various spiritual states to these different colours, so that in effect what Rimbaud did was to construct a language of states, in order that his writing might produce the desired lapis. Of course, he could not use this as a strict scheme or programme for his work; it is rather a mystical speculation about the relationship between sound, symbol and meaning.

Rimbaud's "Alchemy of the Word" is a segment from his passionate work "Une Saison En Enfer" ("A Season in Hell") in which there are passages of savage rage, as well as appeals to the sublime for salvation. Rimbaud casts himself as a rebel with the great rebels, Lucifer, Faust, the Byronic hero. This "season in hell" has its analogue in the alchemical procedure, where, before the redeemed essence can be produced, the elements must be burned and rendered down. As the elements have their equivalents in the spirit and the psyche, this melting process is associated with tremendous suffering, it is the 'black night of the soul'. White's fictional artist, Le Mesurier, is similarly familiar with the language of alchemy: he outlines it in conversation with Voss and Harry. More significantly, he actually undergoes the alchemical transformation in his own body.

IV: Mercy, the Gift of Reconciliation

Le Mesurier's renewal is made possible through the landscape of dream. In the hermetic world of the artist, dream is the sacred realm of inspiration which gives rise to the mystical art object. More importantly, it is the realm in which European and Aboriginal systems meet and blend. In the novel, the tangible expression of the procreative potential of dream is found in the birth of Mercy, 'dreamchild' of Voss and Laura. In order fully to understand the significance of dream material in the novel it is useful to examine the special status afforded dreams in Australian Aboriginal culture.

Aboriginal mythology has allowed for the existence of two separate but synchronous time schemes. On the one hand, there is the profane realm, that of every-day life. Distinct from this is the sacred, in which all significant action takes place: this sacred sphere is designated 'the Dreaming' or 'Dreamtime'. Not all dreams are potent mysteries; there are those which are the product of the individual's needs and fears. Yet there are those dreams which have tremendous significance, and give the dreamer access to the sacred and the mythic. Demonstrating the significance of such dreams, Eliade notes:

> The abolition of profane time and the individual's projection into mythical time do not occur, of course, except at essential periods - those that is, when the individual is truly himself: on the occasion of rituals or of important acts . . . . (Cosmos 39)

Any action or episode which takes place in such a dream is a part of truth, more real than any event which occurs in the material world. The

communication which takes place between Voss and Laura is thus not simply some kind of parapsychological understanding; it is a true communion in sacred time.

As it is in this realm of mystery that all significant action takes place, then there is some explanation for one of the most striking mysteries in the novel, the birth of Mercy. Although ostensibly the child of Rose Portion and Jack Slipper, she is shown to be in truth the offspring of the spiritual union between Laura and Voss. Generation, according to traditional Aboriginal mythology, takes place in the Dreamtime and consequently Voss and Laura can bring forth a child without a physical consummation and conception. Further, anthropological researchers have demonstrated that most Aboriginal groups traditionally did not recognise the association between sexual union and reproduction. Malinowski comments:

> Roughly speaking it may be said that these totemic beliefs and theories of conception prevent the aboriginal mind from forming the idea of physiological paternity and even probably weaken the social importance of maternity. For the only cause of pregnancy is that a "spirit-child" entered the body of a woman . . . . They have no idea of procreation as being directly associated with sexual intercourse, and firmly believe that children can be born without this taking place. (209)

Malinowski, following anthropological method, uses the historic present tense and a universalising turn of phrase, in spite of the fact that while he himself was writing much of the Australian Aboriginal community

was already urbanised and recipient of the dubious benefits of Christian education. Nonetheless this statement is important for our purposes here because Malinowski is in fact discussing traditional Aboriginal belief structures such as would have predominated in the mid-nineteenth century. Thus there is something akin to a sense of recognition when the reader of Voss discovers that, according to Aboriginal teaching, the spirits of unborn children were said to pre-exist in the atmosphere, or in the vegetation and stones. The parents that these spirits selected were simply vessels through whom they chose to materialise. White seems to be alluding to this when he has Voss comment on the arbitrary relationship between parent and child:

> Do you not think that such arrangements of birth are incidental, even if in the beginning we try to persuade ourselves it is otherwise, and are grateful for the warmth, because still weak and bewildered? We have not yet learnt to admit that destiny works independently of the womb. (107)

It is in light of this information that the birth of Mercy assumes an added significance.

White demonstrates with considerable care that the dream union of Voss and Laura has borne fruit. This is achieved primarily at the level of inference in the novel. Before we are made aware that the child which Rose is carrying will be Laura's, White introduces a number of phrases and episodes which, while each is innocent within its context, resonate with significance when considered as a whole. For example, when Laura is devising plans for Rose's confinement, she is described as

"quite pregnant with some idea waiting to be born" (218), and a little later Laura is qualified by the phrase "in her condition" (222). Laura's surrogate role is prepared for through a repeated identification of Rose and herself: they share a new-found empathy, suggested in part by the image of their shadows merging on the side-walk. This marks a dramatic shift in Laura's sensibility. Prior to this she has been squeamish about physical contact with the working class: "It is the bodies of these servants, she told herself in some hopelessness and disgust" (48), and she suspects that she may be a "prig" (49).[3] White also establishes an association between Slipper, Rose's sometime lover, and Voss. This is suggested with considerable subtlety. When we first meet Slipper, he is described as something of a harlequin, "all stains, and patches of shade, and spots of sunlight" (48). Voss is himself described as "particoloured" (438).[4] In Laura's unconscious Slipper and Voss are linked with one another from the start. While at the Pringle's picnic, Laura's attention is arrested by the sight of Voss:

> It was impossible not to see the German where he was standing in the grey scrub, his dry lips the moister for butter, fuller in that light. The light was tangling with his coarse beard. (66)

But then an extraordinary thing happens. Laura hears the voice of Jack Slipper, sensual, insinuating:

> Ah, miss, said Jack Slipper, you have come out for a breather, well, the breeze has got up, can you hear it in the leaves? . . . There was a hot, black smell of rotting. (67)

Yet we know that Slipper has at some time in the past been dismissed from the services of the Bonner family. It is Laura who conjures up Jack Slipper, while gazing at Voss's now moist, now fuller mouth. It is not so extraordinary, then, that Slipper's impregnation of Rose can stand for, or anticipate, Voss's union with Laura.

As is evident from Jung, the process of gestation and birth is, in hermetic philosophy, seen as analagous to the alchemical procedure, and the birth of Mercy is thus patterned against the metallurgical redemption. White's choice of the name Mercy is obviously not arbitrary: the child is, in part, a manifestation of the transformation which Voss has undergone, and the alchemical paradigm is particularly apposite for it can suggest the 'forging' of a new identity which is a resolution to the conflict between the antagonistic principles of aggression and submission, intellect and passion, good and evil. Further, Mercy's birth has been facilitated through the intervention of Aboriginal Dream; she is the equivalent of the lapis which is generated within Frank's body, and thus represents the possibility of the emergence of a composite being who is at once European and Australian and hence a resolution to the schizoid nature of the colonial experience.

CHAPTER TWO: Riders in the Chariot

This chapter has a dual focus. In it, I shall explore the mystical philosophies which provide the symbolic system for Riders in the Chariot. My purpose has an additional dimension, for I hope also to demonstrate the way in which White reconciles a passionate concern over metaphysical issues with a precise scrutiny of major determinants in contemporary history.

Riders in the Chariot opens with an epigraph from Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell", which contains these lines:

> I then asked Ezekiel why he eat dung, & lay
> so long on his right & left side? he answer'd
> 'the desire of raising other men into a
> perception of the infinite: this the North
> American tribes practise . . . .' (i)

Chapman, in an essay on Riders in the Chariot, comments that White hereby places himself in a line of inheritance which is made up of "the biblical prophets and of secular visionaries like Blake" (186). Chapman identifies a line of spiritual descent which is linear, reaching from Judeo-Christian origins through to Western Romanticism. However, the epigraph from Blake in fact warns us against such a Eurocentric bias. Blake, and White with him, seeks to demonstrate that there is a continuity between the mysticism of the Native American who lies on his side eating dung, and the mysticism of the Western tradition. Further, White integrates similar repressed strands of mystical writing in his own work in order to make the correspondences apparent.

Riders in the Chariot revolves around four protagonists. Each is a visionary, and each has access to vision via a different gate. In defiance of the quaternal structure of the novel, I have chosen to focus my discussion on only three of the central characters. The first of these is Mary Hare, a nature-mystic; the second is Himmelfarb, an esoteric Jew; and the third is Alf Dubbo, an artist. The fourth, Mrs Godbold, functions as representative of a fundamentalist, evangelical tradition. Her honesty, labour and simplicity save her; however these laudable attributes render her less interesting and complete as a fictional being. White does give Mrs Godbold an interesting biography, and uses her to make some useful observations about domestic service in Australia, and the obstacles to social mobility for a woman of her class. Nonetheless, Mrs Godbold is so much an undisputed centre of goodness, that her characterisation does not encourage much exposition.

Much of the critical evaluation of Patrick White's novels has celebrated the fact that they deal with "mythic" material, that they wrestle with "eternal issues". If this were, simply, the case, it might seem difficult to defend White against the argument that he neglected history. This is in fact the charge made by Roderick in his response to Riders in the Chariot when it first appeared. Roderick's essay is useful because it provides a wealth of material that demonstrates the philosophic influences on the novel, however his ultimate assessment is that the issue under debate in the novel is based upon a philosophic oddity (Kabbalism) which is no longer of any interest. It is, he argues, "as dead as the dodo" (73) because it is based on theosophic

rather than humanistic principles. The assessment is wholly inadequate, because in Riders in the Chariot White is concerned not so much with exploring or justifying the niceties of Kabbalistic doctrine, but, rather, with investigating an issue which has always been central to Jewish mystical thought: how does one focus on spiritual growth without neglecting social responsibility? Oriental and Occidental religions have all been forced to adopt some position on the continuum which ranges from spiritual abstraction to political action. The problem was one over which White himself fretted: Yet how is it possible for any but a superficial artist to live and work inside a vacuum?" (226). This question has driven him, in recent years, into reluctant forays in the political arena.

Riders in the Chariot is a troubling novel; in Kiernan's assessment, it is White's most controversial (65). Kiernan attributes this largely to the novel's stylistic and formal peculiarities. However, it is a troubling novel also because White uses it to explore one of the most troubling eras in modern history: the central drama of the novel revolves around Himmelfarb, a Holocaust survivor. Finally it is a troubling novel because it uses history to demonstrate that metaphysical issues have a physical dimension, that the war waged between good and evil does not take place exclusively in the blue realms of eternity, but on the chilly fields of human conflict. In spite of the strong mythical quality of the writing, and the elaborate symbolic systems employed by White, the myths are transformed until they reflect on specific historical episodes and circumstances and evil is

demonstrated to have a material existence.

Himmelfarb's sense of guilt, and his desire for expiation, are not merely gestures towards a spiritual quest. One cannot overlook the fact that he holds himself responsible, rightly or wrongly, for the murder of his wife. Roderick's criticism thus does not meet the case when he enjoins us to "bear in mind that the weight of physical force that crushed the Government that destroyed millions of Himmelfarbs was not moved by supernatural justification, but by humanism" (73). It is worth remembering that two of White's novels (Voss and A Fringe of Leaves) were actually written in response to specific historical accounts, and that central to this thesis is the claim that part of White's purpose is to recuperate history for those denied a voice by orthodoxy.

I: Natural Magic

It is clear from White's own comments on the social role of the artist, that he feels that history inevitably intrudes upon the individual consciousness. He is therefore careful, within the opening pages, to place Riders in the Chariot historically. Mary Hare, the focus of the first "movement" of the novel, lives in semi-seclusion in the anachronistic folly built by her father. Her world is a kind of Edenic wilderness, yet ironically this idyll is in fact dependant on the collaboration of the external, profane world for Miss Hare is subsidised in her isolation by regular payments from a distant cousin. Cousin Eustace is an inhabitant of the island of Jersey, and the German occupation of the island causes some doubt as to both his survival and

his ability to sustain his financial support of Miss Hare.

> "I thought *you* knew. I had been receiving the allowance so many years. Till suddenly, the island of Jersey was overrun. Like that."
>
> Miss Hare did, in fact, spill the remaining post office ink, but Mrs Sugden appeared not to care.
>
> "By Germans?"
>
> "Who else?" replied Miss Hare, not without contempt. "Like darkness." (11)

Thus while Xanadu is remote and self-contained, White demonstrates that it cannot stand outside of the vicissitudes of history. Despite her attempts at seclusion, this is but the first of a cycle of episodes which will force Mary Hare to acknowledge that Xanadu cannot fortify itself against the larger context.

Paradise is an imaginative construct, and thus depends for its veracity on the collusion of those within and without it. It is a perilously frail vision, and its sanctity can be violated by the iconoclastic imagination. Curiously, Eden is therefore always on the brink of being stormed. This is a factor which preys upon the mind of many Christian poets. Milton, who provides us with the classic study of the subject, himself seemed fascinated at the ease with which Eden could be penetrated.

> Now to th'ascent of that steep, savage hill
> Satan had journeyed on, pensive and slow;
> But further was found none, so thick entwined,
> As one continued brake, the undergrowth
> Of shrubs and tangling bushes had perplexed
> All path of man or beast that passed that way.

> One gate there only was, and that looked east
> On th'other side; which when th'Arch-Felon saw,
> Due entrance he disdained, and in contempt
> At one slight bound high overleaped all bound
> Of hill or highest wall, and sheer within
> Lights on his feet.
> (Paradise Lost, Book 1V, ll. 172-183)

It is thus not surprising that the fragile paradise which Mary Hare inhabits is subject to invasion. She hires a Mrs Jolley as housekeeper, but the woman turns out to be a vicious and malignant creature, who torments her charge and dominates the household. Miss Hare is forced into self-consciousness for the first time. Previously, not even the outbreak of the war had threatened her as directly:

> But she did sense some danger to the incorporeal, the more significant part of her. Time and isolation had rendered this, she had felt until now, practically indestructible. Even history, wars had not coerced her inner being. . . . Newspapers she never read; living, not reading about it, had been her life. So the world had revolved on the axis with which she had provided it, until Mrs Jolley brought the virtues to Xanadu. (66)

Miss Hare is dominated by her housekeeper, because not adequately equipped to deal with such manifest deception and manipulation. A significant failure at social relations, Mary Hare has retreated into mystical isolation, communing only with nature. Her consequent innocence is a rebuke to those few individuals who do have contact with her. For example, there is frequently a combination of resentment and

wonder in her father's attitude towards her. His ambivalence is evident in the weary meditations which follow his botched attempt at suicide.

> "All human beings are decadent," he said. "The moment we are born, we start to degenerate. Only the unborn soul is whole, pure."
>
> As she had turned away from him, and stood picking at some flaw in the lid of the little desk, he had to torment her. He said:
>
> "Tell me, Mary, do you consider yourself one of the unborn?"
>
> "I don't understand such things," she replied. "Not yet."
>
> And looked round at him.
>
> "Liar!" (39)

Here, Norbert Hare is on the one hand subscribing to the notion of Original Sin, and suggesting that all humanity is born into corruption. However, this passage also has less orthodox overtones, for it carries the suggestion that the foetal stage is an Edenic one, that birth is coincident with the fall. There is thus a phase between conception and materialisation that can accurately be described as 'ideal' in the fullest sense of the word. The created world is a debased one; perfection exists only in the realm of the imagined. Many mystical thinkers during the Renaissance had in fact adopted a similar thesis. If the known world was an emanation from a first principle, or _Mysterium Magnum_, then the act of creation was a divisive act, which called entities into being as discrete, separate, nameable units. The creation was thus the rupture of the primal unity; as explained by Paracelsus, "the creation of the whole of nature is the fall of nature, and the

curse which followed an account of it" (Abrams 159).

There are, in the early pages of Riders, a handful of suggestions that, indeed, Mary Hare lives in a condition of peculiar grace, as one of the unborn. Her father describes her as "Ugly as a foetus. Ripped out too soon" (61). Again, there are clearly overtones of the pre-natal amniotic experience of the foetus in the following description of her early years:

> Unattached, she drifted through the pale waters of her mother's kindness like a little, wondering, transparent fish, in search of those depths which her instinct told her could exist. (23)

Excluded from society, Mary communes ever more deeply with nature. At first, this is registered as no more than the normal response of a lonely child.

> She remained altogether without companions, because it never occurred to anybody that she was in need of them, and she did fairly well without: with sticks, pebbles, skeleton leaves, birds, insects, the hollows of trees, and the cellars and attics of Xanadu. (24)

However, instead of shedding this behaviour as she matures, she becomes increasingly absorbed by nature. Still blessed by the pre-lapsarian sense of holistic unity, she feels herself to be integrated with her environment.

Mary Hare is not a philosopher: she cannot articulate her faith. Furthermore, certain of her beliefs are conflicting, and are not easily

reconciled. This is pointed out by her when she attempts to defend her nature-mysticism:

> "But the earth is wonderful. It is all we have. It has brought me back when, otherwise, I should have died."
> The Jew could not hide a look of kindly cunning.
> "And at the end? When the earth can no longer raise you up?"
> "I shall sink into it,' she said, 'and the grass will grow out of me."
> But she sounded sadder than she should have.
> "And the Chariot," he asked, "that you wished to discuss at one stage? Will you not admit the possibility of redemption?"
> "Oh, words, words!" she cried, brushing them off with her freckled hands. "I do not understand what they mean."
> "But the Chariot," she conceded, "does exist. I have seen it." (172-173)

In spite of Miss Hare's belief in the redemptive aspects of nature, she is no pantheist. Rather, for her Nature reflects the glory of the Creator; through Nature one can see, as in a mirror, the face of God which, to protect the mortal viewer, is hidden behind the 'Cloud of Unknowing.' [1]

> 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 with the bee into the divine Mouth. (67)

This brief but dense passage contains many potential nodes for

philosophic explication, and thus foregrounds White's familiarity with the language of mysticism. There is the idea that Nature provides an opportunity for spiritual renewal, and that the signature of the original artist can be seen in the created world. Further, there is the image of Mary Hare who, in rapture, falls with the bee into the mouth of the flower, to suck at the heavenly nectar. This evocative description is compounded in meaning when the reader discovers that a similar trope is used to describe the obedient ecstasy of the Jewish women that Himmelfarb remembers from his childhood:

> The women clung together like a ball of brown bees, driven by the instinct in their faith, intoxicated with the honey of their God. (112)

In The Song of Solomon, there is mention of the fact that the Bridegroom is as honey to the bride (4:11). Throughout centuries of biblical exegesis, this has been seen as a metaphor for God's relationship with his children, and White takes it for granted that the allusion will be recognised. Implicit in the two allied images cited above is the suggestion that the Bridegroom can be approached through various means, and that he is constant and consistent in his blessing.

Mary Hare's talent for communing with and through nature is evidenced by her ability to speak the 'language of the birds' (see 18, 28). It is important that we appreciate just what White is prompting us to consider here, for Miss Hare's talent is more than an index of her empathy for the natural world; it is also a clue to her philosophical ancestors. In examining the "magical thread" which links those who do

speak the language of the birds, it is necessary to focus on the European tradition, for this is Mary's heritage. It is worth briefly noting, however, that in a number of cultures the ability of an individual to commune with animals and birds is interpreted as a sign of blessing and metaphysical privilege. It is often associated with a sense of spiritual awareness and visionary talent. Eliade, for example, discusses the prevalence of this "speaking in animal tongues" amongst shamans in traditional societies. Eliade also discusses the belief in a primordial time during which men and women could talk readily to animals and birds. This idyllic condition was sacrificed during some kind of cataclysmic Fall (Myths 57-71).[2]

During the European Renaissance, there was a resurgence of interest in and exposition on the language of birds. Two of the influential texts in this era were John French's English translation of Agrippa's *de occulta philosophia*, and a Latin translation of Philostratus' *Life of Appolonius*. Philostratus confirms the view that Arabians had access to natural languages:

> also it is yet common to the *Arabians*
> to hearken to the Voice of Birds, as
> foretelling whatsoever Oracles can. This
> converse with irrationall creatures they
> gain by eating (some say) the Heart,
> (others say) the Liver of Dragons. (qtd. in Ormsby-Lennon 2)

Boehme, in his description of Adam, notes that he

> stood in the *Divine* Image and not in the
> *beastiall*, for he knew the property of
> all creatures, and *gave Names to all creatures*

> from their essence, forme and property; He understood the Language of nature . . . . (86)

This idea, of Adam's capacity to name the animals, gave rise to the proposition that Adam could 'name' in a metaphysical sense, that he could communicate with animals and birds. The ability to converse with animals is thus an attribute of pre-lapsarian human splendour. Edward Bourne, the alchemist, in conversation with the Quaker George Fox, learned of this with some interest:

> In our discourse together on the Rode before our parting, Hee speak of the Glory of the first body, and of Egiptian Learning. & of the Language of the birds, & of wt was Wonderfull to mee to heare. (qtd. in Penney 278)

In metaphysical speculations such as these, the tower of Babel becomes symbolic evidence that human degeneration is manifested at a linguistic level. As Ormsby-Lennon notes,

> If the sons of Nimrod could repossess the language of nature, they would understand the language of the birds; indeed if they understood the language of the birds they would regain "the Glory of the first body" and achieve an Adamic insight into "the Sensuall Language of the whole Creation." (3)

Thus, the repossession of a pre-lapsarian state of grace is seen to give rise not only to an understanding of the language of the birds but, further, to an understanding of all of the created world. Nature becomes the text wherein the redeemed might read of the beauty and

lovingkindness of the Redeemer.

