

The Rhetoric of Painting in Patrick White's Novels

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IN THE CONTEXT of a discussion of various visual arts media, Barbara Herrnstein Smith turns to literature, locating its "corresponding 'medium' not simply in words or language conceived abstractly, but in the whole dynamic complex of verbal behaviour and verbal experience." Given the linguistic complexity of Patrick White's novels, and, further, White's declared interest in painting, it is not surprising that he combines best the whole dynamic complex of verbal behaviour with what Smith calls the "dynamics of visual perception" (26) in three of his novels that feature painters: *Voss* (1957), *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), and *The Vivisector* (1970). This is not to say that the two art forms conflate only in these novels but in them the presence of painters encourages the reader to see the conflation more readily. The importance of painters increases with each of these novels. The first two succeed in making the artistic medium part of the complex of verbal behaviour and verbal experience, or, as I subsequently refer to it, the linguistic medium. In *Voss*, the artist is a very minor character, but throughout White excels in merging the artistic and the linguistic. *Riders in the Chariot* has four central characters, only one of whom is an artist; but here too, the conflated artistic and linguistic media pervade and unify the whole. In *The Vivisector*, the single central character is a successful and single-minded artist; however, although White employs both the artistic and the linguistic, there is an underlying conflict between these two forms that is not resolved.

In 1958, not long after the publication of *Voss*, White first declared his interest in painting: in a short article, "The Prodigal Son," he stated that it had been his intention in *Voss* to combine

the mystical in William Blake's drawings with the more worldly elements found in Eugène Delacroix's paintings. But this is by no means the only external evidence of White's interest in painting. Several painters counted prominently among White's friends are Sydney Nolan, Lawrence Daws, and Roy de Maistre. In his autobiographical comments in *Flaws in the Glass*, White calls de Maistre his "aesthetic mentor" (60), the one who "taught [him] to write by teaching [him] to look at paintings and get beneath the surface" (*Making* 218).

In *Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot*, White successfully uses the elements of painting as an artistic medium to get beneath the surface, combining the elements effectively with the linguistic medium. *Voss* is White's first major exploration of this area, but his orientation is much more linguistic than in subsequent texts. The presence of Willie Pringle, the artist, in significant scenes at the beginning and end provides a frame for the novel. White foregrounds Willie's potential as a "living" or enlightened character. In addition, remembering White's use of names to foreground certain characteristics, one cannot overlook that Willie's initials are the reverse of White's, and that they are both interested in painting.

Willie's desire to see beneath the surface and his latent ability to do so are suggested early in *Voss*. Willie is still young, "not hardened yet," with "eyes that nobody had suspected of understanding" (63). His eyes find in Laura Trevelyan a kindred spirit, one with whom he could share "esoteric jokes and tastes" (63). Out of a sense of kinship with Laura, he makes a drawing of her, to show how "her image had invaded his mind with immense power and grief" (63). However, he finds the drawing "empty" and tears it up. The scene, apparently insignificant, closely connects the artist with Laura, an individual capable of spiritual insight.

At the end of the novel, Willie's artistic ability comes to match his insight. As he observes a group of people at the gathering to commemorate the unveiling of Voss's statue, the face of one of the group fascinates him. It "was broken up into little pinpoints of grey light under the globe of blue glass." He sees in it "[t]he grey of mediocrity, the blue of frustration. . . . If we explore them

[sic]" (447). The use of the colours grey and blue to express states of mind denotes the eye of the painter—Willie's as well as White's. Familiar forms breaking into "brilliant shapes" is also a painterly concept. But in *Voss*, the conflation of the two media is not restricted to mere verbal commentary; the novel embodies it throughout and invokes White's comment about combining Blake's mysticism and Delacroix's worldliness. Voss's exploration of the "common forms" of the desert breaks them into "brilliant shapes" of symbolic significance before the eyes of the reader. To take one example among many, the "infinitely pure white light" of the sunrise becomes a "masterpiece of creation," where a "protoplast of mist was slowly born, and moored unwillingly by invisible wires," and "liquid light was allowed to pour from great receptacles" (282). The importance for Voss of the expedition into the desert is pointed up by the syntactical foregrounding of the subordinate clause written as a complete sentence: "If we explore them." The poetic rhythm of "the grey of mediocrity, the blue of frustration" combined with the syntactical foregrounding of the verb "explore" underlines both the artistic and the linguistic insights of writer and painter.