This tradition persists as a major subversive literary influence into the late seventeenth century. Marvell, for example, in "Upon Appleton House", depicts something of the initiate's ability to commune with nature when the lyric speaker takes sanctuary in the wood.

> Already I begin to call
> In their most learn'd original:
> And where I language want, my signs
> The bird upon the bough divines;
> And more attentive there doth sit
> Than if she were with lime-twigs knit.
> No leaf does tremble in the wind
> Which I, returning, cannot find.
>
> Out of the scattered sibyl's leaves
> Strange prophecies my fancy weaves:
> And in one history consumes,
> Like Mexique paintings, all the plumes.
> What Rome, Greece, Palestine, ere said
> I in this light mosaic read.
> Thrice happy he who, not mistook,
> Hath read in Nature's mystic book.

Marvell describes the patterns created by the fallen leaves as a "mosaic". There is an ambiguity about this term. On the one hand, "mosaic" is used as a noun to signify a design made up of myriad fragmented parts. Further, it can function as an adjective, and has come to mean "that which pertains to Moses". It is most frequently used when qualifying the Ten Commandments as the "Mosaic Law". Thus, as Marvell indicates in the final two lines quoted from the poem, Nature itself can be read as a text that provides instruction and revelation.

This, then, is the background for White's allusion to "the language of the birds". A close analysis of Mary Hare's habits of communication will demonstrate that in fact she foregoes normal linguistic discourse in favour of a system of natural correspondences.

> Mary Hare was fascinated by Mr Cleugh's story, not so much by the narrative as how it issued out of his face. She put it together in piles of dead leaves, but neatly, and matched, like bank-notes. (29)

It is evident here that, for Mary Hare, the signifier dominates over the signified. The elements of the narrative are valued for their concrete existence, rather than referentiality. Language is, in this instance, being esteemed as a system of signs which have their own essential value. (White's own inclination to renounce formal linguistic correspondences is evident here, and also in Voss, when Dugald, confronting written language for the first time, characterises it as a picture of fern-roots (215).) For this reason, language loses its ability to reconcile individuals; rather, it becomes an obstacle to communication.

> She wondered whether Mr Cleugh realized how dead his own words were, and if he was suffering for it. There were, after all, many things he and she had in common, if they could first overcome the strangeness of their separate existences, and crack the codes of human intercourse. (29)

The perfect communion with all manifest nature is, as already suggested,

the privilege of pre-lapsarian humanity. Appropriately, it is something that is obtained by Himmelfarb, the Jewish scholar, in the last days of his life.

> Children and chairs conversed with him intimately. Thanks to the texture of their skin, the language of animals was no longer a mystery, as, of course, the Baal Shem had always insisted. (485)

Mordecai Himmelfarb and Mary Hare meet beneath the spreading canopy of the plum tree in the garden of Xanadu. They exchange tentative but frank observations, and this emboldens Himmelfarb to talk about himself, rather as if he had been waiting all his life for just such a rapport. It is through Himmelfarb's narrative that White introduces the reader to the world of the Hasidic Jew.

II: The Zaddik

Patrick White, in Flaws in the Glass, has stated explicitly that he had done some research into the Hasidic mysteries before writing Riders in the Chariot (140). In Hasidic teaching, the Baal Shem is the "Master of the Holy Name": this title characterises those Hasidic mystics who received potency and transcendence by meditating on the Names of God. There has been some confusion as to the power and purposes of the Baal Shem, and his mystical function was often treated with suspicion by the nineteenth century Judaic scholars who were attempting to bring Judaism

into line with the rationalism that was dominating the era. Heinrich Graetz, in his History of the Jews, characterises the Baal Shem as a "wonder-worker" who could "see into the future" and "perform miracles" (qtd. in Dresner 16).

Himmelfarb is one of these zaddikim, or 'just men', a follower of the Baal Shem. There are a number of indications of this in the novel. He is teasingly referred to as "quite the little zaddik!" by a Galician rabbi (108). There is also an episode when Reha, Himmelfarb's wife, on the eve of the Second World War, asks her husband for some consolation and reassurance. At first Himmelfarb attempts to comfort his wife by telling her that God is in the table before them: this is not a frivolous response, but a serious attempt to convince himself that the universe is ordered after some Divine plan. There is something reminiscent of Mary Hare's simple organicism in Himmelfarb's articulated credo. Yet he himself recognises that this is a far from adequate belief, in the face of history.

> "Oh, Mordecai," she whispered, '"I am afraid. Tables and chairs will not stand up and save us."
> "God will," he answered. "God is in this table."
> She began to cry. (159)

Mordecai realises that he must rely on the true source of his strength, the holy Name, and that he will thereby provide a mantle of protection for his wife.

> "Some have been able to endure the worst tortures by concentrating on the Name," he heard his voice mumble.
> And it sounded merely sententious. For

> he knew that he himself could do nothing for
> the wife he loved. At most, he could cover
> her with his body. (159)

It is the Name that Himmelfarb offers as solace to the aging, ruined woman who dies in the gas chamber.

> "The Name! Remember they cannot take
> the Name! When they have torn off our skins,
> that will clothe. Save. At last!" (205)

Born into the Holunderthal of the 1880's, Himmelfarb's life is coloured, even as a youth, by a sense of leave-taking, as family and friends participate in yet another diaspora. White depicts the migration of the Jews not only as an event, but as a rhythm of life. The normal episodes in community existence are all subordinated to the great exodus which characterises this epoch: "He watched them go, through the wrought-iron grille, from his own, safe, German hall" (107). Those relatives accustomed to material well-being are the more shattered by the crisis:

> the cousins from Moscow and Petersburg,
> no longer quite so rich or so glossy;
> their headachy, emotional wives, clinging
> to the remnants of panache . . . . (107)

However, those whose treasures are laid up in heaven seem to suffer less conspicuously. Migrants on earth always, the specific location of temporal address is unimportant. This is the case, for example, of the cousin who is a Galician rabbi. His habitation at Holunderthal is simply a caesura in a continuous cycle of departure:

> Whatever his destination, he had paused for a moment at the house on the Holzgraben in Holunderthal . . . . (107)

It is he who recognizes something extraordinary in the young Himmelfarb, and jokingly makes reference to the uniqueness of the child: "Well, Mordecai, quite the little zaddik!" (108).

According to Hasidic teaching, there are, in each generation, thirty-six just men: these are the zaddikim. They work, in an almost furtive way, within their society in order to enhance the relationship with God and his children.[3] Himmelfarb in fact later expounds on the zaddikim to Mary Hare, suggesting in a joyous, albeit playful mood, that she is "the hidden zaddik" (173). This is significant for White is making a claim which is, in a sense, anathema to traditional Hebrew thought. First of all, Mary Hare is a female, and, as Scholem comments:

> One final observation should be made on the general character of Kabbalism as distinct from other, non-Jewish, forms of mysticism. Both historically and metaphysically, it is a masculine doctrine, made for men and by men. The long history of Jewish mysticism shows no trace of feminine influence. (Major Trends 37)

White's unorthodox usage deliberately undermines the male cast of Jewish dogma. Further, Mary Hare is herself a gentile. It is true that she has been absorbed, for years, by the potent mystery of Ezekiel's chariot, but for various complex historical and political reasons, Judaism has taught that access to God is not only associated with purity of heart, but also with purity of race. Mordecai is thus overriding the

inherited considerations of gender and of racial privilege. Himmelfarb's expansive attitude is largely a consequence of his philosophic interests and his tolerance, but it also results from his familial circumstances. Moshe Himmelfarb, his father, is described as "a worldly Jew of liberal tastes" (109) who in his declining years renounces his faith, marries a goy and dies adrift from his family and his community. Although there is some criticism of the father's apostasy, the son obviously derives certain benefits from his liberal background.

Himmelfarb, after the customary jolts and joys of adolescence, exacerbated perhaps by his identity as both an intellectual and a Jew, stumbles into an academic career and an honest, rewarding marriage. This period of Himmelfarb's life is depicted as an era in which his spiritual and intellectual resources deepen. There are a number of critical episodes which serve in fact as contributing elements in this "bildungsroman", such as the apostacy and remarriage of his father, and the death of his mother. Obviously, these factors are used to highlight and define Himmelfarb's psychological growth. There are also two key encounters which have a bearing on his spiritual evolution. These are his meeting with the indigo-dyer, Israel, and the purchasing of Jewish mystical texts from Rutkowitz's bookshop. He begins a search, and the spiritual quest is rendered in clearly topographical terms:

> It was, however, the driest, the most
> cerebral approach - when spiritually he
> longed for the ascent into an ecstasy
> so cool and green that his own desert

would drink the heavenly moisture. (152)

The metaphor sustained by this passage reminds the reader of the traditional motif of the children of Israel wandering in the desert, and of Moses' perilous ascent to God upon Mount Sinai. However, White uses this standard image to make the reader conscious of the more specific context of the novel; that Himmelfarb is, even as he tells his story, a refugee upon the vast forbidding continent of Australia, having strayed unwittingly into Miss Hare's Xanadu. There are resonances, also, of the psychic wilderness which Dubbo, the artist-visionary of the novel, uses as his creative terrain. Time and again White uses the immense Australian deserts as the arena for the spiritual exodus of his characters.

Obviously, the exodus has a unique and powerful place in Jewish history and metaphysics. Thus while White uses the idea of the diaspora as a metaphoric equivalent for the state of mind of those engaged in a spiritual quest, he is careful to ensure that the metaphor never becomes bankrupt of its specific historical context.

> Many Germans found themselves, after all, to be Jews. If parents, in the confidence of emancipation, had been able to construe the Galuth as a metaphysical idea, their children, it appeared, would have to accept exile as a hard fact. Some did, early enough. They left for the United States, and fell into a nylon dream . . . . (159)

Himmelfarb himself eventually enters into exile, but in his case, not "early enough". Tarrying too long in Europe, his personal history is

overwhelmed by the history of his people, as he gets caught up in the Holocaust.

White scrupulously demonstrates that the universe of the individual ego cannot exist outside the sphere of political and historical influence. The two orbits collide and influence each other. This is demonstrated by Himmelfarb's unexpected return to Germany, at the brink of World War I. Latterly an Oxford scholar engaged in a torrid affair with "the daughter of a reprobate earl" (127), Himmelfarb had rested in the assurance that the interests of the world at large would never be at odds with his own.

> Although in those days the talk was of war, the Kaiser's unpredictable temper, and the refusal of the French nation to respect German ideals, it seemed most unlikely to the young man that any international situation would ignore the crucial stage of his career. (126)

Shortly after receiving a note of dismissal from his lover, Himmelfarb gets a letter from his father, Moshe Himmelfarb who, in a tone of awkward elation, states that he has renounced his faith and become a Christian. Himmelfarb is deeply stricken by his father's apostacy. Despite his own spiritual barrenness, Mordecai had, characteristically, relied on the continued inviolability of his father's faith. This crisis reflects, in part, the psychological stress of the late adolescent who discovers that a beloved parent is not in fact a timeless repository of all that is good and noble and true.

> If he himself had dried up, there had

> always been the host of others, and
> particularly parents, who remained
> filled with the oil and spices of
> tradition. And now his father's phial
> was broken; all the goodness was run out.
> One corner of memory might never be
> revisited. (129)

There is, in this passage, the blending of temporal and spatial concepts. There is the expectation that others would always remain faithful, that somehow the communal commitment to Judaism would compensate for individual lapses such as his own. Further, the treasured identity of his father as essentially Jewish has been stored in what is described as a "corner of memory".

A similar mix of both the temporal and the spatial is evident in a remarkably dense passage which depicts Himmelfarb's reaction to his father's betrayal. This extract repays close attention, for it marks a significant shift in Himmelfarb's ontology.

> It did seem for the first time that
> his own brilliantly inviolable destiny
> was threatened, by an increased shrivelling
> of the spirit in himself, as well as by
> the actions of those whom he had considered
> almost as statues in a familiar park. Now
> the statues had begun to move. Great fissures
> were beginning to appear, besides, in what he
> had assumed to be the solid mass of history.
> Time was no longer congealed, but flowing. (129)

The statued park within which the child finds sanctuary and an arena for play, has suddenly betrayed itself to be a facade. Arcadia is in fact

peopled. Its apparent timeless tranquillity is an illusion; movement and history force their way in through the "fissures" which have appeared. The classical ideal of repose and meditation is revealed to be, after all, one of the masks of evasion and so Himmelfarb is translated from out of the timelessness of adolescent self-commitment and into history and action.

Years later, when Himmelfarb returns to Holunderthal to take up the Chair of English in his old home town, there are curious resonances of this earlier passage. Where previously the park had been used as an extended metaphor to describe the tranquility and formal order of his child-hood years, the park is now made literal. We discover in fact that the boy's family home borders on a park which is characterised by its formal gardens.

> For, quite apart from the pressure of monumental furniture, the house faced the more formal, or Park side of the _Stadtwald_, with the result that the owners, standing at a first-floor window, looked out over shaven lawns and perfectly distributed gravel, across the beds of tuberous begonias and cockscombs, or down a narrowing _Lindenallee_, lined with discreet discus throwers and modest nymphs, to the deep, bulging, indeterminate masses of the _Wald_ proper. (155)

It would not be remarkable had White first given us a literal context and then used it as a motif or an objective correlative later in the novel; to employ the park first as a metaphor exclusively, and then to

demonstrate that this metaphor was all along located in a specific physical reality, is highly idiosyncratic and characteristic of White's style.

When he removes himself to Oxford, Himmelfarb does, to a certain extent, abdicate from his involvement in historical developments. However, the talk of war which had coincided with his departure to England becomes a reality, and he suddenly finds that he is called upon to commit himself to some kind of action.

> Some of the young man's acquaintances had already packed their bags. They reminded him that war must come and that, as a German, it was his duty to return with them before it was too late, to serve the Fatherland. (129-130)

Described as " s carcely Jew and scarcely German", Himmelfarb prevaricates, but his decision is made for him when he receives a letter from his mother, in which she rebukes herself for her husband's apostasy. The letter galvanises him into action, and he sets off to return to Germany. Here White once again picks up a metaphoric strand which he has employed earlier, in which the self is likened to a "frail craft in which he had embarked alone" (120). This fragile vessel is once more launched upon a voyage of discovery. "Very soon Mordecai found himself adrift on the North Sea. Ostensibly he was returning home" (130). The motif of the individual as a craft is reinforced by the line: "So the sea air wandered in and out of that insubstantial cabin formed by the young man's bones" (130).

White again employs language in an intriguing and characteristic way at this point. He uses a trope which, in current usage, is entirely metaphoric. However, because of its context here, he reasserts the original, literal sense: "The letter did, at least, release her son from the doldrums of indecision" (130). The doldrums referred to here are, obviously, metaphoric, and reflect Himmelfarb's state of emotional inertia. However, because his being has been described as a sailing vessel, the idiom is once again charged with its original meaning. In this way White revitalises the language, and makes the relationship between metaphoric tenor and vehicle more fluid. The effect on the reader is similar to the effect produced in the passages cited above, which use the park first as an objective correlative and then as a physical reality.

Inevitably, Mordecai arrives home too late: his mother is dead and Europe is on the brink of war. The return to Europe does nonetheless precipitate two new movements in his life, the first of which is his marriage to Reha Liebmann. The regular and conscientious faith of his wife's family in turn leads him gently back to God. The steady routine of his new life becomes in itself an act of worship.

> As the coverings of the Ark were changed,
> in accordance with the feasts of the year,
> so his soul would put on different colours.
> He was again furnished with his faith. (139)

As this is the point in the novel at which Himmelfarb begins to redefine his commitment to mystical Judaism, it seems pertinent to consider, here, what thematic and formal characteristics of the novel were

facilitated by the selection of the European Jew as a protagonist. Obviously, it afforded White the opportunity to explore such elements as the Holocaust, cultural dislocation, and the refugee experience, three significant features of twentieth century consciousness. Further, Hasidic and Kabbalistic teaching provide systems which structure the symbolic references in the novel. It has also made it possible for White to embark on a serious examination of the nature of evil, for this is a question which is central to Hasidic and Kabbalistic teaching. As Scholem explains:

> The fact of the existence of evil in the world is the main touchstone of this difference between the philosophic and the Kabbalistic outlook. On the whole, philosophers of Judaism treat the existence of evil as something meaningless in itself. Some of them have shown themselves only too proud of this negation of evil as one of the fundamentals of what they call rational Judaism. Hermann Cohen has said with great clarity and much conviction: "Evil is non-existent. It is nothing but a concept derived from the concept of freedom. A power of evil exists only in myth. . . . " To most Kabbalists, as true seal-bearers of the world of myth, the existence of evil is, at any rate, one of the most pressing problems and one which keeps them continuously occupied with attempts to solve it. They have a strong sense of the reality of evil and the dark horror that is about everything living. (Major Trends 36)

One of the central questions posited by the novel is just this:

what is the nature of evil? Mary Hare articulates confusion early in the novel: "Perhaps somebody will tell me. And show me at the same time how to distinguish with certainty between good and evil" (89). There is the wry suggestion that Utopia is in fact hell, and that Good and Evil are thus unknowable. This is an idea examined in many of White's novels, most notably Voss. Miss Hare exclaims "For all I know, Xanadu, which I still can't help love, is evil itself" (89). There is clearly the suggestion that Miss Hare is attempting to rewrite the Edenic myth when she befriends a serpent, and nurtures it in the garden of Xanadu, her home.

When Mary Hare meets Himmelfarb, she is called upon to discuss and defend her views. Like her, he too is a mystic. However, as a Holocaust survivor his intimate acquaintance with evil in the political and social arenas makes him a little reluctant to embrace Miss Hare's vision. Her holistic, vitalistic views of the universe are inadequate in the face of history. The following brief lines give an indication of her vision.

> Just as I know this tree is good; it cannot be guilty of more than a little bit of wormy fruit. Everything else is imagination. (172)

Here we have another of White's typically crowded clusters of meaning and allusion. On one level, Mary Hare is reasserting her belief in a kind of natural harmony. Yet the tree recalls, inevitably, the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Further, if this tree has sin, as she says, then its only sin is to produce decaying fruit. However, if we look at

the evidence of White's other novels, such as Voss or A Fringe of Leaves, this decay is itself beauty and regeneration, the sin is thus natural and can in fact be no sin. This is a judgement which is not fully tolerated by the concerns explored in Riders in the Chariot.

It is clear that Mary Hare's Edenic home is named Xanadu after the fabulous pleasure dome in Coleridge's "Khubla Khan". For Coleridge, Xanadu, where he sees in vision the 'Abyssinian maid', was the source not only of the Nile, but also of the imagination. As John T. Irwin demonstrates in his fascinating study, American Hieroglyphics, the quest for the source of the Nile was, for writers such as Coleridge, Poe and Hawthorne, analagous to an entry into hierophantic mystery (64-93). The significance of White's frequent use of Abyssinia as a metaphysical space should not be overlooked. There is reference to it in The Aunt's Story, as well as here in Riders; Happy Valley, White's first published novel, derives its title from Johnson's Rasselas, which is set in Abyssinia.

Mary Hare speculates that her Xanadu may be "evil itself" (89). Further, she suggests that in fact evil originates in the imagination (172). This, to a certain extent, is the philosophy underpinning a novel like Voss. However, White seems to express a more complex view of evil in Riders in the Chariot. Himmelfarb reminds us of history. Surely, he suggests, there is culpability for evil, and that history judges and must be judged.

As is frequently the case with Patrick White's writing, the symbol of the tree is not fixed in meaning. Himmelfarb's liberal gentile

friend, Konrad Stauffer, is described as "burning to do something, if not to destroy the whole tree of moral injustice, then, to root out a sucker or two" (167). Thus the tree which we are later required to believe is guiltless, we are here expected to accept as a sign of sin.

Mary Hare, attempting to use organicist metaphors to describe the power of good over evil, comments, "I know that grass grows again after fire" (172). In asserting the continuity of life in spite of destruction, ironically Miss Hare reminds us again of the Holocaust, the ovens. Here White is pointing to one of the major motifs in the novel, the immolation of the faithful. The Fiery Furnace is in fact the subject of one of the paintings by the Aboriginal Australian artist in the novel, Alf Dubbo. Mary Hare herself carries with her a dread of fire because of the gruesome incineration of her pet goat. The passage in which this is described is worth quoting because of its parallels with a later episode.

> Even on the morning of the mistress's severest trial, the abstraction of a goat's mask continued to communicate. Even though the goat itself had become a skull and shred of hide in the ruins of the black and smoking shed.
>
> How she herself survived the holocaust of her discovery, Mary Hare could never be sure. (56-57)

Towards the end of the novel, after Himmelfarb's mock-crucifixion, his shack is torched by his drunken tormentors. Mary Hare, under the illusion that Himmelfarb is still inside the house, enters the flaming building.

> By this time the framework had become
> quite a little temple of fire, with lovely
> dionysiac frieze writhing on its pediment.
> Similarly, all its golden columns danced.
> But Miss Hare, who was involved in the
> inner tragedy, did not notice any of that. (475)

The inferno is explicitly characterised as Dionysiac in quality and White relies on the traditional association of Dionysus and the goat in order to yoke these two thematically related episodes. We are told, at this point, that Miss Hare is "involved in the inner tragedy", and further, that she is protected by "a more rational curtain of flame." These concepts, linked as they are to the mentioning of Dionysus, are reminiscent of Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy. For Nietzsche, we mortals are kept from full knowledge of the horror of life by 'the veil of Maya' or illusion.[4] The veil is that line which separates art from reality; it is, in a metaphoric sense, the curtain across the proscenium arch. It is interesting that in fact White seeks to defamiliarise the furnace as a metaphor, in order to remind us of its real potential for evil. Hell is not simply a metaphysical conceit; it is also the expression, in the world of substances, of the corrupt mind.

Prior to this episode the motif of the veil in the novel has been that veil from Judaic teaching, which divides off the Holy of Holies in the temple. Himmelfarb's house is "quite a little temple of fire" (475); in fact, the temple is Himmelfarb's own body, for Miss Hare, in her hysterical state, has a vision of Himmelfarb, "his ribs burning like the joists of a house" (475). At the same time, then, Himmelfarb is both the sacrifice at the Dionysiac feast, and the temple of the Lord.

The reconciliation of Hellenistic and Judaic elements culminates in the passage which sketches Himmelfarb's dying dream:

> the hills of Zion, spreading their brown pillows in the evening light, had almost opened; the silence of his last and humblest house had promised frequent ladders of escape; as he knelt on the stones, in his blindness, the flames of Friedendorf had offered certain release. But the rope-end of dedication had always driven him on. Even now it was torturing his side, although the goat-mask and hair shawl had slipped, leaving him hanging abandoned on a tree. Again, he was the Man Kadmon, descending from the Tree of Light to take the Bride. (482)

Although this passage is saturated with Hebrew reference, the mention of the goat-mask inevitably recalls the two earlier episodes discussed. Further, the recurrence of allusions to death by fire in these passages suggests that the death of the goat, the deliberate persecution of an old man, and the willful slaughter of millions are all various degrees of orgiastic, dionysiac indulgence.

The claim that this episode is resonant of the Holocaust is reinforced by Kiernan's assessment of Riders in the Chariot. As he notes,

> The grandeur of the conception is apparent in his [White's] attempt to explore imaginatively the nature of evil, by relating the collapse of German civilisation into the barbarism of Nazi genocide to contem-

> porary civilisation in an Australian
> suburb. (66)

In a sense, White is providing a fictional arena in which to demonstrate the verity of Hannah Arendt's vision of the banality of evil.

In spite of the laudatory tone of Kiernan's observation, he nonetheless feels that White fails in his objective.

> But, the wider analogy between the 'evil' of those who prefer plastic to wood, inhabit brick veneer or fibro homes,and go on Sunday drives, and the evil of Nazi genocide seems a confusion of moral with aesthetic values. Wickedly amusing at best, the Sarsaparillian satire does not serve the implied comparison, seeming instead a purely personal and aesthetic revulsion which has replaced serious moral concern. (80)

It seems obvious from this passage that Kiernan is afraid that White has, in Riders, demonstrated himself to be a cultural snob - this is really at the heart of what Kiernan is saying. However, he overlooks the fact that it is just this aesthetic sense which is frequently used as an indicator of moral worth by many of the great novelists, Eliot, James, Austen and Mann to name but a few. Because Riders is essentially an urban novel, White locates the struggle of good and evil on the factory floor instead of the fields of Troy. This is the Age of Chrome, a long way even from the Age of Bronze.

Blue, Mrs Flack's dissolute son, epitomises just what White distrusts in contemporary mercantile Philistine society. There is in

the novel a real sense of dread at the rise of an anti-intellectualism and an aesthetic bankruptcy.

> For just then the door opened, and no bones about it, there stood a young fellow. It appeared to Mrs Jolley that his exceptionally fine proportions were not concealed by sweatshirt and jeans; he was not used to clothes. Nor was Mrs Jolley to sculpture . . . .
>
> Although classical of body, it had to be admitted the young man's head was a disappointment: skin - dry and scabby, whereever it was not drawn too tight and shiny, giving an impression of postage stamps; eyelashes - might have been singed right off; hair - a red stubble, but red. Nor did words come out of his mouth except with ugly difficulty. (252)

This is a portrait of the decadent machine, with its perfect musculature and its corrupted intellect. It is the portrait of Fascism, of Marinetti and vulgar futurism.

Blue is responsible for the torturing of Himmelfarb. Flushed with victory at having won a share in a lottery, Blue drunkenly swaggers in to work, and then, begins to abuse the elderly Jew. It is with the description of Blue that we are compelled to understand the significance of the encounter.

> All were clothed, conventionally, in singlets and slacks, with the exception of their leader, who wore the gumboots in which he was accustomed to wade through the acid of the plating-shop, and the pair

> of old shorts stained beyond recognition
> as a fabric, resembling, rather, something
> sloughed by nature. Blue had always been
> primarily a torso, an Antinous of the
> suburbs, breasts emphatically divided on
> unfeeling marble, or Roman sandstone.
> Somebody had battered the head, or else
> the sculptor had recoiled before giving
> precise form to a vision of which he was
> ashamed. Whether damaged, or unfinished,
> the head was infallibly suggestive. Out
> of the impervious eyes, which should have
> conveyed at most the finite beauty of stone,
> filtered glimpses of an infinite squalor:
> slops of the saloon, the dissolving cigarette-
> butts, reflections of the grey monotonies,
> the greenish lusts. The mouth was a means
> of devouring. If ever it opened on words -
> for it was sometimes necessary to communicate -
> these issued bound with the brass of beer,
> from between rotting stumps of teeth. (456)

White, with his extraodinary genius for crafting language into meaning, demonstrates how completely Blue Flack is the product of his degenerate community. Instead of rendering the young man as opaque and unknowable, White reads in him the colours and the odours of the barren urban experience, the twilight of deception and self-deception, of violence and decay. We are also reminded in these lines that sculpture was celebrated by Fascism for its material substantiality.

The pervasiveness of the banal evil is something which White insists we understand. Mrs Jolley, Mary Hare's house-keeper, is a compound of those "virtues" celebrated by Nazi Germany, with her belief in the church, children and cooking. These Mrs Jolley, as the essential

hausfrau, is relying upon for her eternal salvation.

> Mrs Jolley sang and baked. She loved to sing the pinker hymns. She would even sing those of which she did not know the words. She sang and baked. And saw pink. She loved the Jesus Christ of long pink face and languid curls, in words and windows. All was right then. All the homes and kiddies saved. All was sanctified by cake. (65)

Mrs Jolley finds a way of making even her cake an instrument of torture, and bakes a vile pink thing which she presents to Miss Hare, on which she has placed the script "For A Bad Girl".

The deliberate use of hyperbole in the description of Mrs Jolley and her kitchen suggests that White intends us to take very seriously the suggestion that she is an advocate of evil. It is not by chance that here, too, there are overtones reminiscent of the ovens of the holocaust. White, in the most facetious tone, has blended religion, the kitchen and the family into an evil burlesque:

> At Xanadu the great kitchen almost cracked black open.
>
> Mrs Jolley sang and baked. Brick by brick her edifice rose, but a nice sandwich, of course. Round. Whereas it was the square brick homes which she celebrated. And populated. With her mind she placed the ladies and the kiddies - not so many gentlemen - as if they had been sandwich flags . . . . Mrs Jolley sang and praised. To destroy or to save was the same when you had

paid the premium. (65)

Much of the condemnation of the novel is directed at those who, like Mrs Jolley, cannot tolerate or accept anything unknown or foreign. To the damned, Himmelfarb will never be anything but a "bloody reffo"; however, we, as readers, are led down a path of mystery and revelation so that Himmelfarb's metaphysics, surely alien to most of White's readers, is made known and familiar.

White offers us no sustained explication of Himmelfarb's beliefs: rather, we have to glean elements scattered throughout the text. For an understanding of these seemingly disparate details, it is important to have some grasp of the impact that Isaac Luria, the sixteenth century Hebrew mystic, had on Kabbalistic thought. It should also be remembered that White uses the references to Lurianic teaching more for their metaphoric appropriateness than as a systematic whole.

According to Luria, the original act of creation was not an emanation from God, because God was already everywhere. Of course, the debate over the infinite extension of God is the focus of centuries of religio-philosophical discourse. It was at the centre of the correspondence between Descartes and Henry More. In 1649 Descartes wrote to More:

> I say, therefore, that the world is indeterminate or indefinite, because I do not recognize in it any limits. But I dare not call it infinite as I perceive that God is greater than the world, not in respect to His extension, because, as I have already said, I do

> not acknowledge in God any proper extension , but in respect to His perfection. (Koyré 122)

According to Luria, God withdrew into Himself, in order to allow a space which the created world would fill (qtd. in Scholem, Messianic Idea 44). Space is, logically, a prerequisite for physical change, and yet this is at odds with the concept of an original divine plenitude which manifested itself everywhere. God's contraction into Himself is called by Luria tzimtzum, or limitation. Thus the creation is actually preceded by a yet more prior act, God's falling into Himself. (Clearly this can function as a metaphor for the meditation and absorption which anticipates any creative act.) Obviously, the created world is, for the theist, 'filled with God' and thus Luria makes a distinction between two aspects of the divine personality, the En-Sof and the Shekhinah. The En-Sof is the 'hidden God' and Shekhinah is the 'Divine presence', God as manifested in his creation. With the sin of Adam, a rift develops between god and the created world; further, this results in a rift between the En-Sof and the Shekhinah. Man is henceforth figured as an exile, longing to return to absolute union with his maker.

Luria's own teaching is in a sense a supplement to one of the most influential of all Kabbalistic texts, the Sefer Ha Zohar, or Book of Splendour. Written in Castile in the thirteenth century, it is, as Scholem notes, "chiefly concerned with the object of meditation" (Major Trends 205).

This is the background knowledge that White takes for granted when he describes the Jews fleeing the pogroms of Europe:

> Some returned to Palestine - oh yes, returned, because how else is exile ended? - but were not vouchsafed that personal glimpse of the Shekhinah which their sense of atavism demanded. These were perhaps the most deceived. (159)

Years later, Himmelfarb discovers that he has unwittingly abandoned his wife on the eve of the Holocaust. His shock is registered as akin to the anguish experienced by God during the tzimtzum, when He, as En-Sof, withdrew and became separate and distinct from the Shekhinah.

> Because nobody could realize how his wife was present in him, at all times, until for one moment, that evening, when God Himself had contracted into first chaos. (167-168)

There is a constant, unseen pattern of allusion going on beneath the surface of the text. It is as if the great metaphysical drama is re-enacted countless times in the lives of the chosen ones. Similarly, the reunion of the En-Sof and the Shekhinah is played out in the wedding ritual shared by Himmelfarb and Reha (141). It is the recapitulation of this wedding that fills Himmelfarb's dreams and provides him with succour when he is on his deathbed. Himmelfarb becomes Adam Kadmon, the first product of God's imagination.

As Adam, Himmelfarb recalls his union with his beloved. The boundary between reality and religious allegory is overleaped, as Reha is characterised as both the Shekhinah and the bride.

> Again, he was the Man Kadmon, descending from the Tree of Light to take the Bride. Trembling with white, holding the cup in her

> chapped hands, she advanced to stand beneath the *Chuppah*. So they were brought together in the smell of all primordial velvets. This, explained the cousins and aunts, is at last the *Shecchinah*, whom you have carried all these years under your left breast. (483)

Another of Luria's teachings which was to permanently alter the character of much Kabbalistic thought, was the "Breaking of the Vessels", or *Shevirath Ha-Berith*. According to Luria, God commanded creation into being by shining forth a divine light into silent space. Adam Kadmon, the first human being, is the original expression of that divine light. Adam becomes what might be described as a lantern to God's glory, and the light emanates from his eyes, ears, nose and mouth. In fact the divine presence begins to channel itself through Adam. This light is caught in nine vessels. The first three vessels are unblemished and manage to contain the light. However, the following bowls are of a lower order, and are flawed. Inevitably, they cannot hold the power of the light, and are shattered, scattering luminosity throughout the cosmos. The breaking of the vessels is evidence of a pre-existent flaw; consequently, it is evidence that evil is present even before the origin of the created worlds. Thus, in a sense, the breaking of the vessels is necessary so that evil can be separated out from good and be relegated to the lower realm. *Shevirath Ha-Berith* results in the dissemination of the divine sparks across the face of the earth. The traditional interpretation of this event is in fact two-fold. On the one hand, the scattering of the sparks is taken as a metaphor for the diaspora, and the dispersal of the Jews. On the other hand, some suggest that these

sparks are not the Jewish people; rather, the Jews are in exile across the face of the earth in order to gather up these precious fragments of light.

Obviously, much of the power and poetry of these ideas is diminished when subjecting them to such extreme abbreviation. Happily, they are rendered as poetry once more in the hands of Patrick White: look, for example, at the following lines which chart Himmelfarb's growing frustration with intellectual pursuits, his desire to plunge into the mysteries of Judaism.

> For he was racked by his persistent longing to exceed the bounds of reason: to gather up the sparks, visible intermittently inside the thick shells of human faces; to break through to the sparks of light imprisoned in the forms of wood and stone . . . . He was for ever peering into bushes, or windows, or the holes of eyes, or, with his stick, testing the thickness of a stone, as if in search of further evidence, when he should have been gathering up the infinitesimal kernels of sparks, which he already knew to exist, and planting them again in the bosom of divine fire, from which they had been let fall in the beginning. (157)

Clearly, the references in the novel to Judaic teaching are eclectic. As demonstrated, there is evidence of Lurianic Kabbalism. Further, the teaching about the existence of thirty-six zaddikim is derived from the Hasidism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the title of the novel is derived from ancient mystical

speculation referred to as Merkabah Mysticism, and originates from the early chapters of the Old Testament book of Ezekiel. The vision of God's throne-chariot in Ezekiel is, for Merkabah mysticism, the basis for meditation; so much so that "St. Jerome in one of his letters mentions a Jewish tradition which forbids the study of the beginning and the end of the Book of Ezekiel before the completion of the thirtieth year" (Major Trends 42):

> the earliest Jewish mysticism is throne-mysticism. Its essence is not absorbed contemplation of God's true nature, but perception of the mysteries of the celestial throne-world. (Major Trends 44)

It is as if Himmelfarb, in his person, rehearses the history of mystical Judaism, ranging as it does from the first centuries through to the present day.

Himmelfarb initially learns about the Chariot from mystical texts. However, as he aspires towards vision, and is used to support and enlighten others, so his experience of the chariot becomes more intimate. In fact, Himmelfarb's vision of the Riders in the Chariot becomes so intense that it is quite ambivalent in character. Here is the description of the chariot as it appears above the war-torn city:

> Then wheels were arriving. Of ambulance? Or fire-engine? The Jew walked on, by supernatural contrivance. For now the wheels were grazing the black shell of the town. The horses were neighing and screaming, as they dared the acid of the green sky. The horses extended their

> webbing necks, and their nostrils glinted
> brass in the fiery light. While the amazed
> Jew walked unharmed beneath the chariot
> wheels. (190)

White evokes the hysteria of the anguished city, by failing to discriminate between mechanical and divine, benign or evil machineries.

Himmelfarb, a sceptic and materialist as a young man, is brought to ever-increasd faith through the trials of his experience. Adversity breeds faithfulness. Dubbo's painting of the Fiery Furnace takes, as its subject-matter, the faithfulness in adversity of Shadrac, Meshac and Abednego. Standing in opposition to these demonstrations of steadfastness are the backsliders in the novel, those who renounce their faith in order to survive. The most obvious examples are Moshe Himmelfarb and the Rosenbaums.

There is considerable compassion and understanding afforded to Moshe Himmelfarb for his apostasy. Always a man of cultivated tastes, he has about him the aroma of old Europe.

> Moshe Himmelfarb was a wordly Jew
> of liberal tastes. Success had led him
> by a manicured hand, and continued to dress
> him with discretion . . . .
> Mordecai remembered the silk hats in
> which his father presented himself, on
> civic and religious occassions alike. Ordered
> from an English hatter, Moshe's hats reflected
> that nice perfection which may be attained by
> the reasonable man. (108-109)

Moshe's being has clearly also been defined in response to a desire to

be accepted by the gentile community - and a horror of the ages of darkness in which the European Jew was a pariah.

> Certainly there remained the problem of Eastern Europe, and deplorable incidents often occurred . . . . In the meantime, money was raised by Western Jewry to assist the victims, and to all such funds Moshe was always the first to subscribe. He loved to give, whether noticeably generous sums to numerous religious missions, the works of the German poets to his son, or presents of wine and cigars to those Gentiles who allowed themselves to be cultivated, and with whom he was so deeply, so gratefully in love. (108-109)

There is enormous tenderness in this passage - an understanding of Moshe Himmelfarb's longing for acceptance. However, Moshe's conversion results in the old man being ever increasingly ludicrous in his attempts to assimilate his new culture. The farce culminates in his marriage to a much younger gentile girl.

With Himmelfarb's migration to Australia, he meets the Rosetree/Rosenbaum family. Haim Rosenbaum, who has for pragmatic reasons assumed the mask of Harry Rosetree, a bourgeois Methodist suburbanite, is shattered when forced to recall and resurrect his Jewish identity. Rosenbaum rejects a number of overtures made by Himmelfarb, but, after the death of the latter, Haim is suddenly overwhelmed by a compelling urge to see him given a Jewish burial. The trip to find Himmelfarb's body becomes a compressed version of the travel-narrative, as the literal context is furled back to reveal an inner journey. The

penetration into the future becomes a venture into the unconscious and the past.

> Harry Rosetree continued to drive - the long, glass car was almost too biddable - towards a duty which he had accepted, less from compulsion than from sentiment, he was trying to believe. But as he drove in his incredible car, Haim ben Ya'akov found himself abandoning the controls of reason, not to say the whole impressive, steel-and-plastic structure of the present, for the stuffy rooms of memory. (497-498)

Rosenbaum is once again overwhelmed by the mystery and orientalism of his childhood, and submits to teaching from a visionary incarnation of his father. In this dreamlike state, Rosenbaum recalls a reference made by his father, about the Sabbatai Zevi.

White's reference to Zevi may at first appear to have little concrete significance. However, a brief look at the impact of the Sabbatian movement demonstrates something rather different (Major Trends 287-296). Sabbatai Zevi, by all accounts an extraordinary man, lived in and around Egypt in the mid-seventeenth century. Under the persuasion of the prophet Nathan of Gaza (1644 - 1680) Sabbatai Zevi proclaimed himself Messiah. From what evidence there is, it seems probable that he would today be classified as a manic-depressive. His flights of elation and spirals of despair found a parallel in the doctrine that he evolved. For Zevi, periods of spiritual renewal and asceticism were punctuated by periods of carnal indulgence: the degradation of the self was required for the fullness of salvation.

It is not the purpose of this study to explore the reasons for Zevi's vast cult following. What is of significance is that when Sabbatai Zevi was brought before the Turkish Sultan, he not only renounced Judaism, but adopted Islam. He became the apostate Messiah, and the shock felt amongst his followers was devastating. Although a number of small fanatical sects still confessed allegiance to him, more generally the consequence on Judaic thinking was a suspicion of Messianic teaching and a rejection of mystical excess. Even today, the attempts by established Judaism to represent itself as fundamentally a rationalist religion is largely the consequence of Zevi's apostasy.