Colours always hold symbolic significance for White, but it is in *Voss* that he first begins to explore linguistically his interest in the "brilliant shapes" and colours of painting and to combine their effects. In this connection, White's concern is that of the novelist as painter to integrate colour, light, and shadow into the text of the novel, and not simply that of the novelist to illustrate or visualize for the benefit of readers. Indeed, if anything, White wants readers to apply themselves like interpreters of paintings; he does not create easy, pretty pictures. Consequently, colours bright and dun abound in *Voss*, always well integrated into the text itself, linguistically, symbolically, and thematically. The reader encounters the whole spectrum, from the dull black of *materia prima* that characterizes Voss at the outset to brilliant golds and flashes of synaesthetic green lightning.

Appropriately, the burning gold of the sun accompanies the expedition into the hot desert. But gold is also the desired goal of the alchemical process, a symbol that pervades this novel as a metaphor for the process of spiritual enlightenment. The aes-

thetic insight White gained from his interest in painting enables him to combine the symbolic with the actual, so that one flows naturally from the other. As Voss's party rides westward into the desert, the future is likened to the "dusty golden" (241) sunset: the golden purity or enlightenment that Voss will achieve is indeed "dusty" since he is not to survive the experience but will blow with the dust of the desert to "trouble" (448) those who will eventually be enlightened by his legend. Yet the "dusty" sunset fits logically into the passage about the desert. Equally integrated, yet even more charged with meaning, is the presence of a golden sun shining on the garden at the moment Laura is symbolically impregnated with the servant Rose's child. The garden, "overflowing" with vegetation, seems a proper place for this scene of fecundity, where the golden sun, so necessary for all growth, is foregrounded: "Heavy with the weight of the golden sun, the girl could feel the woman's pulse ticking in her own body" (160). White's unobtrusive use of colour effectively links the vegetation, the embryo, and the alchemical symbolism. At the same time, the reality of the naturally heavy heat of the Australian summer sun is not abused. White's linguistic use of the artist's medium invites the reader to see beneath the surface.

White sees both experience and truth as multifaceted. Not surprisingly, colours convey this multiplicity: Willie sees "common forms . . . continually breaking into brilliant shapes"; and colours symbolize different truths. Green usually conveys the sense of putrefaction from which ultimate spiritual enlightenment grows: settings have "greenish dung" (259), and an ailing Laura has "greenish flesh" (385). Green also, quite naturally, indicates growth and hope. Thus Laura and the child Mercy are often dressed in green, and Laura has "glistening green laughter" (158). Both the synaesthesia of Laura's bright and hopeful laughter and the repulsive nature of the "greenish dung" are presented visually and effectively through the eyes of a linguistic painter. Because White builds his images gradually, none of these sometimes strange epithets jar the reader. Almost a third of the way through the novel, it seems quite natural that Laura is associated with green, especially because of the growth and hope for the future that is vested in her.

White's artist's eye is particularly evident in the way he employs the colour green symbolically without diminishing its graphic significance in the passage that relates how Voss and his men are resting in the aftermath of a violent storm which has taxed their physical and spiritual resources almost to the limit: "Thick, turbulent, yellow water was now flowing in the river bed. Green, too, was growing in intensity as the spears of grass massed distinctly in the foreground, and a great, indeterminate green mist rolled up out of the distance. . . . There was the good scent of rich recent, greenish dung" (259). In another passage, Laura describes a piece of embroidery she has begun. The colours of the embroidered images dissolve into the linguistic medium, just as de Maistre must have taught White to transfer his artist's vision of the world into words. Laura writes to Voss:

First I sketched the design on paper, and had actually begun in a variety of coloured wools: blue for distance, brown for the earth, crimson, why, I cannot say, except that I am obsessed by that colour. However, as I worked, the letters were soon blazing at me with such intensity that the most witless person alive must have understood their significance. So I put the work away, and now it is smouldering in the darkness of my cupboard. (239)

White transfers to his writing the artist's sensitivity not just to colour but to light and shadow as well. In *Voss*, light can be as liquid or as brilliant as it is in many paintings of the French Impressionists: the "light of dawn . . . is water of another kind" (282); the sun rises "like a square-cut, blazing jewel in a prison of . . . blue brilliance" (188), or "set[s] in a splendour of enamels" (258). On occasion, Voss himself "glitter[s] coldly" (89). In a short passage that relates one of Voss's last, and most significant, telepathic visits with Laura, the painter's eye is evident throughout as the greys of the dawn and the ashes are gradually penetrated by the "shining light" of Laura's radiance:

In the altering firelight of the camp, the thin old man was a single, upright, black stroke, becoming in the cold light of morning, which is the colour of ashes, a patient grey blur. . . . [T]he grey light upon which [Voss] floated was marvellously soft, and flaking like ashes. . . . [I]n the grey light, it transpired that the figure was that of the woman. . . . While the woman sat looking down at her knees, the greyish skin was slowly revived until her full, white immaculate body

became the shining source of all light. . . . [A]t once he was flooded with light and memory. (383)

With a painter's artistry (and invoking such terms as "stroke" and "blur") White directs the reader's eye upwards from the woman's knees as the light grows almost perceptibly, suggestive of Blake's impressionism.