This, then, is the history which provides the background to the opaque comment made by Rosenbaum's father:

> I have just come, the father confided, from a conversation with two Rabbinim, in which we discussed the One who is Expected . . . . The One who, in our time, we are convinced, must come, to lead and save, as it was not, it seems, David, or Hezekiah, and not, most certainly, Sabbatai Zvi [sic], though all that is something you will not have heard about. (p. 444)

Upbraided by a sense of his own apostasy, Haim Rosenbaum can only just concentrate on his material purpose, to find the body of Himmelfarb. Driving through the dust of Sarsaparilla's outskirts, Rosenbaum notes "that his tongue was sticking to the roof of his mouth" (498). There is an echo here of the psalmist's prayer:

> If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let
> my right hand forget her cunning.

> If I do not remember thee, let my
> tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth;
> (Psalm 137: 5 and 6)

Rosenbaum arrives to discover that Himmelfarb has already been given a Christian burial. Afraid that he has in fact betrayed the true Messiah, Rosenbaum hangs himself.

III: The Breakthrough

Alf Dubbo, the artist who creates The Fiery Furnace and is witness to Himmelfarb's crucifixion and deposition, is a mulatto Aboriginal. Born on a reserve, he is in his youth removed to the town of Numburra by the Reverend Timothy Calderon, who intends to make Alf the beneficiary of his 'Great Experiment'. By correctly monitoring and supervising Alf's education, the Reverend Calderon is firm in the belief that the Aboriginal boy will gratefully assume the ethics and customs of Christian Civilization. Dubbo's story, as may readily be assumed, is not peculiar to the realm of fiction. There are a number of well-documented historical cases in which European benefactors effectively "stole" Aboriginal children from the 'pernicious authority' of family and tribe, and attempted to rid them of their cultural identity. A Mr Hinkins of the Merri Creek school, on the outskirts of Melbourne, carried on a sustained experimental programme. One of the more notorious progeny of this school was Thomas, the son of the Aboriginal leader, Bungaleenee, who died in a British prison. As the critic Healy notes,

> Hinkins almost succeeded in eliminating

> the Aboriginal in him. He got Thomas a job on a ship and had him initiated into the Oddfellows Society at the Prince of Wales Hotel in Moonee Ponds. Bungaleenee's son was a confused young man at this stage. He spent a deal of time convincing his shipmates that he must logically be white since Mr and Mrs Hinkins were his parents. (20)

Hinkins' own recollections of Thomas are appalling, largely because they are so unconscious of culpability.

> I might here mention that he could not bear to be reminded of his colour, and, when a boy, would often run to me after washing his hands vigorously, and holding them up for my inspection, say, "I think they are getting a little whiter - are they not father?" (Healy 20)

Unlike the Thomas of history, the fictional Alf Dubbo is the bastard spawn of an incident between an Aboriginal woman and an Irishman. Alf's confusion as to his physical and spiritual ancestry is expressed in the observation that the boy's European forebears have been relegated to "the mythical status of the Great Snake" (353). This Great Snake is in fact the prime-mover, the 'Father-of us-all' of Aboriginal mythology. Thus the implication is that the boy's European and Aboriginal heritage are both equally remote, both equally familiar.

Dubbo very early demonstrates himself to be eccentric and original, something of an outsider. Haunted by colours and images, he begins to create an alphabet of symbols, many of which are worked and reworked in his paintings.

Patrick White's own relationship with the world of painting is an interesting one. He frequently alludes to himself as a kind of frustrated painter. His comments on this are explicit: "Why can't a writer use writing as a painter uses paint? I try to" (McGregor et al. 218). Further,

> I find words frustrating as I sit year in and year out reeling out an endless deadly grey. I try to splurge a bit of colour - perhaps to get a sudden impact - as a painter squeezes a tube. But there isn't the physical relief a painter experiences in the act of painting. I wish I had been a painter or composer. ("Conversation" 138-139)

White renders very vivid verbal descriptions of the subject and style of Dubbo's paintings. It is interesting that the description of one of Dubbo's early paintings is strongly reminiscent of a passage from the Childhood sequence in the diaries of Frank Le Mesurier, Voss's fictional poet. Compare these two passages: the first is from Riders, and is a conversation between Dubbo and his patron's sister; the second is from Frank's diaries.

> "That is a tree," he said when he was able.
> "A most unnatural tree!" she smiled kindly.
> He touched it with vermilion, and it bled afresh.
> "What are these peculiar objects, or fruit - are they? - hanging on your tree?"
> He did not say. The iron roof was cracking.
> "They must mean something," Mrs Pask insisted.
> "Those," he said, then, "are dreams."
> He was ashamed, though.

> "Dreams! But there is nothing to indicate that they are any such thing. Just a shape. I should have said mis-shapen kidneys!"
>
> So that he was put to worse shame.
>
> "That is because they have not been dreamt yet," he uttered slowly.
>
> And all the foetuses were palpitating on the porous paper. (356-357)

> When they had opened us with knives, they took out our hearts. Some wore them in their hats, some pressed them to keep for ever, some were eating them as if they had been roses, all with joy, until it was realised the flesh had begun to putrefy. Then they were afraid. They hung their flowers upon a dark tree, quickly, quickly. (Voss 289)

Even in White's fictive, constructed world, the gap between the painted and the written visions is extremely slight. It is significant that, when asked about aesthetic influences in his life, White will cite painters as often as writers.

When Dubbo comments, of his painting of foetus-dreams, that they are mis-shapen "because they have not been dreamt yet" he is articulating his frustration at his own technical and spiritual limitations, as well as asserting that each thing has its own season. At the same time, however, Dubbo's statement carries overtones of a more specific Aboriginal concept: that the spirits of the unborn reside in nature until dreamt into being. (See Chapter One for a full discussion of this.) The dream precedes creation. In fact Dubbo himself 'dreams' his art into being; we are told that "He would snooze and compose"

(379). Further, there is evidence that the act of painting is, in Aboriginal philosophy, linked with the liberation of these 'spirit children'.

As a child Alf is introduced to a painting of Apollo, a painting which at once thrills and annoys the boy. It is thrilling because it is the first painting that he sees of one of the Riders in the Chariot. At this point Alf has no articulate response to the painting, but this subject becomes a primary study in his later work. The painting is annoying because it is so static. Dubbo becomes obsessed with the idea that "Fire and light are movement" (361). This is something that he will explore and experiment with later. We find, for example, that when he is living with Mrs Spice on the edge of a rubbish dump, and painting a number of studies of junk, "Motion still eluded him" (379). The desire to capture movement in paint pursues him throughout his life, and is finally realised in his painting of the Chariot:

> From certain angles the canvas presented a reversal of the relationship between permanence and motion, as though the banks of a river were to begin to flow alongside its stationary waters. The effect pleased the painter, who had achieved more or less by accident what he had discovered years before while lying in the gutter. So he encouraged an illusion which was also a truth, and from which the timid might retreat simply by changing their position. (514)

There are two (at least) central ideas contained in this dense passage. The first asserts the phenomenological nature of the universe, that things are structured by the perceiving consciousness. The second

alludes to a theory of the avant-garde which postulates that a breakthrough in perception opens the way for a breakthrough in technical execution. The modernist conception of the breakthrough is clearly derived from Romantic dogma, particularly that of Blake. In "Jerusalem" it is clear that, for Blake, artistic breakthrough is equivalent to a Luciferian rejection of what is, a will to create the universe anew, from a fresh perspective. As Los exclaims, "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Man's" ("Jerusalem" 10:20). It is a holy equivalent of Lucifer's non serviam.

In White's fiction, because of its religious component, the notion of the breakthrough and the avant-garde are saved from the sterile self-consciousness of, for example, the Kridwiss circle in Thomas Mann's Doctor Faustus. My reference here to Mann is not an arbitrary one: the cycle established in Riders in the Chariot, of creation through deprivation and sickness, is one articulately explored by Mann, and the links between Mann and White will be discussed later when we deal with Dubbo's disease.

The young Dubbo is described as more or less a doubting Thomas - he begins to suspect that he can only believe what he has seen. His previous experience of love as something witnessed obliterates the abstraction of love that the Reverend Calderon tries to describe (361). This is partly because Alf does not submit readily to the pious dogma of aestheticized religion. It is also because as a painter, his imagination is powerfully governed by what he can witness. The blending of vision and observation is something that is explored as the novel

advances.

At this point in the novel Alf is introduced to oil-paints, and he is exhilarated by the vividness of the colours. Mrs Pask is afraid of his attraction to oils - she suspects in it a leaning towards sensuality. She, it will be remembered, is an admirer of water-colour. This translucent medium for her carries spiritual and moral truths. The vision held by Mrs Pask is in fact the same as that which Alf discovers when he reads "the sad story of Our Lord Jesus Christ" (386). In the New Testament Alf finds that everything "was pale, pale, washed in love and charity, but pale".

As Alf develops into an adolescent, Reverend Calderon becomes increasingly vulnerable to the boy. He passes through phases of excessive tenderness and emotion, on one occasion clutching the boy's head to his stomach. Alf, pressed against the old man's belly, hears a pathetic rumble. He imagines the source of the noise to be "an old, soft, white worm" which rises, sways, and collapses (365). There are obviously explicit phallic overtones in this passage. However, there is another layer of meaning which is part of a dense web of symbolic transformation. This symbolic transformation is generated by Alf Dubbo's own physical mutation, the corruption and dissolution he experiences while suffering from syphilis and tuberculosis. In order to explore these symbols adequately, it is therefore necessary first to chart Dubbo's physical decline.

Mrs Spice, that wreck of a patron from the rubbish dump at Mungindribble, is the first to talk to Dubbo about his illness: she

accuses him of it and chases him out of her 'home' (382). The disease becomes an inevitability. It is described as the negative pole of his creative gift (383). J.F.Burrows assesses this description as an unfortunate "excurses into bad Lawrence" (56). This is misleading because the formulation used by White is in fact more similar to one adopted by Mann in The Magic Mountain. In his essay on "The Making of The Magic Mountain" Mann articulates his intentions:

> What he [Hans Castorp] comes to understand is that one must go through the deep experience of sickness and death to arrive at a higher sanity and health; in just the same way that one must have a knowledge of sin in order to find redemption. "There are," Hans Castorp once says, "two ways to life: one is the regular, direct and good way; the other is bad, it leads through death, and that is the way of genius." (725)

It is this pattern of regeneration through death, says Mann, that makes The Magic Mountain a novel of initiation. Of course, the truths that Mann articulates are the ancient truths of gnostic wisdom, of alchemy, of St John of the Cross. There are also interesting echoes of the way of excess, the path advocated by Sabbatai Zevi. They are also the truths which inform the structure of White's earlier novel, Voss. (For a more detailed discussion of this, see Chapter 1.)

Dubbo's art is registered as gnostic, hierophantic. We are told that his drawings are hieroglyphs, almost impossible to interpret. (See 384, 511). In this, Alf's creations are akin to the kabbalistic mysteries which animate Himmelfarb's universe. Here reference to Edgar

Wind's Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance provides us with some useful analysis on the nature of mystical truth. In his evaluation of the language of Neo-Platonic mysteries Wind states that:

> It follows that all mystical images, because they retain a certain articulation by which they are distinguished as "hedges" or as umbraculae, belong to an immediate state, which invites further 'complication' above, and further 'explication' below. They are never final in the sense of a literal statement, which would fix the mind to a given point; nor are they final in the sense of the mystical Absolute in which all images would vanish. (206)

Dubbo's art is in one sense hieroglyphic because of its formal qualities. As a type of the expressionist artist, he employs a symbolic system which is idiosyncratic and highly personalised. Further, his art is hieroglyphic because in substance it is veiled behind the 'Cloud of Unknowing': the mystery is preserved from becoming a profane idea, by remaining obscure even to the initiated.

As Dubbo declines into sickness, his symbolic world begins to cohere, and his art is described as "crystallizing". Thus there is an antagonistic pairing: physical dissolution is associated with spiritual regeneration. Frank Le Mesurier, the artist figure in Voss, makes the same discovery when he is overwhelmed with fever. He finds that, in fact, "chunks of smouldering ore" are materialising within his own body - he has himself become both the refining fire and the artefact (Voss 263).

With Dubbo's submission to the "logic of disease" he becomes imaginatively liberated. The disease itself transforms Dubbo into a prophet: he wakes, for example, to discover a trumpet of blood imprinted on his pillow (397). Trumpets in fact abound in the novel. This cluster of symbols will be examined later. Suffice it to note at this point that when Hannah, the prostitute who takes him in, first meets Dubbo, she greets him by blowing out a trumpet of smoke (387).

At Hannah's, Alf comes across an old Bible. He stumbles into the Psalms, and confuses his own exhilaration and passion with that of the ancients, in a muddled vision of Psalm 148 (397). At this point in the novel, a group of images coalesces. Dubbo, now prophet and praise-singer, has a vision of himself with colours issuing "like charmed snakes from the tips of his fingers" (397). The image prompts us once again to remember the avant-garde artist, whose work is a direct expression of the soul, without the mediation or intervention of technique, form, or even the paintbrush. Individual and eccentric as it is, Dubbo's art is also determined to some extent by his mix of Aboriginal and Christian muses. It is the equivalent of the lapis which is generated within Frank Le Mesurier's chest while Frank, in dream, encounters the Aboriginal deity, the Rainbow Serpent (Voss 263). It is important to bear in mind that the Great Snake mentioned ironically (353) is in fact one of the most potent of mystery figures in Aboriginal culture. At the same time the effect of Dubbo's education under the effete Reverend Calderon is registered at the level of symbol, and the symbol is frequently that of an enfeebled phallus. Thus, on the one

hand there is the suppressed but potent mystery of the Aboriginal Serpent, on the other the emasculated "white worm" which rouses itself when the Reverend makes sexual advances on the boy (365). When Dubbo paints an early autobiographical piece entitled My Life, it is a synthesis of these conflicting images:

> There would be the white people, of course, perpetually naked inside their flash clothes. And the cup of wine held in the air by the Reverend Tim. That was, again, most important. Even through the dented sides you could see the blood tremble in it. And the white worm stirring and fainting in the reverend pants. And love, very sad. He would paint love as a skeleton from which they had picked the flesh - an old goanna - and could not find more, however much they wanted, and hard they looked. (367)

Later, when painting the Deposition, Dubbo is again reminded of the forlorn phallus, but this time in dream:

> There he remained, shut in a solid slab of sleep, except when he emerged for a little to walk along the river bank, beside the Reverend Timothy Calderon. But drew away from the rector, who continued mumbling of eels, and sins too slippery to hold. (512)

In other words, the "negative pole" (his childhood, his education and his "furtive, destroying sickness") is now transformed into the "regenerating, creative act" (See 383, 397). Through his art, Dubbo can conjure up symbols which actually synthesize and reconcile the

contradictions of his experience: "So, in those acts of praise which became his paintings, he would try to convey and resolve his condition of mind" (416).

Dubbo is struggling to find and give expression to a unified scheme. This is largely a consequence of his mixed inheritance, as part Aboriginal and part European. By the time White writes The Vivisector, the artist's purpose is considerably more rarefied: Hurtle Duffield is searching ultimately not so much for an articulate vision, as for an element, the colour INDIGO. This is obviously associated with that "intolerable purple" which Dubbo seeks in order to paint the image of God.

One of the masterpieces produced by the mature Dubbo is a painting entitled The Fiery Furnace. Here White hints at the theme of apostasy which he explores in the novel, as Shadrac, Meshac and Abednego, the legendary subjects of the painting, are testaments to faithfulness, who refuse to bow down to foreign gods in spite of the trial by fire. The painting is described in some detail. We are told, for example, of "the feathery texture of the angel's wings" (404). This attribute is located in Dubbo's own literal experience of the feel of a live cockatoo (404). However it is also related to the maze of references which tell of man's metamorphosis into bird (a theme which is picked up again in A Fringe of Leaves, but to a different purpose). Norm Fussel, the homosexual who shares lodgings with Alf and Hannah, does a 'turn' at a party, in which he transforms himself into a bird.

> He was wearing a bunch of feathers on
> his head, and a bunch of feathers on

> his arse, and a kind of diamond G-string wherever else. Otherwise Norm was fairly naked, except that he had painted on a pair of formal nipples, and was prinked and powdered in the right places. The bird began to perform what was intended as a ritual-dance . . . . (400)

Alf himself, when courted by the Reverend Calderon, had perforce ended up in a similar arabesque: "They were revolving in the slightly shabby room, their ridiculous shirt-tails flapping like wings" (372).

Icarus, as the original artist, is one of the archetypes suggested by this bird-man motif. There is also an allusion to the well-documented Aboriginal belief in metamorphosis (see Chapter Three). Further, the Angel of the Lord is a bird-man: at once an amalgam of two planes of being, the angel functions both as an evolutionary link and a mid-point. It is a symbol of human aspiration, transfixed at the moment of transformation.

The Furnace itself has other resonances: on the one hand, it is the refining fire of the alchemist; on the other, it is the ovens of the Holocaust. Dubbo's paintings become 'embers' (405) of a fire which "lit a bonfire in the mediocre room, the walls of which retreated from the blaze of colour" (404). The lexical associations of the metaphoric noun "blaze" are used literally, and White thus defamiliarizes the language to the reader. Alf, of course, carries the fire within his imagination - this is described explicitly (396). The flames themselves are "feathers", and the two symbolic sets are forged together by this very fire:

> Alf Dubbo was fortunate in that he had his fire, and would close his eyes, and let it play across his mind in those unearthly colours which he loved to reproduce. But which did not satisfy him yet. Not altogether. His eyes would flash with exasperation. He could not master the innermost, incandescent eye of the feathers of fire. (396)

On an afternoon tainted by sweet decay, Alf walks out into the yellow light, and finds that he is once again coughing up blood. He returns home to discover that his two paintings (The Fiery Furnace and the Chariot-thing) have disappeared, sold to the art dealer, Mortimer. Outraged, Dubbo attacks Hannah who has momentarily embraced the unlikely role of entrepreneur. At the end of the fight, Hannah notices that there is blood trickling from the corner of Alf's mouth. It is, of course, a sign of his internal corruption, the disease that is destroying him from within. On a metaphoric level, it also signifies Dubbo's links with Aboriginal practice, more explicitly the Aboriginal rite of tooth extraction as associated with initiation, for Hannah asks "You knocked a tooth, eh?" (414).

Enraged that his works have now effectively become public property, Dubbo gets an axe and destroys the paintings which remain in his room. The reader is not immediately aware of this fact, for White uses, as he often does, an omniscient narration which is strongly contaminated by the point-of-view of the protagonist. Dubbo is shown meditating on the way that a skull acts as a box which contains secrets. There is an unexpressed link between the literal and the metaphysical: the reader is

asked to deduce that the skull functions in the same way as a room does. Alf then meditates on the destruction of the images within the imagination, for even they can be betrayed.

> For there was no containing thoughts, unless you persuaded somebody - only a friend would be willing - to take an axe and smash up the fatal box for good and all. How it would have scared him, though, to step out from amongst the mess, and face those who would have come in, who would be standing round amongst the furniture, waiting to receive. (415)

While this meditation is taking place, Dubbo is actually smashing the contents of his room, but we are not made aware of this until later, when Hannah enters the splintered room.

Frank Le Mesurier, the type of the artist in Voss, escapes his own compulsion to write by cutting a hole in his throat, and climbing through it "into the immense fields of silence" (Voss 381). Dubbo is deterred from taking a similar course of action. He now undergoes a crisis of faith and re-examines all the principles that have informed his development. He is aware that the early phase of his adult life has been rife with contradictions:

> Hannah's place was connected in his mind with some swamp that he remembered without having seen, and from which the white magic of love and charity had failed to exorcise the evil spirits. (416)

"Swamp" is a curiously ambivalent term, and part of that ambivalence is

itself based upon cultural difference. In the quest narratives of Romance, the swamp is associated with stale, foul water, disease and a foetid, evil atmosphere.[5] It is the place of trial by water. These negative connotations have been imported to the current meaning of the word, and "swamp" now, even for the uninspired city-dweller, loosely signifies a contaminated and poisoned stretch of water. However, to one whose survival depends on ephemeral water-holes, the swamp is an oasis. Thus Hannah's is both a locus of warmth, shelter and provision, and also a bog which has hindered Dubbo's maturation. In the antithesis between the "white magic of love and charity" and the "evil spirits", we are once again reminded of the feeble war waged by Reverend Calderon and his water-colour god against the vivid gods of the Aboriginal canon.

Dubbo at this point realises that "Angels were demons in disguise" and that it is perhaps naive to attribute purely charitable motives to those who dispense charity. Even Mrs Pask, the sister of Reverend Calderon, is now also a bird-woman, but a fierce and devouring one, a harpy with "brass nipples and a beak" (416). Turning his back on Hannah and this period of his life, Dubbo goes on a "walkabout" through the landscape of his mind. "Nor would he have wished it otherwise, for that way he could travel quicker, deeper, into the hunting grounds of his imagination" (417). Of course the walkabout is a period of spiritual renewal as well as challenge. The hostile Australian landscape provides a testing-ground as well as a reward, for the Aboriginal who can successfully follow the Dreaming Trail of his ancestors reaffirms both his links with the eternal, and his understanding of the desert.

Dubbo's identity, as artist and urban Aboriginal of mission-school upbringing, determines that his walkabout is of a rather different order to that of his more traditional, rural kin:

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

It is no accident that Dubbo chooses the urban landscape. His is no pastoral vision. As we have already seen, his is the vision of the rag-picker, the modernist descendent of Baudelaire's flâneur, who translates the forms, energies and odours of the city.

Dubbo's search for form and aesthetic unity is dramatised in the language of exploration. White selects words with distinct spatial connotations in the following passage:

> While his organism was subjected to the logic of disease, an increased recklessness of mind helped him to take short cuts to solving some of the problems. Many others remained, though as he wandered deeper into himself, or watched the extraordinary behaviour of human beings on the periphery of his existence, he was often hopeful of arriving eventually at understanding. (384)

There is a suggestion here that Dubbo lives his life as a

spectator, on the edge of the lives of those he is observing: this is central to White's characterisation of Dubbo as an artist. When he inevitably gets involved in Himmelfarb's destiny, it is as an outsider rather than a participant.

> Now Dubbo knew that he would never, never act, that he would dream, and suffer, and express some of that suffering in paint - but was, in the end, powerless. In his innocence, he blamed his darker skin. (461)

In this deceptively transparent passage White is yoking together a number of significant concepts. Firstly, as already suggested, he introduces the idea of Dubbo as interpreter; he then comments on Dubbo's lack of power, and implies that the Aboriginal mistakenly attributes this powerlessness to the politics of racism. In spite of the negative construction White uses here, the very fact that power and colour are linked, albeit in this instance erroneously, reminds the reader that in other instances the charge of discrimination is an accurate one. Further, there is a hint here of the real source of Dubbo's powerlessness, and that is, finally, a reflection of White's deep fatalism. Earlier in the novel, this is made more explicit.

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

As the artist-figure in the novel, Dubbo is forced to collaborate in

that fatalism to which White, as artist and mystic, is subject.

After witnessing the quasi-crucifixion of Himmelfarb, Dubbo, in a fever of creative excitement, paints his Deposition. He becomes absorbed by the painting, and moves between the world of material reality and the world of his imaginative construct.

> Once on emerging from behind the barricade of planes, the curtain of textures, he ventured to retouch the wounds of the dead Christ with the love that he had never dared express in life, and at once the blood was gushing from his own mouth . . . . (509)

Here Dubbo's artistic quest is identified with the spiritual quest of the other protagonists in the novel. The identification is implicit rather than overt, and is evident in the use of the phrase "the curtain of textures". The accrued significance of these words becomes apparent upon a close examination of the text. Where he uses "curtain" here, earlier in the novel White uses the synonymous but more traditionally significant noun "veil".

In the opening pages of Riders, there is reference to the veil as a screen which separates off the sacred realm from the profane. Here is the moment when Mary Hare suspects that her own father may be something of a reluctant novitiate:

> Often in the evening as she watched from the terrace of her deserted house for the chariot of fire, the woman wondered how her father would have received her metamorphoses: probably with increased disgust,

> although a suspect visionary himself, and
> on one occasion at least, standing together
> at the same spot, she had actually seen him
> twitch the veil. (40)

The veil is quite clearly meant in the Old Testament sense, as that which divides the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was, according to Levitical law, only accessible to the high priest (see Leviticus 16). However, following standard hermeneutical interpretation, the death of Christ transformed every believer into a high priest, and thus gave him or her direct access to God. For this reason, Paul tells the Hebrews, the moment of the crucifixion coincides with the supernatural rending of the veil in the temple. (See for example Matthew 27:51.)

In Chapter Two of Riders in the Chariot there is an ironic echo of the rending of the veil. Mary Hare is about to employ a housekeeper for Xanadu, and the idea of an outsider having easy access to her private life threatens Miss Hare.

> . . . . an individual called Mrs Jolley,
> whose hips would assert themselves in navy
> blue, whose breathing would be heard, whose
> letters would lie upon the furniture addressed
> in the handwriting of daughters and nieces,
> telling of lives lived, unbelievably, in other
> places. It was frightening, frightening. (19)

On the morning of Mrs Jolley's arrival, Mary Hare has a trivial domestic accident. "She jerked the curtain. And it tore uglily. A long tongue of gold brocade" (18). This slight episode dramatises, on a

psychological level, the rending of the veil. The arrival of the housekeeper signifies the end of Xanadu as a place of sanctuary and retreat. In this instance, White uses the word "curtain", and does not explain its metaphoric correspondance with the word "veil". However, the semantic association between "veil" and "curtain" is established at a number of points in the novel, as already demonstrated. There is one clear illustration of this point which is worth citing. When Mary Hare attempts to rescue Himmelfarb from the inferno which was once his home, the scene is described as follows:

> A revelation should have been made to one possessed of her especial powers, and indeed, a more rational curtain of flame was almost twitched back for her to see. (475)

The significance of these words is evident when one remembers that Norbert Hare, when attempting to glimpse the mysteries of the universe, is described as trying to "twitch the veil" (40). The verb "twitch" is used in similar contexts, for both "curtain" and "veil".

Later, these two words are more explicitly associated. In a brief passage which describes Harry Rosenbaum's Hebrew education, the two words are identified by contiguity and function:

> So the boy read, fearfully: <u>The Commandment of the Lord is clear</u>. Then the beadle pulled the cord, and the wonders and terrors were again veiled by the little curtain. (498)

Thus when White refers to the "curtain of textures" in describing Dubbo's painting, the phrase bears with it the additional meaning given

by the rest of the text. Dubbo's artistic breakthrough is the rapturous moment of hierophantic entry into God's presence. It is also a moment of extraordinary fullness, for it marks the collapse of two metaphysical systems, Aboriginal and European, into one visionary spell.

Dubbo has been prepared for this by the simultaneous development of his moral, imaginative and technical faculties. It is this commitment of the whole being that White celebrates in the novel, a commitment shared by the personalities of Mary Hare, Himmelfarb, Dubbo and Mrs Godbold.

CHAPTER THREE: A FRINGE OF LEAVES

A Fringe of Leaves is the last of White's novels to depict a sector of the Australian Aboriginal community. Significantly, it is once more what could loosely be called an historical novel, one which again depicts an early encounter between Europe and Aboriginal Australia. One of my primary purposes in this chapter is to examine the marked shift in treatment, in spite of the apparent similarity in context, between *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves*, and what this suggests about a shift in philosophical emphasis.

Voss is characterised by a scrupulous attention to the metaphysical world, and introduces White's readers to specific aspects of Aboriginal mythology. Aboriginal powers in fact invade the psyches of the German explorer and his companions; in a sense, Australian spirits reinvigorate and renew the Europeans. In *A Fringe of Leaves*, by contrast, the reader familiar with *Voss* is struck by how little attention is given to this spirit life, and even when there is evidence of it, the protagonist, Ellen Roxburgh, is excluded and cannot for the most part find access to or make sense of the rituals she witnesses. The emphasis in the novel is on the material, rather than the symbolic culture of indigenous Australians.

This failure to communicate on a symbolic level (except in the single, rather complex instance of a shared cannibalistic feast, which is on Ellen's part prompted by physical hunger) is reinforced by the

fact that there is no true visionary artist in this novel. Voss and Riders in the Chariot both have dominant artist-figures, individuals who, in vision and in their work, are the expression of the creative marriage of cultures. In A Fringe of Leaves, the individual with artistic aspirations is Austin Roxburgh, but he is a man of failed vision and circumscribed imaginative training, schooled in the classical pastoral traditions. His models are archaic and nostalgic. He thus, unlike Le Mesurier and Alf Dubbo, cannot offer a hope for the resolution of aesthetic and spiritual contraries.

In my discussion of the failed artist, I shall examine the frequent allusion to and metaphors of sterility and impotence in A Fringe of Leaves. I suggest that this figure of futility reflects White's own increasingly realistic attitude to the limited scope of art's intervenient role in the moral, social and political arenas. The philosophic tone of this novel is in fact best described as a kind of resigned resolve.

Much of the focus in this chapter will centre on a discussion of Ellen Roxburgh's two great 'crimes': incest and cannibalism. I shall consider how White uses these to undermine our sense of moral absolutes, how he demonstrates them to be culturally determined.

Once again I shall be investigating White's attempts to reinvest history with competing voices in an attempt to move us away from the monololithic and uniform interpretations facilitated by Australian orthodoxy. In this novel, for example, much attention is given to the figure of the runaway convict, a potent figure in Australian legend. In

Voss, although Judd, the emancipist, is given a considerable role no-one, we are told, knows what his crime had been (145). However in A Fringe of Leaves Jack Chance, a parallel figure, is given the opportunity to tell his own history. Further, the historical episode upon which this novel is based is one which gave White a female castaway as his protagonist, and I shall be commenting on how this challenges both history's patriarchal tendencies as well as the conventions of the shipwreck narrative.

I: The Genesis of the Novel

White deferred writing A Fringe of Leaves because there was a period when he was constrained by the conviction that "Australian writers should deal with the Twentieth Century" (Flaws 171). Of course, Voss, White's first major success, had been set in the nineteenth century and was itself an 'historical' novel of sorts: White had picked up the kernel of an idea from history and had worked it into an elaborate fiction. There is no statement which explains why he once more felt liberated to adopt a similar strategy, but in A Fringe of Leaves White again draws on an historical moment for the basis of the novel.

The historical moment which gives rise to A Fringe of Leaves is the shipwreck in 1836 of the Stirling Castle which was sailing from Hobart in Tasmania (then known as Van Diemen's Land) to Singapore. The survivors managed to make their way to land in open boats. However, having arrived on the beach they were involved in an altercation with a

local Aboriginal community and several members of the party were killed, including the captain of the ship, Captain Fraser. Records of the Aboriginal losses are not available. Mrs Fraser, however, lived, and became for a while assimilated into the Aboriginal group.

Much of White's interest in this episode was prompted by Sidney Nolan, who had in the 40's and 50's painted a cycle which depicted Mrs Fraser after the shipwreck. (See Figures 12-17). White himself notes: "I first went to Fraser Island after Sidney Nolan gave me the story of Eliza Fraser and the wreck of 'Stirling Castle'" (Flaws 171).

Other probable sources for A Fringe of Leaves are Michael Alexander's Mrs Fraser on the Fatal Shore and Robert Gibbings' John Graham, Convict, 1824, for there are striking parallels between these accounts and White's imaginative history of Ellen Roxburgh. Clearly, however, White's treatment of the Ellen Fraser episode does not slavishly copy history. His purpose is different, and is perhaps best expressed in the following statement:

> Personally I tend to dislike historical novels, and have avoided writing them because of the strictures they impose on the imagination. Instead, on a couple of occasions, I have taken a historic character or moment, as starting point. I feel this is permissible if you preserve psychological credibility and respect your aesthetic principles - the fiction need not decline into romance. If, instead of writing Voss, I had written a novel about Leichhardt, in whose life there was no woman his obsessive equal, or if in A Fringe of Leaves I hadn't substituted Ellen Roxburgh for Eliza Fraser, little more than a hardbitten shrew from

> the Orkneys, neither novel would have had the psychological complexities, the sensibility, and the passion I was able to explore.
> ("Patrick White speaks" 100-101)

White's express purpose, then, is to investigate the emotional and psychological dynamics of a historically determined set of circumstances, rather than to recreate historical events. In defence of his strategy White implies that there is a difference between "truth" and fact"; he is concerned primarily with reflecting truth, in what he designates as "that admittedly disturbing marriage between life and imagination". The recording of fact is the province of the documentarist ("Patrick White speaks" 100). This is not to suggest that White naïvely allows either truth or fact the status of objectivity; rather, he is pointing to the priorities in his own work.

It is nonetheless inevitable that much of the critical attention given to A Fringe of Leaves has sought to test to what extent this fiction has been freed from the constraints imposed by history. This is the express emphasis of Ward's essay "Patrick White's A Fringe of Leaves: History and Fiction"; it is an oblique question in Randolph Stow's "Transfigured Histories: Recent Novels of Patrick White and Robert Drewe". My investigation, by contrast, is more concerned with demonstrating how once again White used the historical encounter which underlies A Fringe of Leaves to reclaim aspects of the history, to enrich it by adding the voices of those rendered silent in the narrative told by orthodoxy's historians.

Mrs Fraser's story was indeed one that had provided considerable

substance for debate and instruction. Although she may have been "little more than a hardbitten shrew from the Orkneys", the Mrs Fraser of history provided a powerful symbol of the dangers implicit in colonial contact. She reminded all solid Britons that one of the Empire's first responsibilities was to protect its women. Eliza Fraser's tale was thus seized upon by the Australian colonists and mythologized. The pervasiveness of the Fraser mythology had been suggested by White in The Eye of the Storm, the novel which preceded A Fringe of Leaves. In this saga, a group of individuals is holidaying on the island which was the site of Mrs Fraser's capture. It is through the children in the party that we are first alerted to this fact, and here White's choice is a strategic one, for he uses the children in order to suggest a kind of colonial psychosis which is passed down from generation to generation. All of the usual fears about miscegenation, the sexual potency of blacks, and the humiliation of white virtue is implicit in the brief, excited exchange between the children. The use of the phrase "in the beginning" suggests that the episode has the status of a pre-lapsarian moment.

> 'There was somebody murdered here in the beginning. They were wrecked on the island. The blacks killed the men and made the woman their slave.'
>
> Though it was hardly night, Sara was already wearing the promised gold-and-turquoise chain. 'They undressed this woman,' she said, 'till she was quite naked.' (378)

This brief episode draws ironic attention to the familiar equation

established between "beginnings" and European arrivals. Australian history begins with the advent of the colonists.

It is obviously partly because of the mythic power of this saga that White began to work and rework the Eliza Fraser narrative. She was the subject of various works of art, some contemporaneous, others modern. White himself is evidently concretely indebted to the pictorial representations of the Fraser drama. There is, as already suggested, the influence of Nolan's works. Further, Alexander mentions that a "contemporary drawing of her, bonneted and shawled, shows a handsome dark-haired lady whose strong features and mobile mouth suggest contradiction between duty and indulgence" (18). These are exactly the ambivalent drives which provide White with the central psychological conflict in Ellen Roxburgh. The conflict is in the novel further expressed thematically through a series of emotional contraries: her pagan origins are at odds with her Christian education, and her longing to play a nurturing, maternal role is complicated by her desire for sensual and sexual fulfilment.

There is, then, some suggestion as to how the substance of the Fraser story provoked White into another novel: through the extremity of the situation in which the woman found herself, as well as the implicit contraries in her own psychological make-up, the history provides White with various tantalising ingredients as well as certain constaints which he chooses to adopt or ignore at will. What is of further interest is that the conventional aspects of the shipwreck narrative _in themselves_ provide the novelist with opportunities and limitations, which White

will in turn use and undermine, affording him the opportunity to take what he needs from the genre without being restricted by it.

II: Shipwreck Narratives

A Fringe of Leaves shares certain features with works generically classified as shipwreck or explorer narratives. Such a designation is not of course useful in itself; however it can allow the opportunity for comparison, as the text is suddenly seen in relation to other texts with a similar focus or purpose. The novel becomes more overtly a comment on the novels which are its precursors. Culler, in Structuralist Poetics, makes a similar case in his discussion of genre:

> A genre, one might say, is a conventional function of language, a particular relation to the world which serves as norm or expectation to guide the reader in his encounter with the Text. . . .
> A genre, in other words, is not simply a taxonomic class. If one groups works together on the basis of observed similarities one does indeed have purely empirical taxonomies of the sort which helped to bring the notion of genre into disrepute. A taxonomy, if it is to have any theoretical value, must be motivated . . . . (136)

> If a theory of genres is to be more than a taxonomy it must attempt to explain what features are constitutive of functional categories which have governed the reading and writing of literature. (137)

By undertaking to write a novel which belongs to an identifiable genre, White automatically invokes specific expectations for reading and

assimilating that novel. If in certain strategic and identifiable ways he challenges the reader's expectations or violates them, he renews the reading act, making conscious those functions which are usually unconscious.

In Voss White had undermined the linear scheme of the male explorer narrative in order to foreground the cyclical patterns of symbolic transformation, patterns frequently implicit but usually supressed in such narratives. Similarly, in A Fringe of Leaves, he invokes the conventional expectations of the shipwreck or explorer narrative in order to overthrow them, thereby exposing the assumptions upon which such expectations are based. It is evident, for example, that White is challenging the paradigm by having a female survivor: this narrative choice acts as a deliberate rebuke to the patriarchal tradition which runs from Defoe (or, if you will, from Homer's Odysseus!) through Swift, Stevenson, Poe, Ballantyne and Conrad, and which expresses itself finally, weakly, as a dying motif in Golding. In the established tradition, it is the ingenuity and integrity of the Western male which is challenged by the author placing him in extremis, and observing his responses.

The consequences of the shipwreck ordeal are determined, generally, by two contradictory philosophic thrusts. The first may be termed the 'optimistic' view, and what is interesting is that the optimism derives from two almost antithetical propositions. The first instance is exemplified by Robinson Crusoe. In Defoe's novel, the shipwreck is used as a pretext to demonstrate the innate superiority of the Western male,

his mastery over natural man and natural forces. This results in the beneficent civilizing of nature. The second paradigm which provides for an optimistic resolution is exemplified by the narrative in which the protagonist renounces the restraints and encumberances of sophisticated European (or American) society and returns to a state of nature and a state of grace. Obviously this is for the most part a post-Romantic shift, and such narratives, unless wilfully naïve, are usually highly problematic: Melville's Typee provides a useful instance.[1] By contrast, there is an opposite argument, a 'pessimistic' one in which the shipwreck is used to demonstrate man's intrinsic violence and the horror which is inadequately masked by social contrivance. Instances of such a position can be seen in Poe, Conrad and Golding.

In A Fringe of Leaves White seeks to confront this very philosphic split by incorporating the debate into the novel. The two views of humanity are given expression at various points by various characters. Right at the start of the novel, we overhear an illuminating exchange between Miss Scrimshaw and Mr Merivale. Miss Scrimshaw gasps "Oh no, people can be frightful! . . . I do not believe one will ever arrive at the end of people's frightfulness." Merivale's response is "I don't believe I've ever come across a fellow in whom I didn't find a fair measure of good" (2). Allied by condescending collusion, Miss Scrimshaw and Mrs Merivale attribute his optimism to the natural limitations of the masculine imagination. Miss Scrimshaw is thus aligned with a pessimistic, and Mr Merivale with an optimistic tradition.

There is obviously a bit of parodic play in White's choice of the

name 'Merivale'. It is a pun on Happy Valley, the title of White's first novel, which was itself in turn named after the Happy Valley of Johnson's The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia. Johnson, twenty-four years prior to the writing of Rasselas, had published an abridged translation of Father Jeronymo Lobo's Voyage to Abyssinia. What had attracted Johnson to this work was its lack of hyperbole:

> The reader will here find no regions cursed with irremediable barrenness, or blest with spontaneous fecundity; no perpetual gloom, or unceasing sunshine; nor are the nations here described either devoid of all sense of humanity, or consummate in all private and social virtues. (Johnson 11)

Johnson's ultimate defense of Lobo's narrative is particularly interesting: he comments that the reader will find in Voyage to Abyssinia "what will always be discovered by a diligent and impartial inquirer, that wherever human nature is to be found, there is a mixture of vice and virtue, a contest of passion and reason . . . ." (11). This is the philosophic model which informs A Fringe of Leaves, and White's choice is an important one, for he is thereby rejecting the Utopian and Dystopian dichotomy that is reflected in many of the shipwreck and travel narratives.[2] This is neither the best nor the worst of all possible worlds; it is, simply, the world that is.

Early shipwreck narratives were often based upon the convention of the "found manuscript", Defoe providing us with the most obvious original. The "found manuscript" was a contrivance which was used to legitimate the novelistic undertaking, and narratives were purported to

be the accurate account of an individual's history. This was so readily interpreted as a conventional strategy that Swift could use it as the premise upon which to base his most sustained satire. The fictions masked themselves as truths, and, far from being treated as frauds, were actually considered successful insofar as they gulled the reading public. One of the most celebrated of these public hoaxes was Edgar Allan Poe's The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket. The first two chapters had appeared under Poe's own name in the Southern Literary Messenger. Deciding now to mask the work as a genuine document, Poe had to employ elaborate strategies in order to explain the inconsistency in attribution. So it is that Poe's fictive author, A.G. Pym, writes a preface to his travel narrative in which he actually addresses the question of the work's authenticity: Pym's preface states that "in order that it might certainly be regarded as fiction, the name of Mr Poe was affixed to the articles" (Poe 44).