But White does not restrict himself to highlighting his canvas only on significant occasions with contrasts of light and shade. Light and dark have a vital metaphysical importance for Voss, who believes that all things will be resolved "[t]hrough the marriage of light and shadow" (190). The heightened significance of this "marriage" is exemplified when Mrs. Bonner opens the curtain for the suffering Laura to see the comet, a "most unusual and wonderful thing" (375). The brilliance of the comet's "broad path of light" (375) in the black sky is such that even the unspiritual Mrs. Bonner is affected by it. The comet has great metaphysical significance for Voss; the effect of its "marriage" of light and dark signifies for him the marriage of his spiritual and his physical beings that precedes his death. At these and other crucial moments, the play of light foregrounds the transcendental atmosphere in the same way that the painter uses light to foreground the central point on his canvas. In another passage of metaphysical significance, plant stems glimmer among the "dappled shadow[s]" in the garden where Laura is "impregnated" (158). Then, among the "intemperate roses" (160) Laura's and Rose's "two shadows [are] joined" (160). The movement from shadow to the "weight of golden sun" (160) underlines the intangible, spiritual nature of this impregnation, which nevertheless has very tangible results and is completely in keeping with the subject to hand.

In *Voss*, then, colour, light, shadow, and the important though minor artist are imperceptibly combined by White to produce a "canvas" that convinces both artistically and linguistically. White incorporates the worldly and physical elements of Delacroix's paintings with the spiritual or metaphysical elements of Blake's drawings. He does this in and through the reds and yellows that predominate in both Delacroix's paintings and the sun and sands of the real and spiritual desert into which Voss plunges.

The symbolic and spiritual nature of the telepathic relationship between Laura and Voss reflects the symbolic and spiritual nature of Blake's drawings. Incontrovertibly, White's interest in painting and his friendship with painters taught him to see beneath the surface both of the world and of his own linguistic potential.

In *Riders in the Chariot*, White introduces an artist, Alf Dubbo, as one of the four major characters; in emphasizing the importance of the artist, White becomes more specific about how he uses the artist's medium. Actual paintings play a role in *Riders in the Chariot*—as well as colour, light, and shade. Without naming either painting or artist, White invokes certain paintings by Delacroix and Odilon Redon. Both these artists painted pictures of Apollo and, more important, of his horse-drawn chariot. From his early childhood, a burning interest in the chariot haunts Dubbo. Thus, painting adds significance to the title and the prime symbol of the novel—additional to their obvious and important connections with the Bible and with Blake. The artistic medium and the painter's techniques associated with the chariot unify the novel. The only hint at the title or the artist of the painting that affects Dubbo so much is that Dubbo discovers it in a book of paintings by French artists. The young Dubbo is "consumed" (320) by the light, the sun, the golden tones of this painting; it haunts him until he finishes his own chariot painting. This first painting of the chariot that Dubbo encounters resembles, at least in vague detail, the Delacroix painting of the chariot and horses in the Louvre; Dubbo's own painting is more resonant of Redon's paintings of Apollo and his chariot whose horses exude an earthiness of form, combined with a transcendence of spirit, suggested by the light and "heavenly gold" (458) that streams from their flanks.¹

Even at this early stage Dubbo is aware of certain "stiff," "wooden," "tinny," and "material" elements in the unidentified painting. He feels he could improve on them, given time. The material heaviness that Dubbo senses in the French painting is transferred to White's description not only by the adjectives cited above, but also by the monotonous repetition in two long sentences of the definite article in front of the nouns that identify

the major elements in the painting: "In *the picture the* chariot rose, behind *the* wooden horses, along *the* pathway of the sun. *The* gods arm . . . lit *the* faces of *the* four figures, so stiff in *the* body of *the* tinny chariot. The rather ineffectual torch trailed its streamers of ineffectual light" (320; emphases added). For Dubbo, light is transcendent, illumination in all senses of the word; it is definitely not "material." Dubbo himself then takes over from the authorial description, explaining what he plans to improve. Light and movement are essential for Dubbo just as light, movement, and the chariot underlie the whole novel. In a sense, Dubbo's paintings, especially the one of the chariot, become the objective correlative that gets beneath the surface of the novel:

"And horses. My horses," the boy claimed, "would have the fire flowing from their tails. And dropping sparks, or stars. Moving. Everything would move in my picture. Because that is the way it ought to be." (320)

This passage in particular coalesces the artistic and linguistic insights. White achieves this conflation through poetic and syntactic devices that impart linguistic form to Dubbo's artistic feelings: the predominance of present participles creates movement; sentence fragments, and the last sentence quoted with its large number of short monosyllables, create in the reader the same artistic excitement that Dubbo is feeling. The foregrounding of "the fire" by a somewhat oddly placed definite article indicates that Dubbo's "fire" transcends the earth while the original "material light" remains tied to it.

Dubbo's ability to see beneath the surface grows visibly from his first encounter with art. The insight that both White and Dubbo are seeking comes only to those who have been able to partake fully of both the phenomenal and the numinous worlds. Hence, Dubbo's life is not only surrounded by the tangible and squalid—from the moral squalor of his stay with the Reverend Calderon, to the physically debilitating illness (tuberculosis) that drags him towards his death—but it is also dominated by colour and movement, the numinous elements of his artist's vision.

One of the earliest recollections that Dubbo has is an artistic one of "shiny foliage [that] seemed to sweat a deeper green," one

of "polished stones," "pleasing shapes," and the "orange knuckles of the big bamboos" (312). Once Mrs. Pask begins to encourage his talent, he scribbles on the walls of a cowshed "the finespun lines of a world he felt to exist but could not yet corroborate" (314). Here White combines the "finespun lines" and the latent vision of the artist to convey both the physicality and symbolism of the cowshed.

Dubbo's first encounter with oil paints shows his constant and growing preoccupation with colour and the physical medium of paint. In the old box of oils he discovers at Mrs. Pask's is "a blue, so blue, his eyes could not focus on it" (322). He coaxes "a rosy tongue out of a second tube. And was drowning in a burst of yellow from the bottom of a third" (322). The juxtaposition of "drowning" and "bottom" suggests the descent into the baptismal waters that precedes illumination as well as Dubbo's own actual death, literally drowned in his own blood, which, like the paint in the tube, is golden. As he dies, after completing his vision of the chariot, his artist's hands are "gilded, he was forced to observe, with his own gold" (459).

Dubbo's vision that with oils he could finally do what he "never ever would have known how to do before" (322) takes the shape in his first painting of a very physical encounter with the medium. The verbal gives linguistic form to the artistic—"to squeeze," "moulded," "to demolish," "dripping"—and their physicality is enhanced by "glistening gobs" and "stalactites of bluish white" (325).

Right up to the painting of his last two pictures, the transcendent possibilities of this tangible and malleable medium never leave him. As Dubbo paints the *Deposition*, White foregrounds the "whorls of blue and crimson" and "the long funnel of his most corrosive green." Finally, "he ventured to retouch the wounds of the dead Christ . . . and at once the blood was gushing from his own mouth, the wounds in the canvas were shining and palpitating with his own conviction" (253). Again the physical and the spiritual are joined by the medium of art.

Thus the physical nature and the transcendental potential of his chosen medium are present in both Dubbo's and White's linguistic representation of it. The two realms are linked by

Dubbo's ineffable sense of colour both in the world around him and in his painting—especially the primary reds, yellows, and blues, as well as the greens created by combining the yellows and the blues. Moreover, these colours dominate not only Dubbo's sections but the whole book, enabling White to use his artist's vision to create a work of literary and verbal cohesion based in the medium of art.

Hues of yellow and gold, of course, underlie the uniting theme of the golden chariot and its four riders: Miss Hare, Mordecai Himmelfarb, Mrs. Godbold, and Alf Dubbo. Each of the riders is associated with certain colours, but all are united by yellows and golds, particularly, but not entirely connected with their individual visions of the chariot. Light, too, and the windows through which it penetrates darkness are important factors uniting all four.

Because Miss Hare is so closely connected with the earth and nature, the golds and yellows and light that pervade the passages concerning her are combined with the green of growing things. She is introduced under the "pale disc of the sun" (7). The approaches to Xanadu, where she lives, provide "[w]hole towers of green" (9). The house itself contains "cool, greenish rooms, the golden walls of stone" (16) and is often seen in the red and golden light of evening. When she finally disappears at the end of the novel, she goes off into "soft, opalescent remnants of night . . . the blue glare of white light off rocks" (439).