These "found manuscripts", whether travel accounts, letters, journals or memoirs are thus seen to provide the foundation of the novel as a form. Robinson Crusoe, for example, is the confident, accurate record of the achievements of a rising middle class, and Crusoe is establishing a secular, commercial equivalent of Judeo-Christian history. Crusoe is producing a 'new tablet', writing the history of himself as a new order of being in a new relationship with God and creation. It is his Genesis and Exodus, his trial and reward - but his faith is in bourgeois capital and its inventiveness. Effectively, Defoe writes over the Old Testament, erasing as he re-writes.

In White's novels, by contrast, one is struck by the remarkable frequency of "lost manuscripts". In Voss, there is Le Mesurier's journal, a visionary document on childhood and the way of salvation, which is destroyed by its author. Similarly, Voss's letter is torn into fluttering scraps by its bearer, and Laura thus never receives a material assurance of his love and offer of marriage. In Riders in the Chariot, the final quarter of the novel revolves around the painting of a group of visionary canvasses, canvasses which are either destroyed or disappear without trace. Here in A Fringe of Leaves the journals of Austin and Ellen Roxburgh are lost at sea and never retrieved. White's purposes in this are difficult to ascertain, however one can usefully comment on the effect achieved by this narrative strategy. In the first instance, White liberates himself from the realistic self-consciousness of writers such as Defoe and Richardson. There is no obligation to convince the reader of the "authenticity" of the texts; they exist, quite wilfully, as fictions. Further, we are reminded of White's abiding mistrust of writing: he himself has frequently acknowledged his own anxiety about writing as a project:

> I find words frustrating as I sit year in and
> year out reeling out an endless deadly grey.
> I try to splurge a bit of colour - perhaps to get
> a sudden impact - as a painter squeezes a tube.
> But there isn't the physical relief a painter
> experiences in the act of painting.
> ("A Conversation" 139)

He has also commented that "writing is really like shitting" (McGregor et al. 220). In the novels, in other words, there seems to be a belief

in the superiority of the lived life, rather than the reflected one. There is a mystic absorption with the quality of material existence evident in many of his protagonists. Even the unlikely Austin Roxburgh, an intellectual who habitually perceives life through the interpretive frame of Virgil, has a measured respect for those who can experience the immediate:

> Mr Roxburgh had his crypto-faith in those who perform feats of manual dexterity and technical miracles which might contribute to his personal welfare. . . . (141)

Mary Hare, in Riders in the Chariot, is possibly the fullest expression of the principle that the experience of a thing liberates its transcendance; ironically, however, the attempt to articulate that experience reduces the substance to its original banality. This is, in part, the dilemma of White as a mystic artist.

The Neoplatonic tendency in White's writing provides a perfect instance of what Derrida has identified as the bias in Western philosophy. Derrida's project has been to demonstrate how there is, in our tradition, evidence of an abiding belief in an always-prior utterance, a speech act or performance which precedes and surpasses its present linguistic (and particularly, its written) execution. Christopher Norris provides such a lucid explication that he is worth quoting at some length.

> Voice becomes a metaphor of truth and authenticity, a source of self-present 'living' speech as opposed to the secondary lifeless emanations of writing . . . .Writing. . .destroys this ideal

> of pure self-presence. It obtrudes an alien, depersonalized medium, a deceiving shadow which falls between intent and meaning, between utterance and understanding. . . . Writing, in short, is a threat to the deeply traditional view that associates truth with self-presence and the 'natural' language wherein it finds expression. (28)
>
> . . . .
>
> Rousseau, for instance, treats of writing as the "supplement" of spoken language, existing in a secondary relation to speech just as speech itself - by the same token - is at one remove from whatever it depicts. Such arguments have a long prehistory in Western thought. Like Plato's mystical doctrine of forms, the effect is to devalue the activities of art and writing by constant appeal to a pure metaphysics of presence, their distance from which condemns them to an endless play of deceitful imitation. (33)

Voice, in other words, is identified with the Utopian, with a fullness of utterance and an identity between essence and form.

In White's fiction there are a number of significant moments during which the author allows words to be re-animated, reinvested with their original fullness. He does this by undermining the referential function of words, concentrating instead on their concrete reality. This strategy is vividly presented, for example, in the description of the "see seed" in *Voss* (183). Dreaming about the seeds of an unidentified lily found by Palfreyman, the naturalist, Voss has a revelation about the tangible nature of language. Characteristically, he tries to resist the dream.

> I do not wish this yet, or *nie nie nie*,

> niemals. Nein. You will, she said, if you will cut and examine the word. "Together" is filled with little cells. And cuts open with a knife. It is a see seed. . . . The weaker is stronger, O Vooooss. (183)

In these lines White plays with the visual representation of the name "Voss", transforming the signifier into a sign, as the name itself becomes a little row of identical seeds. There are related moments in many of the novels, when words take on a substantial quality. For Mrs Roxburgh in A Fringe of Leaves, the name of Garnet, her seducer/lover is transmuted into G-A-R-N-u-r-d (133), and in Riders in the Chariot Mordecai becomes MORD. . . (503). At the end of The Vivisector, Hurtle Duffield, the ego-obsessed painter, has a final vision which is the mantra "indi-ggoddd" (617).

The hieroglyphic opacity of these magical words reveals White's affiliations with Neoplatonism. For the Neoplatonist, mysteries were not to be available to all, but should be concealed by the Cloud of Unknowing or a veil which obscured the mystery and kept it hidden from profaners. The difficult and impenetrable is thus identified with the sacred, as Cusanus explains:

> The face of faces is veiled in all faces and seen in a riddle. Unveiled it is not found until one has entered, beyond all visions, into a state of secret and hidden silence, in which nothing is left of knowing or imagining a face. For so long as this obscurity is not reached, this cloud, this darkness - that is, the ignorance into which he who seeks thy face enters when he transcends all knowledge and under-

> standing - so long can thy face be encountered
> only veiled. (qtd. in Wind 221)

White's purposes are frequently those identified by Neoplatonic teaching. At times, as demonstrated in his transformation of names into signs or hieroglyphs, White's actual strategies are those of the Neoplatonists: as Wind remarks, "Plotinus had suggested that Egyptian ciphers are more suitable for sacred script than alphabetic writing because they represent the diverse parts of a discourse as implicit, and thus concealed, in one single form" (207).

It seems that White is interested in setting up a disturbance at the level of signification, by making language more gnostic. An extension of the complication at a linguistic level, is evident in White's breaking down of philosophic and social categories. If we follow Lévi-Strauss's formulation, social codes are themselves organised as a language, and a rupture of such codes is effectively also a disruption of the language to which the codes belong.[3] Such an undermining of social norms and conventions is inevitable in a frontier encounter, when alien cultures meet each other. Ellen Roxburgh's sojourn with the Aboriginals is thus characterised by a series of challenges to the codes and ethics of nineteenth century Europe.

III: The Collapse of Categories

Ellen Roxburgh is an unsettling protagonist. First, as we have noted, White is violating expectations in the reader by making her the locus of the narrative. Even more unsettling, perhaps, is the fact that

she is guilty of the two great crimes identified by Western culture: first, she is guilty of incest; secondly, she is also guilty of cannibalism. Cannibalism is of course something of a rhetorical trope in the shipwreck narrative; it is used as a sign of the foreignness, the cultural strangeness of indigenous peoples encountered.[4] In A Fringe of Leaves White uses the trope while at the same time managing to challenge the assumptions upon which it is based by having Ellen Roxburgh participate in a cannibalistic feast.

Incest is so frequent a preoccupation in the nineteenth century novel that it too functions as a kind of trope. It is a pervasive threat in Wuthering Heights, for example, and is a veiled motif in Mill on the Floss and Jude the Obscure. White uses the incest theme as a way of locating his text as a nineteenth century saga, and he does so by following many of the conventions in some detail. Let us examine the pattern of Jane Austen's Mansfield Park fairly closely, as it exemplifies many of the features which White chooses to employ.

First published in 1814, Mansfield Park depicts, with characteristic detail but uncharacteristic sobriety, the lot of the poor cousin, brought into the home of her wealthy relations, the Bertrams, that she might be given the advantages of a cultivated home. We watch as she is, in turn, exploited, undervalued, ignored, until finally her intrinsic worth is recognised and she proves herself adequate to marry the second son.

At first appearance the circumstances of A Fringe of Leaves could hardly be more dissimilar. Published in 1976, White's novel is a

fictional recreation of an early nineteenth century shipwreck off the coast of Australia. However, a close scrutiny of the two novels begins to reveal certain interesting parallels. Most obviously, the two girls have been born into circumstances which would preclude the expression of their potential. Ellen is all too aware of how determined her future would have been had she not been absorbed into the Roxburgh family.

> The girl's fate might have been her own, that of a scullery-maid becoming a drudge-wife, had a rich man's caprice not saved her from it. (64)

Fanny's original circumstances are not quite the same as Ellen's. Her lot, we are told, is the consequence of a misalliance in marriage: further, her family is urban, settled in Portsmouth. Ellen's is rural, and much of her circumstance is the direct consequence of cultural, class and economic distance between Protestant London and Celtic Cornwall. However, in both novels we are given an analysis of the fortunes and misfortunes of the young girl "taken in" by a cultivated and wealthy family. In both novels, the experience is frought with distress and humiliations. However, Austen leaves us in no doubt as to the cultural superiority of Fanny's adoptive class. In White's novel, by contrast, Ellen is deliberately placed as having come from an organic and resistant farming community, a community which, for all its hardships, is rich in its own spirits and legends: Tristan and Isolde glide across the surf of her adolescent dreams, and Tintagel is the longed-for place of pilgrimage. In order to be assimilated into the Roxburgh family, Ellen must surrender as much as she adopts.

When Mrs Norris, Fanny Price's aunt, first suggests that Lord Bertram undertake to educate and cultivate his niece at Mansfield Park, she senses a momentary resistance in him. In order to allay any apprehensions she constructs an intriguing argument:

> You are thinking of your sons - but do not you know that of all things upon earth _that_ is the least likely to happen; brought up as they would be, always together as brothers and sisters? It is morally impossible. (44)

Clearly, the alliance which is feared by Lord Bertram is here rejected by Mrs Norris on the grounds that such a bond would be incestuous. Yet it is exactly the love of a brother for a sister which Edmund, the second son, has for Fanny: "My Fanny - my only sister - my only comfort now" is his cry when he is betrayed in his passion for Mary Crawford (432). Edmund, of course, marries Fanny, and we are asked by the author to believe that the brotherly affection is transmuted into an adult love "exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier" (454).

Similar fraternal affections are celebrated in all of Austen's novels: a particularly striking parallel exists in the relationship between Emma and Mr Knightley. Yet in _Mansfield Park_ there is the most overt and revealing defence of brotherly and sisterly love as exemplum of the highest and deepest affection. Here Austen describes the love between Fanny and her brother William, from whom she has been removed since girlhood, but with whom she had corresponded regularly.

> An advantage this, a strengthener of love, in

> which even the conjugal tie is beneath the fraternal. Children of the same family, the same blood, with the same first associations and habits, have some means of enjoyment in their power, which no subsequent connections can supply; and it must be by a long and unnatural estrangement, by a divorce which no subsequent connection can justify, if such precious remains of the earliest attachment are ever entirely outlived. Too often, alas! it is so. - Fraternal love, sometimes almost every thing, is at others worse than nothing. But with William and Fanny Price, it was still a sentiment in all its prime and freshness, wounded by no opposition of interest, cooled by no separate attachment, and feeling the influence of time and absence only in its increase. (244)

In these lines there is an antagonism established between 'conjugal' and 'fraternal' loves in the opening sentence, with the hierarchical preposition 'beneath'; further, the connotations of such words as 'unnatural', 'estrangement', 'divorce' and 'increase' all suggest that this fraternal love is itself laden with sexual overtones.

What is the cause, what is the meaning of Austen's passionate outburst at this point? A clue to the enigma lies in the lines "Children of the same family, the same blood, with the same first associations and habits . . ." It is that reiteration of the phrase "the same" which suggests that Austen is seeking to protect and conserve the identity of a closely defined group with shared values. Some perceptive insights into this phenomenon have been formulated by Edmund Leach in his structural analysis of historical Jewish kinship

structures. Analysing the material in the Book of Genesis, Leach demonstrates how the Jewish community maintained racial purity in order to enhance their spiritual communion with their God, that the foreigner represented a threat to cultural and spiritual identity during this period of upheaval ("Genesis" 1-14). Endogamous marriages, marriages within the group, were advocated and organised by the community. However, in structures such as this the close-knit group is constantly at risk of taking the principle to its logical extreme through the practice of incest, in which most-like are bound together. In order to prevent this, structures are set up which define very specific marriage options.

If we consider Austen's novel in similar terms we see that, although the model must be modified, it still provides some useful insights. Fanny cannot marry William, in spite of their devotion to one another, because of the laws of taboo. She thus forms an attachment with Edmund, a surrogate with whom she is raised and educated. She is assimilated into the Bertram family and acquires their values and habits. The Bertram family is clearly a portrait of the decaying end of an aristocratic line, as we see from Lady Bertram's lassitude and the moral bankruptcy of the children. Fanny Price provides the possibility of a regenerated line, a reinvigoration.

If Leach's formulation is translated into material terms, then Edmund's marriage to an 'outsider', someone from another class, threatens to dissipate the advantages of his education as well as to precipitate the redistribution of the wealth of the great estates.

The crisis is thus expressed in Austen as a conflict between an impulse toward incest and the taboo which renders incest intolerable. The resolution is to celebrate the union of brother/sister types, "Children of the same family, the same blood, with the same first associations and habits".

An examination of the early pages of A Fringe of Leaves reveals some similarities between Fanny Price and White's protagonist, Ellen Gluyas. The daughter of a poor Cornwall farmer, Ellen's sphere of experience and opportunity is extremely narrow, and this in spite of middle-class family relations. As White notes:

> Alone on a derelict farm on the edge of a moor, she would have had to leave in any case, but where to go? Into service? Aunt Triphena would not have had her on account of Will and incestuous marriages between cousins, as Hepzie pointed out in a book. (30)

Aunt Triphena's apprehensions are similar to those which are debated in the opening pages of Mansfield Park, the likelihood of "incestuous marriages between cousins". Despite parental intervention, however, the interest which develops between cousins Ellen and Will takes on an adolescent sexual dimension.

> On her fifteenth birthday Will had been unable to disguise the pleasure her company gave him; he fumbled at her outside the dairy. Whether she had enjoyed it, Ellen was afraid to consider, for Aunt Triphena's becoming a too sudden witness.
> 'I'll get vex with you, Will, if you act disrespectful to Ellen. She's as close as your

own sister, remember.' (36)

The incest motif is pervasive in A Fringe of Leaves, far more so than initially evident, and it has escaped the attention of previous critics. There is the relationship between Ellen and her cousin; further, there is Ellen's ambivalent attitude towards her father.

> While she was still a little girl, he used to stroke her cheeks as though to learn the secrets of her skin. She would feel the horn-thing on his crushed thumb scraping her.
>
> On one occasion, unable to bear it any longer, she cried out, 'Cusn't tha see I dun't want to be touched?' and threw him off.
>
> He brooded and sulked a fair while, but it had been necessary; shame told her she was as much excited as disgusted; she grew more thoughtful as a result, and melancholy on wet afternoons. (42)

Here there is an attraction between father and daughter, offset by a revulsion which the child naively displaces to the thumb-nail. The thumb, as a disfigured phallus, is a sign of the incestuous overtones in the relationship. There is a third instance in the novel, when Ellen is seduced by her husband's brother (82-83). In other words, White is exploring three specifically different structures of incest. What are his purposes? Although there are certain ironic resonances of Mansfield Park in the early episodes, White's intent is clearly not the same as Austen's. The incest motif locates A Fringe of Leaves as a text responding to other nineteenth century novels; furthermore, as we shall see, it suggests the collapse of categories inevitable in the colonial

encounter.

According to Leach's formulation, the impulse toward incest is in response to a threat to cultural identity. In Austen's work, the threat is generated by changing socio-economic factors. In A Fringe of Leaves the threat is due not so much to changes at home (although Ellen herself is to an extent representative of the new mobility between classes) but because of increased colonial contact between Britain and her territories. Ellen is, however, not only guilty of incest, she also participates in cannibalism. In other words, she violates what have been constructed by our society as the two great taboos. And it is, according to Lévi-Strauss, precisely because these acts threaten the structure of social organisation that they are so severely prohibited.

Although the principles which determine what we may or may not eat are presumably different from those which determine when sex is allowed and when it is prohibited, both the incest and the cannibalism taboos are based upon the principle of categorisation.[5] Social groups, in seeking to defend themselves, establish categories which govern their sexual and their nutritional appetites. The exact codes will differ from region to region, from group to group, but the principle remains intact.

> Human beings, in the process of learning to talk, extend this category-forming capacity to a degree that has no parallel among other creatures. . . . (Claude Lévi-Strauss 39)

> Certain binary concepts are part of man's nature - eg., men and women are alike in one sense yet opposite and interdependent in another;

> the right hand and the left hand are, likewise, equal and opposite, yet related. In society as it actually exists we find that such natural pairs are invariably loaded with cultural significance - they are made into the prototype symbols of the good and the bad, the permitted and the forbidden. . . . The incest taboo . . . implies a capacity to distinguish between women who are permitted and women who are forbidden and thus generates a distinction between women of the category wife and women of the category sister.
> (Claude Lévi-Strauss 45)

Incest and cannibalism are so powerfully threatening to the Western consciousness because they are perceived as a failure to discriminate the categories of prohibition and tolerance upon which our society is based.

White's intention is not that we should shun Ellen Roxburgh in horror; rather, he has her violate the taboos in order to confront his readers with their own assumptions about social organisation. Extending this principle further, he wishes to show how the Manichean habits of classification which have characterised recent Western attitudes are shaken by encounters with new worlds.

The nature of colonial contact was such that it challenged all former habits of thought. There is an oblique reference to this late in the novel.

> She meant to encourage her visitor, or anyway, in some measure, but on hearing her own voice was reminded of the black swans encountered while living with her adoptive tribe. It was the same hissing as when the birds arched their

> necks, and extended their bills, spatulate and
> crimson, making ready to protect themselves
> against the intruder. (281)

By indicating that Australia is the home of the black swan, White is reminding his readers that the colonial context is one in which categories are challenged, rejected or modified. The encounter with the unfamiliar, the inconceivable black swan is a sign of the disturbing foreignness which characterized much of Australian natural history. It is by now a familiar anecdote that the platypus was dismissed, when first introduced into European scientific circles, as a hoax because it combined a number of contradictory features. European classification had no way of accomodating this peculiar cluster of disparate parts.[6] Even today the platypus is considered a somewhat whimsical and eccentric set of differences, rather than an organically conceived unity.

The shock at discovering that creatures existed which Western civilization had no way of 'naming' had been a feature of colonial texts since the earliest colonial adventures. Much more profound than the stress of having constantly to expand the bestiary in order to incorporate novel forms was the distress at encountering new groups of what might need to be classified as human cultures. The encounter was threatening on at least two levels: firstly, the existence of foreign and remote human societies posed a dramatic threat to one's situation at the centre of God's plan.[7] This led to an ever-growing sense of cultural relativism, as Ricouer demonstrates:

> When we discover that there are several cultures

> instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with the destruction of our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just others, that we ourselves are an "other" among others. (278)

Second, and more to our particular purposes, these human societies were manifestly foreign: they worshipped foreign gods; had kinship structures which violated Western ideas of proper and improper liasons; they, in everything which had defined what was human, differed rather than agreed. It was thus impossible to designate these as truly human societies, and once again categorical definitions were challenged and confused. Animal features and physical grotesqueries were attributed to the foreigners. Even Eliza Fraser, the historical counterpart to Ellen Roxburgh, herself described the Australian Aboriginals as having blue hair growing from their shoulders like epaulettes, in spite of the fact that she had actually lived in Aboriginal society (Alexander 126).
An excerpt from John Mandeville's Travels (c 1350) is useful because it manifests the merging of categories which is so characteristic of these early travel narratives. Describing the inhabitants of the Isle of Natumeran, Mandeville switches from the observed 'real' to the phantoms of the threatened European imagination: "Men and women of that isle have heads like hounds; and they are called Cynocephales" (qtd. in Pratt 139).