Himmelfarb, the intellectual Jew, is also associated with the predominant colours in the novel. His name ("heaven colour") identifies him readily with the blue that dominates Dubbo's *Deposition* painting, done only after the artist has participated in Himmelfarb's crucifixion and his death scene. Gold, too, is associated with Himmelfarb; he is intrigued by the golden chariot of the Merkebah and the sparks of emanation of light that he finds in books about the Kabbalah—he "longs to gather up the sparks visible inside the thick shells of human faces" (140). He recalls the flames of bombed German cities during World War II. In his mind's eye he sees the ambulances and fire-engines in terms of the chariot with horses whose "nostrils glinted brass in the fiery

light" (179). There is also the "breath of orange fire" (185) that he feels as Friedensdorf goes up in flames.

Mrs. Godbold is another character linked to the others by colours, though to a lesser extent. Earth-bound as she may be, she resembles the horses in Dubbo's chariot painting who "could have been rough brumbies, of a speckled grey rather too coarse," for whom "*earth-bound* might have been a legitimate comment if their manes and tails had not streamed beyond possibility, and the skeins of a cloud shed by their flanks appeared at any point to catch on the rocks of heavenly gold" (458). These words could serve to portray Mrs. Godbold, whom White often describes as greyish or pudding-coloured. But she too reaches out to the "heavenly gold" even in her daily activities of baking golden bread, or boiling the laundry in her burnished copper. Her name, metathesized, suggests gold. Her connection with the chariot, however, is really more musical than painterly: going into the cathedral for the first time in her life, she is overcome by the the sound of Bach soaring from the organ. Nevertheless, her experience is couched in synaesthesia: the music is "lashed" into "a whole *shining* scaffolding of sound. And always the *golden* ladders rose . . . as if to reach the window of a *fire*" (236; emphases added). She is linked to Dubbo by these ladders and scaffolding. She meets him only once. As she tends to Dubbo in his drunkenness, he looks at her with his artist's eye: "Now I think I see. I will get it all in time" (283). She remembers

sitting in the cathedral in her home town, watching the scaffolding of music as it was erected. . . . Nor had she heard a voice issue with such certainty and authority out of any mouth since the strange gentleman referred to that same music. Now it was the abo on Mrs Khalil's floor. (283)

Mrs. Godbold first encounters Himmelfarb through his window, seeing him at prayer. She leaves a freshly-baked golden loaf for him. She wipes the blood from Dubbo's mouth, cares for Himmelfarb's wounded hand, and tends Miss Hare in her illness.

Although all four characters never come completely together as a unified group in one scene, the relatively infrequent but nevertheless crucial meetings of different groupings of them are tied together by references mainly to gold or blue, or at least

through some aspect of the artistic medium. The rather furtive encounter between the shyest two—Miss Hare and Alf Dubbo—anticipates Dubbo's painting of Miss Hare "inside the transparent weft of whirling, procreative wind" (455). It is Dubbo's view of her at the beginning, as she peers through the leaves and is "practically reduced to light and shade" (62) that inspires him to try to paint the wind.

A specific artistic medium knits together the two riders, Miss Hare and Mordecai Himmelfarb, who have the most physical connection and who are perhaps most different from the others. They meet in the garden of Xanadu, where Himmelfarb tells his story to Miss Hare in the overgrown mass of the orchard "broken by a hatching in grey wood" (91). Apart from the trees with their greens and their tangled branches that later appear in Dubbo's paintings, the word "hatching" is mentioned. "Hatching" is a term culled from painting techniques but it applies also to the actual interwoven tangle of branches. Through the green leaves the "strong light" shines on "little wizened oranges radiating a feverish gold" (91), creating a focus of light as in a painting.

White purposefully connects these four characters without compromising their uniqueness as individuals. The relationships among them are controlled by the artist's medium. In certain ways, the four are distinguished by their oppositions yet linked by their varying visions of the chariot. Though complementary to each other, they are also essentially independent of each other. They are not set up as the opposing halves of the same personality as are the Brown twins in *The Solid Mandala*. The fact that they represent such a variety of dispositions indicates White's belief that the ability to see beneath the surface is not restricted to any one particular group of people. Nevertheless, to make his novel a literary whole and not four separate stories, there must be some connection among these characters. Thus White uses the medium of painting as a unifying structure to create a whole dynamic complex. The recurrence of the colours blue and gold contribute to this unity. And so do the geometric patterns created as one story weaves in and out of the others—patterns that are literary parallels of those used by painters to create dynamic, artistic wholes.

These four individuals are finally united not only by their spiritual visions of the chariot but also by the physical reality of Dubbo's last two paintings. The four riders are carved by Dubbo "out of the solid paint," each one being given a shape and a relationship to the others that correspond to his or her established role in the novel: Mrs. Godbold "might have been done in marble, massive, white, inviolable"; Himmelfarb "was conceived in wire, with a star inside the cage and a crown of barbed wire." The wind ruffles "the harsh, fox-coloured coat of a third." Dubbo himself is "constructed of bleeding twigs and spattered leaves, but the head could have been a whirling spectrum" (458); connected here are his aboriginal origins in the forest, his tuberculosis, and his painter's palette. Thus the four riders are joined by the chariot through the paint itself and Dubbo's vision of them, just as they are in his previous picture by the "whorls" (436) of colours that link them throughout the novel.

The scene of Himmelfarb's death that initiates Dubbo's paintings of the four is dominated by windows, the artist's source of light: first, Mrs. Godbold's, then Dubbo's own window. Those colours which predominate in the novel play an essential role in linking all four characters in this scene, as they will also in Dubbo's painting of the scene, the *Deposition*. As Dubbo peers through the window, he sees the "solid white woman . . . her daughter, such a delicate greenish white," the "panegyric blue" with which he paints the tree Himmelfarb had been "crucified" on, the flowers "in pools of deepening blue," and the "cold, yellow skin" (436) of Himmelfarb's feet as Mary Hare kisses them.

The whole section dealing with Dubbo's final two paintings where he unites the four protagonists is permeated by yellow light. He returns to the "empty room . . . of the yellowest light" (453). By the time he is ready to work on his chariot painting, his strength greatly reduced, his imagination rises "to meet some conjunction of light and colour in the window in that always changing, but unfinished, abstraction of sky." Then one "yellow morning of returning summer . . . the windowpanes were unable to contain the blaze . . ." (456), and Dubbo gathers the strength to complete his work.

While *Voss* shows how White began to explore his interest in painting as a "literary" medium, *Riders in the Chariot* shows how the various elements of painting—colour, paint, light—can be an effective literary medium, creating life, shape, movement, focus, unity, and illumination. *The Vivisector*, with just one protagonist—Hurtle Duffield—rather than four, concentrates much more intensely on art than the other two novels. Yet the overall literary effect of the artistic medium is ultimately unsatisfactory. *The Vivisector* manifests too great an insistence on the mundane and this diminishes the artistic drive to see beneath the surface. The colours that dominate the novel—blue and red—do not effectively unify it; they work towards opposing ends and their interrelation is not shown consistently enough throughout.

Karen Hansson is right in pointing out (233) that Duffield's striving after the "never-yet-attainable blue" brings the novel full circle from his childish delight in watching the sky until he becomes dizzy trying to attain the "otherwise unnameable I-N-D-I-G-O" (617) at the very end. Nevertheless, colour is less effective as an integrating factor in this novel than are the yellows and golds of *Riders in the Chariot*. Too often the tones of blues and purple that Duffield seeks as a sign of enlightenment are associated with the philistines, albeit he draws some of his artistic potential from them. To pick two examples at random, Mrs. Courtney wears a hat with "blue and white feathers" (27). Also, Hero Pavloussis, a spiritually ambiguous character, carries a foregrounded bouquet of violets on a visit to Duffield's. Characters such as these, in spite of their divergent associations with blue, do help Duffield in one way or another to realize his artistic potential—Mrs. Courtney by providing the environment, and Hero through her affair with Duffield. Nevertheless, in the end they are negative characters. The "strands of purple" and "the light and colour of the sea-sky" with which Hero is associated during their visit to the Greek island of Perialos are juxtaposed with the "conventional piety" (387), which appears on her face. Nor is Hero obviously connected to the red of vivisection—though Duffield needs to "vivisect" her to benefit artistically from his association with her.

At a point when blue—the colour of truth—might have played a unifying role, it is strangely lacking. Nance accuses Duffield of being obsessed by what *he* likes to think is the truth. Duffield reacts by envisioning a painting with no specific colour: “he had never been able to catch [his past] in its true prismatic colours” (248). Where is the blue that would point towards the perception of the “truth” or illumination of that finally attainable indigo? It ought not to be found through the greater part of this novel only in the “blue stares” of lords and ladies in paintings, in hats, in “strands of blue smoke” (321), and other relatively unimportant occasions. It is far too important for this. In *Riders in the Chariot*, the colours that appear in Dubbo’s final paintings also unify the novel; here, although from the beginning Duffield strives to achieve his vision of blue, the colour has no unifying function. Nor does White prepare us for its overbearing recurrence at the end of the novel.