The spectre of the hound-headed race was readily, with time, transmuted into the notorious Anthropophogi, the cannibals who lived off

human flesh. Cannibalism was generally used an index of the degree of barbarity of a foreign group; it functioned as a sign of the "otherness" of other peoples, and was frequently an expression of paranoia or cultural arrogance. As such, it was inconceivable that cannibalism could be attributed to a 'civilized' European. However, this self-assurance was severely shaken in the nineteenth century by the tragic outcome of the celebrated Franklin expedition. In 1845 Sir John Franklin and a crew of 128 men set off, on behalf of the Royal Navy, in search of a Northwest Passage through the Arctic. His ships were the _Erebus_ and the _Terror_. Such was the confidence which Franklin and his noble quest inspired, that, even when the ships disappeared, the navy did not send out any search parties until 1848. The party seemed to have disappeared without trace. It was only in 1854 that _The Times_ published a report by Dr. John Rae, who had allegedly met with Eskimos who attested that they had found the remains of white men along the shores of King William Island. The report went further: Rae comments that it was clear from the Eskimos' testimony that "our wretched countrymen had been driven to the last resource - cannibalism - as a means of prolonging existence" (Knoepflmacher 108). The reaction to Rae's report was swift and passionate.[8] The reading public rejected the claim as preposterous, and sought every means possible to dispute it (see Knoepflmacher 95-112).

Such a frighful circumstance, inconceivable as it was to most European minds, had already been conceived of by Edgar Allan Poe, who, in his _The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket_, had included a

gruesome fictional account of cannibalism. Pym and his companions, after being lost at sea for weeks, finally draw lots and surrender one of their number up to be eaten by the others (Poe 146). Poe's novel was first published in 1838, just two years after the shipwreck of the Stirling Castle, the ship which had carried the factual counterpart of Ellen Roxburgh. It is perhaps with Poe's narrative in mind that White writes the following dialogue between Pilcher and Ellen:

> 'Some was for droring lots, to decide which of 'em 'twould be, but I wouldn't have no part in that.'
>
> 'And what about your companions? Did they favour eating one another?'
>
> Mr Pilcher swallowed. 'Some of 'em was eaten.' (282)

The difference between Poe's account and White's is that for Poe, cannibalism is a sign of absolute depravity, a judgement that is rendered more complex because of his own antipathy to the black races. (See Poe 14-30). In Heart of Darkness, similarly, there is a reference to the "unspeakable rites" in which Kurtz participates, rites which suggest his total degradation (Conrad 118). Although there is no specific indication that Conrad here refers to cannibalism, the eating of human flesh is so frequent an indication of moral collapse as to not require explanation.

Ellen both witnesses and participates in cannibalism when living with her adoptive tribe. She first encounters the practice by accidentally stumbling across the charred remains of Ned Courtney, the first officer, during one of her solitary rambles. Her initial response

is one of shock and revulsion: the Aboriginals are now described as "the vindictive but necessary blacks" (190), in which brief phrase White demonstrates her uneasy position as unwilling dependant. The ambiguity expressed skilfully exposes the psychological contradictions necessary to accommodate what she has learned, both about herself and about her captors. White describes the scene in meticulous detail.

> Amongst charred branches and the white flock of ash gone cold, lay a man's body set in a final anguished curve, the roasted skin noticeably crackled down one side from shoulder to thigh. One of the legs had been hacked away from where the thigh is joined to the hip. If the skull, bared to the bone in places by wilful gashes, grimaced at the intruder through singed whisker and a crust of blood, grime, and burning, the mouth atoned for all that is fiendish by its resignation to suffering. (189-190)

This scene is reminiscent of a moment in the opening pages of the novel. Delaney, the emancipist who deals with Mr Merivale, deliberately tries to provoke Mrs Merivale and Miss Scrimshaw by relating an account of cannibalism:

> 'Well,' he said, 'to cut a story short and come to the point however tragical, the two men - honest fellers both of 'em - had just been found, their guts laid open (savin' the ladies' presence). Stone cold, they were, an' the leg missin' off of one of 'em . . . .' (11-12)

Delaney's account is the stuff of which urban myths are made. It is a brief exemplum, which is constructed in such a way as to be both

outrageous and tantalizing. Mrs Merivale and Miss Scrimshaw respond accordingly.

> Mrs Merivale might have been impaled; Miss Scrimshaw, on the other hand, continued distantly watching a scene, each detail of which filled her with a fascinated horror. (12)

By contrast, the death of Ned Courtney is particularised and thereby contained. The scrupulous account places the episode outside of the realm of wild legend. The description evokes as much pathos as it does shock. Furthermore, this encounter with the corpse is placed within a very deliberate context, as the cannibalistic act is demythologised: we have been told, in the preceding pages, that the "whole of life by now revolved round the search for food" (187). The constant contest for limited nutritional resources is described by White. Even the fleas, we are wryly told, have a "greed for human flesh" (204) and it is the need to escape the fleas that frequently drives the group to change camp-sites (190).

White suggests the difficulty with which Ellen assimilates the fact of cannibalism. In one episode, he uses a confusion over categories in order to recreate the mind's reluctance to perceive what the viewer sees:

> she caught sight, to one side of the dying fire, of an object not unlike a leather mat spread upon the grass. She might have remained puzzled had she not identified fingernails attached to what she had mistaken for fringes, and at one end, much as a tiger's head lies propped on the floor at one end of a skin rug,

> what could be the head of the girl she remembered . . . . (201)

At each point of the cognitive process, we are told, Ellen attempts to interpret the information through appeals to familiar and placed impressions, which is why she identifies the features as something other than what they are. The human corpse becomes a "leather mat" and a "tiger's head". It requires a shift in mental process for her to identify the corpse for what it is.

Unlike Ned Courtney, the girl has been eaten by the community as a sacramental act. The unhappy victim of a domestic fight, she is removed into the forest where she is ceremonially consumed. We, as readers, are guided in our interpretation of this sequence by the very explicit authorial commentary in the preceding paragraph.

> She realized she had blundered upon the performance of rites she was not intended to witness. There was no immediate indication of what these were; most likely the ceremony was over, for she sensed something akin to the atmosphere surrounding communicants coming out of church looking bland and forgiven after the early service. (201)

These lines occur immediately before the description of the human corpse, and they thus provide the symbolic frame within which this act of cannibalism is to be interpreted. Further, White describes the quality of the morning air: there is "moisture dripping from frond and leaf." The atmosphere is singularly forgiving, the moist fresh morning clearly is an unexpected benison. Yet the communicants do not welcome witnesses: shocked at discovering the interloper in their group, the

Aboriginals pack up the remains of their feast and move off. Ellen, following slowly after them, finds a thigh bone accidentally dropped along the path. Caught between disgust and desire, she takes up the bone and gnaws from it the remaining morsels of flesh and fat. White's description of the subsequent moments is clearly ambivalent; it is not finally possible to determine whether the ambivalence is used to evoke his protagonist's contradictory state of mind, or whether it suggests a latent ambivalence in himself.

> The exquisite innocence of this forest morning, its quiet broken by a single flute-note endlessly repeated, tempted her to believe that she had partaken of a sacrament. But there remained what amounted to an abomination of human behaviour, a headache, and the first signs of indigestion. In the light of Christian morality she must never think of the incident again. (202)

It seems clear that the universe makes no accusation against Mrs Roxburgh: the morning is explicitly "innocent", and she is still capable of hearing natural choirs. What is not clear is whether she is capable of forgiving herself.

The difference between 'ceremonial' and 'aggressive' cannibalism is one of the issues hotly debated in anthropological circles. In fact, the question has been raised as to whether there is any substantial evidence for cannibalism as a sustained and sustaining practice. [9] Obviously the debate is of enormous significance because White himself clearly accepts the premise that at least certain of the Australian Aboriginal communities have practiced cannibalism. It is necessary to note, for our purposes here, that a distinction is made by most

anthropologists working in this field, between cannibalism against outsiders, which is designated as 'aggressive cannibalism', and the eating of the dead within the group in order that they be re-integrated into the community, and live again through the lives of others. This is, of course, the symbolic interpretation of ritual cannibalism. A materialist interpretation of this behaviour has suggested that cannibalism of the dead is practised in areas deficient in protein resources.

In A Fringe of Leaves White actually seems to hold a number of variant interpretations together, allowing for a complex of interpretions which all provide some insight. The sacramental feast is prompted both by transcendental and by physical hunger. At Austin Roxburgh's death we are given a deliberately brutal and demystified reading, a reading which allows for little comfort:

> The blood was running warm and sticky over her hands. Round the mouth, and on one smeared temple, more transparent than she had ever seen it, flies were crowding in black clots, greedy for the least speck of crimson before the sun dried the virtue out of it. (177-178)

There is an ambiguity in the description of the flies, for it is unclear whether they are settling upon already clotting blood, or whether there is a macabre elision of meaning, suggesting that the mobs of flies are thickening upon the corpse, becoming what they feed upon. Of course, there is also the ironic resonance in the choice of the noun 'virtue' to designate the blood's nutritional richness.

At other points, however, White is clearly demonstrating that

Christian mythology, (ever at odds with "Christian morality"!) with its emphasis on the partaking of the body and blood of Christ, is the symbolic equivalent of the act of cannibalism. This understanding is anticipated early in the novel, for when, after days without sustenance on the lost longboat, Spurgeon dies and is heaved overboard, Austin Roxburgh's reverie takes on the quality of hallucination:

> he fell to thinking how the steward, had he not been such an unappetising morsel, might have contributed appreciably to an exhausted larder. At once Mr Roxburgh's self-disgust knew no bounds. He was glad that night had fallen and that everyone around him was sleeping. Yet his thoughts were only cut to a traditional pattern, as Captain Purdew must have recognised, who now came stepping between the heads of the sleepers, to bend and whisper, _This is the body of Spurgeon which I have reserved for thee, take eat_. (171)

Cannibalism, we have seen, was used from the earliest of times in Western travel writings to show the absolute foreigness of foreign cultures. White selects just this sign to demonstrate that the difference perceived is based upon misperception; that the structures which govern and order Christian orthodoxy have their analogues in Aboriginal practice. Thus the rite in which Ellen participates, when she partakes of the body of the dead girl, is not so much foreign as familiar.

Given the context of all of the sacramental feasting suggested in the novel, there is one episode in particular which assumes an exaggerated symbolic significance. After Ellen eludes her Aboriginal

captors via the intervention of Jack Chance, a runaway convict, the two become lovers as they attempt to make their way out of the labyrinthine forest wilderness and back to the borders of the European settlements. One afternoon Chance ventures off to capture the evening meal. Following the pattern of Aboriginal distribution of labour, Mrs Roxburgh stays behind to encourage a fire "using sticks and fibre", as the black women had done (233).

When Chance finally returns, he is carrying "one of the giant birds of wooden gait and human demeanour" (234), clearly an emu. The devouring of the emu is given the status of symbolic cannibalism by White; this is achieved through a series of linguistic manipulations and associations. First, the emu is described as having something like the air of a human being; further, Chance seems uneasy at having killed the creature. Ellen "thought she could detect moral censure directed by the convict at himself for having murdered the human bird". In these two phrases White overtly establishes an equivalence between 'emu' and 'human'.[10] The analogy is not original to White, however; there is a series of Aboriginal myths which draw attention to the curiously contradictory status of the emu, as not entirely bird-like yet nonetheless oviparous.[11] The singular nature of the emu is also suggested in a cycle of myths in which the eating of emu-meat is socially tabooed.[12]

When Chance arrives with the bird under his arm, Ellen notes the neck "dangling as far as his shins, like the broken spring of a jack-in-the-box" (234). Apart from providing a striking simile, these words set up a structure of identity between the slaughtered bird and its killer, because of course Chance is himself named Jack. The

"jack-in-the box" thus becomes a riddling description of Chance as convict. It is a defamiliarized pun on the over-worked and thus neutralized term "jail-bird". The emu can thus "stand in for", or substitute for Chance in a ritual of sacrifice and communion; and this is precisely what takes place, because the meal does become, in a measure, redemptive for Chance the murderer:

> She liked to believe that rest and their feast of emu meat had restored to him what she remembered as authority and strength, and was even persuaded that she saw a nobility transcending the convict's origins and fall from grace . . . . (235)

The equivalence between the emu and Christ is to some extent enabled by Christian traditions of substitution, however it is also derived from Aboriginal myths of metamorphosis.[13]

There is a further sense in which the convict is 'saved'. Jack Chance is excluded from telling his own history, because society has determined that he be silent. By allowing Chance to speak, White confronts the reader with "the convict's origins and fall from grace", and so the figure of the convict, too, is redeemed, liberated to play a speaking part in Australian history.

Figures of metamorphosis abound in all of White's novels, and his metaphor-laden style enhances a sense of constant mutation, of things in a state of Becoming, rather than fixed in Being. For example, the idea of the man-bird, as exemplified in the emu, is prepared for by a mass of metaphoric as well as narrative detail. This detail accumulates until patterns and structures of transformation become evident. Further,

these suggestions of transformation also reinforce the sense of a collapse of categories, as identity becomes unstable. It is with curious pleasure that one discovers that the home of Ellen and Austin Roxburgh is named "Birdlip House". The peculiar conjoining of 'bird' and 'lip' is one which unsettles because it contradicts all experience. The presence of 'lip' excludes the possibility of 'bird', yet here the two disparate elements are yoked together. This yoking of dissimilar ideas is frequently used by White in order to revitalize metaphoric conventions; however at times it would seem that these linguistic ploys underpin a profound philosophic principle. Such an instance can be seen in the narrator's deliberately faltering attempts to find an accurate designation for the Aboriginal who performs a magical healing rite over an ailing child.

> She recognized by his topknot and the dilli containing the magic stone carried under one armpit, the physician, or wise man, or conjurer, who had failed to resurrect the dead child. (211)

The different terms allow for a variety of frames of reference. It becomes evident that in this instance the Aboriginal is being treated not so much as an individual but as a component in the structural organisation of his society. The implication is that the physician, the wise man and the conjurer all fulfill the same role in their respective social groups.

IV: Outsider Voices

After Mr Roxburgh meets Miss Scrimshaw at the harbour as the

Bristol Maid is preparing for departure, he subsequently remarks to his wife that the "brown woman - that eagle - or vulture, would peck out a man's liver for tuppence" (24). A variety of different reading operations are activated by this simple sentence. Obviously, there is the appeal to an external or public mythological system, with the allusion to Prometheus. Further, there is the echo of an association between 'bird' and 'human'. There is also an irony in Roxburgh's characterisation of Miss Scrimshaw as "the brown woman", for just prior to this episode Miss Scrimshaw has characterised Cornwall as a "remote county. . . . Of dark people" (5). The concept of darkness is used to designate foreignness: in fact an identical correspondence occurs in Riders in the Chariot, in which the Jew, as outsider, is similarly classified as dark. The Jew is, on a number of occasions, actually identified as black. Blue, the young fascist bully, abuses Himmelfarb with the words "You bloody buggers! . . .You black bastards!" (Riders 459). One of the European Jewish ancestors is likewise described as "that black old woman whose innocent and almost only joy had been to welcome in the Bride with Cup and Candle" (Riders 494).

The characterisation of both Miss Scrimshaw and Ellen as somehow 'dark' is used to link them as outsiders denied a place in dominant British society: Miss Scrimshaw, as a destitute and thus dependent member of the aristocracy, and Ellen, as Cornish peasant, and both, as women. They are thus also obviously aligned with the Aboriginals, a group similarly excluded from constitutional and discursive power. It seems in fact that one of White's main projects in A Fringe of Leaves is to rewrite Australian history, and to write into it the histories of

those groups normally excluded.

It is already evident that in this novel White is looking at the place of women and Aboriginals; another community given deliberate attention is that of the Australian convict. In order to display and describe historical Australian power structures, White links these three groups consciously. This is achieved through the creation of a protagonist and a narrative which allow for maximum personal and social mobility. Ellen Roxburgh is thus able to both witness and participate in a vast spectrum of human groupings. What is worth noting, too, is that the narrator is constantly drawing analogies between the groups observed. The analogy is achieved, at times, by an explicit comparison.

> [She] feared that this ribbon of sand might not lead to Moreton Bay, but could double back upon itself to create a prison in an island. (189)

At times, however, the link is established with greater poetic subtlety, as one frame of reference ellides with another, as is evident in the following dream-like sequence. Ellen and Jack Chance have fled from the Aboriginal group and are resting in the cool of an unexpected forest:

> She was lying stretched on the scrolled couch. The striped cerise silk blazed in a sunlight such as Cheltenham had never seen, the gilding of the scrollwork bronzed and blistered by unnatural heat (the gold leaf was in fact peeling like sunburnt skin). She shaded her eyes and rearranged her neck on the bolster as though expecting an assignation. She had shed, she noticed, the fringe of leaves which was her normal dress . . . . (231)

Most frequently the parallels between the various worlds is suggested through the characterization of Ellen, who embodies, in a sense, the Keatsian notion of the artistic imaginative capacity, that 'negative capability' which enables the creative mind to take on various identities. Ellen is, in her range of encounters, alternately convict, and Aboriginal, but always woman.

The depiction of Aboriginal society in A Fringe of Leaves differs fundamentally from that in Voss, which, in turn, is unlike that in Riders in the Chariot. In Voss, White had focussed on the spiritual life of the Aborigines, making indigenous Australian symbolic structures accessible to the reader, showing these to be compatible with Western mystical traditions. Riders in the Chariot is an urban novel, and the Aboriginal, Alf Dubbo, is the product of the chaotic mix of his Australian ancestors and his mission-school education. In A Fringe of Leaves, White is at pains to depict the material, rather than the symbolic culture of Aboriginal Australians. There is, for example, the careful scrutiny of the hierarchy between men and women (182); the deliberately observed preoccupation with food, with particular attention to the women's digging techniques (186) and the fishing episode (190-191). Ellen is herself struck with what she initially perceives to be a lack of metaphysical coherence in the Aboriginal community.

> What she longed to sense in the behaviour of these human beings was evidence of a spiritual design, but that she could not, any more than she could believe in a merciful power shaping her own destiny. (182)

All existence is resolved down to its most fundamental ingredient, as Ellen herself is re-educated to think "of food which is, after all, life, as she had forgot while sipping chocolate and without appetite nibbling maçaroons at Birdlip House Cheltenham" (191).

Ellen's increased awareness of the demands of necessity stands in ironic antithesis to her late husband whose "experience of life, like his attitude to death, had been of a predominantly literary nature" (154). A devotee of Virgil, Austin Roxburgh is addicted to the pastoral idyll constructed in the _Eclogues_, and this classical education has culminated in his conviction that "[o]ver and above practical necessity, labour, you might say, has its sacramental function" (35). There is, it is true, the expression of just this "sacramental function" in _A Fringe of Leaves_; it is possibly best exemplified in the episode in which Austin Roxburgh applies a poultice to the neck of Spurgeon:

> Mr Roxburgh applied the poultice to the inflamed swelling on the steward's neck, and bound it up, round and round, with the strip of shirt, sighing as he did so; he had come to love Spurgeon's boil for giving him occasion to discover in himself, if not an occult gift, at least a congratulable virtue. (160)

However, the accumulating tax of material distress constantly erodes the frail world of the imagination in which death might be contained, as "something of a literary conceit" (20). There is a resounding shock at the centre of the novel, when Roxburgh is killed by an Aboriginal spear; the death has a grotesque brutality because it is so certain, so physical by contrast with Roxburgh's intellectually constructed world.

The slow detail exaggerates and distorts; order, proportion and symmetry are mocked by the surreal inappropriateness of the moment.

> Mrs Roxburgh became aware of a terrible whooshing, like the beating of giant wings, infernal in that they were bearing down upon her more than any other being. Indeed, nothing more personal had happened to her in the whole of her life. For a spear, she saw, had struck her husband; it was hanging from his neck, long and black, giving him a lopsided look.
>
> 'Awwwh!' Ellen Gluyas cried out from what was again an ignorant and helpless girlhood.
>
> Austin Roxburgh was keeling over. On reaching the sand his body would have re-asserted itself, but the attempt petered out in the parody of a landed shrimp.
>
> 'Oh, no! No, no! It was the little skipping motion, of defeat in the attempt, which freed her; it was too piteous, as though all the children she had failed to rear were gesticulating for her help. . . .
>
> She could not, would never pray again. 'Oh, no, Lord! Why are we born, then?' (177)

The shock, for Ellen Roxburgh, at losing the man whose preservation has become her life's work, is registered as a loss of faith.

In _Voss_ and _Riders in the Chariot_ the narrative structure of the novels is, to a large extent, determined by the symbolic system underscoring each work. Thus, in _Voss_, the alchemical transformation demands that Voss undergo trial and dissolution in the desert; in _Riders in the Chariot_, Himmelfarb becomes the scapegoat, the sacrificial lamb, the Messiah. The patterns of metaphor and symbol are often actually generated by the narrative structures, and similarly the narrative

structures are determined to some extent by the symbols and metaphors. The narrative resolution of the text is thus a vindication of the stylistic features of the text. This is not the case in A Fringe of Leaves. Much of the symbolic and metaphoric material derives its meaning solely within the terms of the novel itself: there is not the same appeal to an immense coherent frame, a single organising principle. White is always in some sense a religious writer, and so what is identified here in A Fringe of Leaves is not so much an absolute case, obviously, as a tendency. There are patterns of image which cannot satisfactorily be reclaimed and recuperated by the reader. For example, there is a glass stopper which is literal when first mentioned (141) which becomes metaphoric later in the novel. Oswald Dignam, Ellen's child-like ally on the ship, is buried at sea, and White has "the sea put a glassy stopper in his mouth" (158). This metaphor can, to a limited extent, be recovered with reference to Voss; White's novels do, as already noted, refer to each other to an unusually high degree. However the image has become sterile when divorced from its original context, and brings with it a sense of displacement. It is an awkward and reluctant allusion in A Fringe of Leaves, whereas it had been a potent and cohering principle in Voss.

A similar discomfort is experienced by the reader when trying to untangle the immense web of allusion to garnets. Ellen is associated with garnets, is given a garnet ring to wear, is seduced by her brother-in-law Garnet Roxburgh, and, finally, by the close of the novel is wearing a garnet-coloured silk dress. One can make some meaning of this when alerted to the fact that in Old French and Latin the word is a

cognate for pomegranate, for Ellen thus is associated with Persephone, female rites of passage, and cyclical renewal. Nonetheless this reading is not entirely satisfying because the demands of the narrative chosen by White differ from the structural resolution offered by the myth. The reader accustomed to looking for organising metaphoric and philosophic systems in White's novels would do well to remember that Ellen Roxburgh is guided back to the settlement by Chance, rather than by Design.

If, in A Fringe of Leaves, Ellen Roxburgh is excluded from the full mystery of Aboriginal culture, and records it only in its material expression, she does, by contrast, gain real insight into the circumstances of the Australian convict. When she first arrives in van Dieman's land, she is struck by its genteel facade and comments "I have difficulty in believing I am being driven through a famous penal colony of the antipodes" (57). It is one of the great contradictions of Australian history that Australia's success has been in large part due to the energies of its original convict population. What a riddle, that those who were so threatening to the structure of society 'back home' could subsequently provide the basis for a similar society on the other side of the globe. It was, after all, the anti-social aspect of these criminals that made deportation such a palatable option. Let us not underestimate the scale of the convict population: Michael Alexander notes that at the time of the Stirling Castle's arrival in 1836, "the convict population of New South Wales was 27,000 out of a total of 77,000" (19). What view of Australia permitted this kind of colonial

'dumping'? Richard White, in Inventing Australia, attributes much of the ruthlessness to an uncomprehending revulsion at things antipodean, evident from the earliest reports by Dampier in the seventeenth century. As Richard White explains:

> There was a terrible aptness about the decision that the new land of contraries should become, on the advice of Banks, a dumping ground for those who had gone against the established social order. The lowest element of British society was to be cast out among the lowest form of human life; unnatural vice was to be exiled as far from home as possible, where nature itself was inverted and nakedness knew no shame. (16)

The runaway convict has had, inevitably, to play a dual role in Australian legend. A figure of menace, he (and sometimes she, as in the famous case of Mary Bryant and her companions) was also a symbol of potent anarchic energy, an avenger, a romantic outsider whose task it was to redress the injustices of the Australian penal system. This is, for example, the Ned Kelly of legend. It is also the Ned Kelly depicted in Sidney Nolan's numerous paintings.[14]

When we first meet Jack Chance, the runaway convict in A Fringe of Leaves, he is full of the mercurial vigour which is identified in legend. He is a "giant of a fellow, a natural clown", who entertains the Aboriginals with his tricks and jokes. Further, he carries at his waist an axe, which is much admired and coveted (207). Because he exists outside of any social group he is classless and thus has a power and a liberty, an almost magical quality. However, once he and Ellen

become fellow fugitives and lovers, we are introduced to the specific circumstances of his life, his trade, his period of penal servitude. He ds not remain the shadowy figure of the imagination, but is rewritten as as a substantial and contradictory individual with human fears, needs and suspicions. It is his detailed tangible existence that is used to such powerful effect by White. The intimate portrait of himself as a bird-catcher is what gives poignant meaning to his frightful history. Jack Chance does not exemplify the lot of the deported convict; quite the contrary. Chance's narrative reminds the reader that each convict's story is as distinct, as idiosyncratic in its ironies and its pathos.

White's use of the runaway convict as Ellen Roxburgh's guide is more deliberate than is immediately apparent to the reader. The choice is in fact a response to elements in the historical saga of Eliza Fraser. When in August of 1836 a search party was sent out to look for any survivors of the luckless Stirling Castle, John Graham, a convict, volunteered to join the search party, in hope of a commuted sentence. At this point the story becomes controversial, for local belief has it that Graham's tale is not the full account, that the convict responsible for Mrs Fraser's rescue was in fact an individual named David Bracefell. Bracefell had lived for some years amongst the Aboriginals, but allegedly involved himself in the rescue of Eliza Fraser, hoping to be granted a pardon. However, as legend has it, not fully trusting the good will of his charge he fled back into the bush just before arriving at a European settlement. In his novel, White chooses to follow the popular myth rather than what was official history, and Bracefell

clearly provides the pattern for Jack Chance, the runaway convict.

There is one other outsider figure to be considered, and that is one afforded a unique and significant place. This is the artist, generally in White a seer, a visionary inividual who interprets society to itself.

V: The place of art

It may seem perverse that the final question to be considered here is White's conception of the role of the artist, for this is the only one of the novels under consideration which has no true artistic visionary. Yet it is for precisely this reason that A Fringe of Leaves casts such powerful shadows on White's previous novels. In Voss and Riders in the Chariot the artist offers the promise of a world (even if only in the imagination) in which contradictions can be reconciled, in which the European and the Aboriginal experience can be married, and in which men and women are at peace with themselves and with one another. A Fringe of Leaves suggests that such glimses of order and unity are but "circumstantial straws" at which "human nature cannot but grasp" (303).

Austin Roxburgh, the artist figure in A Fringe of Leaves is a failure, an artist by aspiration, not in substance. His models are all classical, and he has no assimilative imagination; thus he can produce no original vision. The transformation of his wife, the farmgirl Ellen Gluyas, into an acceptable English gentlewoman, is the one sucessful project in a life characterised by feebleness and sterility.

When Mr Merivale alerts his companions to the fact that "Mrs Roxburgh is a woman, not a marble statue" (6), White is setting up a

pattern of allusion to the Pygmalion myth which reverberates throughout the novel. Pygmalion is, among other things, the story of the active and creative male agent which structures, composes and orders the passive female form into a living being that is both aesthetically pleasing and desirable. However, the need for the male to contain and determine the nature of the woman's desire is integral to Ovid's version of the myth: we are told that Pygmalion has renounced women because of witnessing the unbridled lust of the "loathsome Propoetides" (Ovid 231), the first women to prostitute themselves in public. As a manifestation of their brazenness, the blood hardens in their cheeks, and it is but a short step, then, when they are actually transformed into flints. Clearly, the story of Galatea's own metamorphosis is an inversion of this cautionary tale: Galatea is initially made of stone but is transmuted into tender living flesh.

Austin Roxburgh's fear of overt passion can be likened to Pygmalion's, and there is thus a similar urge to craft a being which can be loved on his own terms. He chooses Ellen Gluyas as the model for his experiment, who, when we first meet her, is an energetic, even wilful girl with a powerful imagination and strong romantic impulses. Early in their relationship, her vigorous health gives her confidence (34), but as her bond with Roxburgh deepens she becomes increasingly uncertain. This is explicitly because of the insecurity she feels due to her class. Austin Roxburgh, by temperament a passive and scholarly figure, nonetheless has all of the assurance that his status and his gender provide him, and, ironically, he becomes the dominant partner. Ellen is

transformed by him, becoming increasingly passive and undemonstrative:

> For her part, she longed to, but had never dared, storm those limits and carry him off instead of submitting to his hesitant though loving rectitude. . . . She herself had only once responded with a natural ardour, but discovered on her husband's face an expression of having tasted something bitter, or of looking too deep. (52)

Freud, in his work on psychical impotence, identifies those males who, due to an exaggerated attachment to the mother, cannot experience a fulfilling erotic relationship. The tendency to idealise the woman leads to a crisis, and where "they love they do not desire and where they desire they cannot love" ("On the Universal Tendency" 251). It is the split between passion and admiration which, according to Freud, prompts "the tendency so often observed in men of the highest classes of society to choose a woman of the lower class as a permanent mistress or even as a wife. . . ." ("On the Universal Tendency" 254).

In the classic Freudian formulation, the individual is split between a potent sexual passion, which is directed at the debased love object, and a spiritual love, directed at the mother, the virgin, the saint: "The sphere of love in such people remains divided in the two directions personified in art as sacred and profane (or animal) love" (251). This split is registered, in A Fringe of Leaves, as the schism between the two brothers, Austin and Garnet. The portrait of the two as children highlights the difference between them.

> Enhanced by Austin's sallow face and

> expression of anxiety, Garnet made a charming impression: his frock so cut as to reveal the shoulders, his lips as glossy as washed cherries, his chestnut hair arranged by an admiring nurse with a studied casualness which left the forehead engagingly exposed. (53)

Austin's physique is dismissed in a few brief words; however a sensual pleasure is evident in the very description of Garnet. The verbs "to reveal" and "exposed" are obliquely tantalising, and the coincidence of the cherry lips with the chestnut hair (although the epithets are simply descriptive of colour) seems to offer him up as a fistful of fruits to be enjoyed.

Riddled with self-doubt from childhood, and bitterly aware of the gap between his artistic aspirations and his very real limitations, Austin Roxburgh sees Ellen Gluyas as a means to make good his ambition.

> That he might marry Ellen Gluyas became after all a tenuous possibility on seeing her not only as his wife, but also as his work of art. This could be the project which might ease the frustration gnawing at him: to create a beautiful, charming, not necessarily intellectual, but socially acceptable companion out of what was only superficially unpromising material. (41)

To describe her thus as "unpromising material" is, of course, idiomatic. Yet White renews the idiom by exploiting its metaphoric value, and he thereby reminds us of just how inert a substance Ellen is, and that she is valued as a malleable medium, not as a defined being. Even when confronted with vital situations she is reluctant to take charge, so

ingrained is her passivity. Thus, when an opportunity to escape from the Aborigine group becomes possible, she is uneasy for "she would be faced with coming to a decision more positive than any she had hitherto made in a life largely determined by other beings or God" (204).

The English bias against Ellen's Celtic origins is explored in the opening pages of A Fringe of Leaves, and Ellen is fashioned, by her in-laws and her husband, into an acceptable facsimile of an English lady. Similarly, after the shipwreck she again undergoes a transformation, this time at the insistence of her Aboriginal captors. Her head is shaven, her body covered with grease and a spray of feathers is plastered to her scalp with beeswax. While the Aboriginal women are delighted with the artifact, Ellen is dejected and, once again, passive:

> Only the work of art sat listless and disaffected amongst a residue of black down and sulphur feathers shaped like question marks. (186)

One may be tempted to suggest that the treatment meted out by the Aboriginal women is far more extreme and thus fundamentally more profound than that of Austin Roxburgh and his mother. However, White is quite explicit in his claims that the two experiences can be likened. When Ellen is first confronted by the Aboriginal women, White notes that "Ellen Gluyas had not encountered a more unlikely situation since forced as a bride to face the drawing-rooms of Cheltenham" (179).

Austin's failure as an artist is thematically associated with his inability to produce a living heir: in other words, there is in Austin

the coincidence of a genetic and an imaginitive infertility. Early in the marriage there is a miscarriage which is followed by an infant death. White is careful to point to these as evidence of Austin's infertility, not Ellen's, for his mother comments "we shall all soon be dead. Not you, my dear, you are far too healthy" (53). The Roxburghs are, in a sense, representative of an atrophying British petty-aristocracy, and Ellen Gluyas offers a new line of vigorous energy. Even Garnet, the sensualist, is a sterile force because his passion and licence are not regenerative: the child which is possibly his (although this is by no means clear) is stillborn after the shipwreck.

The blight of infertility is pervasive in A Fringe of Leaves, and can be traced in a myriad different patterns. One such instance can be found just after the shipwreck. Austin Roxburgh, when first set adrift in the longboats, cradles his precious copy of Virgil's Georgics against his belly for comfort. As we have seen, procreation is for Austin conceived of primarily as an imaginative act. Ellen, seated beside her husband, is prompted to remember her own fondness for a childhood doll. This poignant image becomes a violent one when we are told of how the doll's head "was ground to china splinters by a cartwheel" (132), and the doll thus becomes associated with the idea of abortion and sterility which is woven throughout.

There is, too, the slight but brutal episode towards the close of the novel. After her return to urban society, Mrs Roxburgh befriends the children of her benefactor, Mr Lovell. Coming across the daughter,

Kate, Ellen notices that the child is arrested by the spectacle of something which she is holding in her hands.

> Upon reaching her Mrs Roxburgh asked, 'What is it you're holding?'
> 'Nothing!'
> The child was carrying the corpse of a fluffy chick, the head lolling at the end of a no longer effectual neck, the extinct eyes reduced to crimson cavities.
> '<u>Nothing</u>!' Kate screamed again, and flung the thing away from her.
> And ran. (285)

Even a chain of innocent suppressed yawns becomes a motif of premature death: "From feeling them swell inside her throat, she saw them as the continuum of soft, unlaid eggs in the innards of a slaughtered hen" (113).

One of the ship-hands on the ill-fated <u>Bristol Maid</u> is the youth Oswald Dignam. Entranced by Ellen Roxburgh's dark beauty and her refined veneer, he becomes a celebrant, enslaved by the desire to serve her. She, similarly, is charmed by his sweetness and his candid devotion. His worship finally destroys him, however, because, while gathering shellfish for her after the shipwreck, he is swept off the rocks and drowned. In the days which follow Dignam's death, once the survivors have returned to the longboats, Ellen has a miscarriage:

> somewhere in the folds of her petticoats bunting nibbling at her numb legs this slippery fish was pushing in the direction of a freedom to which she had never yet attained. (167-168)

The little form is buried at sea, and Oswald Dignam's glory-bag serves as a diminutive shroud. Thus the burial becomes a rite of parting for both of these lost children, for the bag, which had contained Dignam's few worldly treasures, is also a metaphoric foetus.

Against the recurrent theme of failure and miscarriage, there is the tenuous hope in Ellen Roxburgh's renewal. Having been "tempered by adversity" (233) after the shipwreck and her period of servitude with the Aboriginals, she must still undergo the trial of submitting in love to the convict, Jack Chance. At first reluctant, she is, in some measure, renewed by their relationship, for, after a night of passion and confession, the world is momentarily transformed:

> In the mood in which she found herself she would have liked to drowse. The alchemy of morning was changing steel into gold. . . . All that she saw belonged to an age of gold in no way connected with a body scarred, withered, and blackened by privation . . . . (223)

Chance leads Ellen back to the European settlements; in a sense he is a Charon-figure, transporting her from one realm into another. The metaphor is appropriate here, for the convict has himself spent a period of initiation travelling subterranean rivers.

> I bought meself a hoe an' a bull's-eye lantern, and joined the longshoremen. I lost meself in the sewers. Picked up a pretty decent livin' too, from retrievin' articles of value. It's wonderful what goes down the sewers. It's a good life once you get accustomed to the air. (242)

When Ellen finally flees the forest, she has to "re-enter what is commonly referred to as civilization almost as naked as a newborn child" (246). This, then, is the single sign of regeneration. But it is a slight and feeble hope, given the context of disillusionment and material suffering which provides the canvas of the novel. As a young girl, Ellen's world had been filled with potent and mystical fantasies, as she recollects just before leaving Jack Chance at the edge of the forest:

> Did I ever tell you, Jack, how I walked all the way to St Hya's and let meself down into the pool? In they days people went to the saint for all kind of sickness. What I went there for I dun't remember, not at this distance. Or if I were cured. (247)

However, by this point she has been robbed of her spirits, and is left with little more than cynical realism:

> I dun't believe a person is ever really cured of what they was born with. Anyway, that is what I think today. (247)

* * * * *

The shift from <u>Voss</u> to <u>Riders in the Chariot</u> is one which reflects an increasing sense of the material reality of evil in White's fiction. In <u>A Fringe of Leaves</u>, there is, in spite of moments which show

glimmerings of transcendental perfectability, a greater recognition that circumstances are as they are, and, given human fallibility, will remain so. The change of philosophical emphasis in the novels is a reflection of White's own increasing scepticism about the intervenient role of the artist in society, particularly the society of late-twentieth century opulence and instant gratification. Nonetheless, White continues writing, a gesture which in itself suggests that he still feels a commitment to action. This is strikingly evident in his address for the National Book Council Awards in 1980, an address in which he was speaking, largely, to other writers. His closing statement has the energy and the passion of a rallying cry:

> The voice of the Fuhrer can be heard in the land, and unless we have in us enough passionate concern to alter course radically from the one we have been pursuing - I feel Australia could be lost. ("Patrick White Speaks" 101)

We have been considering the development of White's metaphysical and historical frame of reference, exemplified by the amalgamation of Neoplatonic, mystical and Aboriginal philosophy, and dramatised in the shift between Voss, Riders in the Chariot and A Fringe of Leaves. What White forges is in opposition to the uniformity and imaginative sterility of bourgeois Australian culture. Despite his increasing pessimism, it is White's own metaphysic which sustains him. The seemingly relentless advance of materialism and the attendant loss of morality are not in fact inexorable. The wheel turns. As White encourages the reader in his characteristically uncompromising voice,

"Don't despair however, any of you who have continued reading; it is possible to recycle shit" (<u>Flaws</u> 116).

NOTES

Notes to Chapter One

[1] See, for example, Ian Turner, "The Parable of Voss". Overland 12 (1958):36-37.

[2] All future references to this edition are abbreviated as CW.

[3] White's repeated avowals of faith in the sacramental nature of honest labour generates a powerful critique of archaic class attitudes. For a more specific instance, look at the characterisation of Mrs Godbold in Riders in the Chariot.

[4] It is worth noting that White, in characterising Voss as something of a harlequin, seems to be alluding to the harlequin figure in Conrad's Heart of Darkness. He provides a type of the Romantic explorer, glamorous, pure in his commitment to the quest. Compare White's portrait of Voss with the physical description given by Conrad. "He looked like a harlequin. . . . covered with patches all over, with bright patches" (Conrad 127). Note, further, Conrad's characterisation of this man's drives:

> The glamour of youth enveloped his parti-coloured rags. . . . He surely wanted nothing from the wilderness but space to breathe in and to push on through. His need was to exist, and to move onwards at the greatest possible risk, and with a maximum of privation. (126)

Notes to Chapter Two

[1] The 'Cloud of Unknowing' is, in traditional hermeneutics, that cloud which veiled the face of God from Moses - see Exodus 24: 15-18.

[2] See also Eliade's Shamanism.

[3] See Scholem, The Messianic Idea 251.

[4] See Sections 1 and 2 of The Birth of Tragedy.

[5] Look, for example, at Rider Haggard's She, 57 and 89.

Notes to Chapter Three

[1] Herbert's Marquesan Encounters provides a fascinating study of Typee.

[2] For some evidence of how the Utopian and Dystopian are reflected in contradictory portraits of Australia and its inhabitants, see Chapter 1 of Richard White's Inventing Australia.

[3] See, for example, The Elementary Structures of Kinship 493-494.

[4] For an outline of how cannibalism was used as a trope in the early explorer narratives, look at W. S. Arens, The Man-Eating Myth.

[5] See The Raw and the Cooked and The Elementary Structures of Kinship.

[6] See Richard White 9.

[7] For an extensive examination of this, see Johannes Fabian's Time and The Other.

[8] Evidence of the impact of the account is detailed in Chauncey C. Loomis's essay on "The Arctic Sublime", Knoepflmacher 95-112.

[9] Look at W. S. Arens, The Man-Eating Myth and Paula Brown and Donald Tuzin, The Ethnography of Cannibalism, for some indication of the debate.

[10] A similar equivalence is established at various different points in Riders in the Chariot. Norm Fussel performs a mating dance in the guise of an emu. For an extensive discussion of White's purposes in Riders, see Chapter Two.

[11] See Kenneth Maddock, "The Emu Anomaly" in Hiatt. Maddock examines Aboriginal difficulty in settling the emu in a specific taxonomic group.