In this novel, the ability to see beneath the surface is essentially negative, destructive, or “vivisectioning,” represented by the reds and crimsons of blood. In its roles as a linguistic and an artistic medium, then, red outweighs blue, which frames the book. The conflicting linguistic functions of the two colours is not resolved in a satisfying way. Their obligatory integration (the indigo of the final scene—issuing as a product of red and blue) is not effectively shown. Red is left hanging almost in limbo after the Duffield retrospective, where its role is again contradictory, and blue has too many divergent meanings.

Olivia (Boo) Hollingrake, who is introduced as a “dark-green, smooth girl” (139) and later as “golden” (150), probably has the greatest potential of all the secondary characters; but after a sensuous encounter with her as a child in the Courtney’s garden, Duffield’s meetings with Boo are dominated by the stark, contrasting black and white of her clothes and predominantly by her “crimson talons” (286) indicating a potential for violence. Duffield leaves her house one night under “the crimson sky-mark” (420) and later begins a painting inspired by her rosebush. In it, there are “fluctuations of gelatinous light, in which a threat of crimson was still suspended” (425). These reds serve in part to enhance White’s criticism of the “world of art”—the critics, the

dealers, the buyers (none of whom he portrays with any redeeming quality)—which pervades much of *The Vivisector*.

White's vitriolic attack on the art world opens the Duffield retrospective, but red here has little to do with the role of the artist as vivisector, nor does the final indigo issue from this red. Duffield thinks of his retrospective as a "slaughter" (574) and those who attend as philistines; to them Duffield's pictures are simply an investment. Here we encounter Boo for the last time. Although she has a "certain priestly air" (584), her earlier potential is belied by her mouth "overflowing with anachronistic crimson" (584). In the past, even though she has bought many of Duffield's paintings, donating them to the museum, and even though she has been identified (by the gold and green tones that White used in the early descriptions of her) with the enlightened, she is now most definitely associated (again by colour) with the rest of the guests. Her crimson lipstick, the "fire of rubies" (584), and the "pigeon's blood" (585) ring connect her with the blood of the "slaughter" that Duffield has anticipated, and now is confirmed by the red print in which his name is "carved out" (571) on the catalogue. However, these reds are destructive of art, not creative. The theme of the artist's self-vivisection latent in this passage is not made manifest in the text as a whole. This is a novel of violence, not only of the art world, but also of the artist's own world. To see beneath the surface, the artist must vivisection and be vivisected. This theme legitimizes the omnipresence of red and crimson, but the necessary connections between vivisection and ultimate enlightenment lack artistic expression.

Apart from the essentially negative reds of the retrospective, the reds of vivisection predominate in the novel. Duffield's sister, Rhoda, is the quintessential "red" person. Duffield imagines painting her hair in "sticky pink" (81); her veins are "pinkish-brown" (83). He realizes early that "[r]ed or pink, Rhoda had the smell of red people" (34). Red abounds in many other places. Even on his first visit to the Courtneys, Duffield discovers a "bird with a red beak," "a glare of mahogany, a blaze of crimson leather" (26). He paints the Latin tutor's suicide in red, large on his bedroom wall. Nance, on a visit to him, brings a cream horn whose "raspberry blood had begun to stain" (201).

Sharp knives and razors, instruments that can easily draw blood, are frequent images. Fire images, red hot and blazing—thus combining light and colour—pervade Duffield's house by the gorge. Indeed, while building the house, Duffield watches "the gorge snap and gnash at its own flames, as the trees went up in a clatter of fiery blinds" (216). The violent imagery of light and the red suggested by these passages culminate in the splintered glass and violent sun present when Duffield discovers Nance's body in the gorge. But the reds of vivisection do not lead to the indigo of truth:

. . . the sunlight had sharpened. Its glass teeth met with glass. . . an explosion had taken place, he realized, of glass, and less spectacularly, flesh. The splintered glass almost rose from the rock to smash his conscience. . . . He couldn't look at her face: the sun had golded it with too savage a brilliance. (252)

Blood and violence, then, commonly associated with red, dominate the majority of *The Vivisector*, and to a great extent serve to unify it. But the blue of the final "truth" requires a more positive role. The violence symbolized by the reds disrupts, but the blue does not emerge from it as the gold of Voss's spiritual growth emerges from the black *materia prima* and "greenish dung." It is only at the time of his stroke (a mere seventy pages from the end of the over-six-hundred-page novel) that the dominance of blue becomes manifest since Duffield's earlier obsession with the sky. The vision of the "extra indigo sky" (549) when he tries to tell himself to "[h]ang on to the last and first secret, the indigo" (549) is carefully introduced by an insistence on the blue plastic bag Rhoda has given him to carry home the sheep's heart. The blue bag and the red heart do link the two colours. The red heart is a likely image of vivisection, but the plastic bag is not an adequate image to unite the physical with the spiritual, as do the red and golden blood of Dubbo's disease. The blue plastic bag partakes too much of the crass, philistine world that White satirizes—the world that Duffield hates. The juxtaposition of Duffield's growing awareness of the transcendent indigo while he is lying on the pavement with the oppressive bag in front of Cutbush's grocery store strikes one as ineffectively melodramatic. On seeing Duffield lying here, Cutbush's wife cries: "Oh,

Lord, Cec! It's his sister's blue plastic bag. I recognized it. Rhoda Courtney's" (548). Rhoda Courtney's name insistently associates Duffield further with the philistine world.

Rodney Edgecombe quotes the last seven lines of *The Vivisector* that move emphatically to the final "indi-ggodd" as a successful example of White's "modernist prose" (85). He believes these lines have "been subsumed to a comprehensive vision" (85). "Comprehensive vision" indeed can be found in both *Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot*, but it is not there in *The Vivisector*, certainly not in the symbolism of blue which purports, because of its role at beginning and end, to be the overriding one. Blue and its associated tones too often have negative associations scattered throughout the text. Blue is not pervasive enough as a positive symbol. The principle of unity in this novel is a red one, one of blood, destruction, and vivisection, though even red, as we have seen, has two dissociated roles.

While the ending with its apocalyptic vision demonstrates that indigo should serve to unify *The Vivisector*, the title, the images, and the many disparate characters forced by strained images of crimson and red into a comprehensive vision of vivisection make indigo appear to be little more than a well-intentioned splotch not effectively integrated into the "painting."

The Vivisector could have achieved the same results as the other two novels. After all, *Voss* is as compulsive a monomaniac as Duffield, if not more so. But in *Voss*, White is successful in melding the different worlds of the two main characters through the media of words, colour, and light. The alchemical colours grow from black to gold within the framework of the city and desert. The artistic media work with, not against, the vision, as in *Riders in the Chariot*, where the transcendental gold and blue of the chariot rising into the heavens, incorporates the artistic and linguistic media, subtly unifying the four otherwise very different characters. Perhaps the isolation of the one main character in a book the length of *The Vivisector*, with its multitude of secondary and minor characters, leaves too much room for elements disruptive of its unity for the blues to work both against themselves and against the reds.

Thus, in the first two of Patrick White's three "artist's" novels, the author uses the media of language and painting, passing them through the scrutiny of his artist's eye to create satisfying, unified structures. The techniques evolve from the material, the artistic and linguistic media, without appearing to be imposed from without. In these two novels, White uses his skill with language and his interest in painting to explore their dominant facets: in *Voss*, the characters, the harsh desert, the transcendental gardens, the spiritual depths and heights; in *Riders in the Chariot*, the four very different characters united finally in vision and physical location. In *The Vivisector*, on the other hand, the overriding insistence on the central character, the artist, isolates him in a way that separates the vision from, rather than conjoins it with, its medium; and the reds and the blues tend to work against not with each other. The whole dynamic complex of verbal behaviour and verbal expression does not produce a comprehensive vision in White's most ambitious treatment of the artist's world.

NOTES

- 1 The connection between Delacroix and Redon is not arbitrary, or based solely on Redon's connection with *The Eye of the Storm*. In her commentary on the first of two pastels of Apollo that appear in *Odilon Redon: Pastels*, Roseline Bacou states: "From 1905 on, Redon favoured the theme of Apollo's chariot, whose wide-ranging, symbolic significance he had analyzed in 1878 in a reflection on Delacroix's treatment of it on the ceiling of the Gallery of Apollo in the Louvre: 'This is the work he made in the fullness of his talent and power. What is its great expression, its most important characteristic? It is the joy of full daylight opposed to the sadness of night and shadows, like the happiness of feeling better after great distress' (*To Myself*, p. 145)" (150). In her commentary on the second of the two, Bacou points out that this chariot picture shows Apollo "exorcising darkness, and giving birth to light" (152). The literary equivalent, in the hands of White, is to be found in the symbolism of the "coherent vision" of the chariot and horses in *Riders in the Chariot*.

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