

The Evolution of Artistic Faith in Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*

Meg Harris Williams

Today nobody will stop at faith; they all go further. It would perhaps be rash to inquire where to, but surely a mark of urbanity and good breeding on my part to assume that in fact everyone does indeed have faith, otherwise it would be odd to talk of going further. (Kierkegaard 42)

Patrick White said he wanted to write a novel about “saints”—those who ride invisibly in the Chariot of faith as “apostles of truth” (qtd. in Malouf 13). At the centre of the book *Riders in the Chariot* Himmelfarb the Jew expresses his frustration at being unable to visualize the riders, the hidden *zaddikim* (*Riders* 172); it was a question also formulated by Kierkegaard as he speculated in *Fear and Trembling* on the possibility of what strange ‘movements of infinity’ might lie concealed within the ordinary man in the street, such as the pipe-smoking cheesemonger as he “vegetated in the dusk” (42). Kierkegaard felt he himself did not have faith, but that the Hegelians—the objects of his satire—who believed they were “going further” by means of a dialectic of compromise, had in fact not yet attained this state of half-knowledge. The world of ethics and reasoning is not that of faith and spirituality, which is both ordinary and inscrutable. Like Kierkegaard’s cheesemonger, White’s Mrs Godbold knows “the grey hours when the world evolves,” and “the wheels of her Chariot are solid gold” (*Riders* 73); and Mary Hare, in her mystical union with nature, sees in the colours of sunset the “swingeing trace-chains of light” when the wheels “plough the fields of tranquil sky” (25). White’s ambitious tapestry of imagery is founded on the evocation of such moments of dusky or smoky indirect communication, as his riders recreate through their interweaving yet distinct lives the story of the Crucifixion against the backdrop of a broad canvas ranging from Eden to apocalypse. In this context, I shall suggest, the Chariot-deity that revolves between heaven and earth becomes the governing aegis

not only of the riders but also of the novelist,¹ as he puts his trust in the meaningful relationship of his disparate materials—a relationship that will have the power to evoke a sense of the ethereal.

There would appear to be a renewed interest in the work of Patrick White, after a period of relative neglect (Malouf 12–13). My own article relates to the continuing debate in White studies about the degree to which his vision evolves organically from his artistic materials, or to what extent it is superimposed, a “design too palpable” (Colmer 288), “too contrived for comfort” (Steven 79). White was himself suspicious of schematic interpretations of his work, presumably owing to the dangers of reductionism; though his writing with its allegorical flavour and its wealth of theological, poetic and metaphysical references does understandably invite such interpretations and gives them legitimacy. Gavin D’Costa has described the way in which the three riders could be seen as representing three religious traditions which are then synthesized within that of the fourth rider, the artist.² I would like to further suggest that all the riders in fact embody aspects of the artistic struggle for realization, and gradually link up into a coherent picture as the novel itself progresses. They all live on the fringes of social acceptability, yet each has a specific contribution to make to the spirituality of the social fabric: Mary Hare with her enhanced observation of natural process; Himmelfarb with his analytical powers; Mrs Godbold with her endurance and practicality; Alf Dubbo with his ability to mingle emotional colours into harmonious patterns. This sketchmap of artistic characteristics is White’s starting-point for a deeper investigation. As the characters develop and interweave, in response to contact with the Chariot, they generate insights which form part of a more comprehensive vision of artistic activity. My aim is to detail the extent to which White’s immersion in his symbolic materials forms the basis for a complex synthesis of emotional links which could be termed “artistic faith.”

The evolutionary viewpoint to which I refer, espoused by creative writers since the time of Coleridge, falls in line with both modern psychoanalytic thinking and with those philosophers of aesthetics who place the capacity to relax “palpable design” at the heart of creativity.³ Susanne Langer, for example, following in the tradition of Whitehead,

Russell and Cassirer, distinguishes between “discursive” and “presentational” forms, and emphasizes the untranslatableability of the art-symbol, whose essential meaning or “underlying idea” is bound up in its particular form and cannot be explained away by academic interpretation:

To understand the idea in a work of art is more like having a new experience than like entertaining a new proposition.
(*Philosophy* 260–63)

The genuinely creative artist employs his medium to engage in a process of exploration and discovery under the aegis of this governing “idea.” This process is frequently described by artists and aestheticians as “artistic inevitability”—when the links in the art-symbol seem to be constructed not by authorial control but by internal necessity, and the work takes on a life of its own. As Leonard Bernstein writes: “Form is but an empty word, a shell, without this gift of inevitability” (30). According to Langer, the “elements” of an art-symbol (sounds, colours, characters) gain their spiritual significance from their relationship to a “whole” (*Feeling and Form* 57): that is, from their harmony and ordering. Further, she writes, the artist is impelled by a sense of “moral obligation towards the Idea,” which she treats as a Platonic Idea guiding his manipulations of the medium (*Feeling and Form* 121). The idea controls the creative artist, rather than the other way round—hence the sense of inevitability. What kind of spirituality informs artistic sensuality—indeed, what is an artist? The nature of the artist as a generic entity is, I suggest, the underlying theme of White’s own quest in *Riders*. It is, as one would expect, a latent preoccupation of all his novels, and in *The Vivisector’s* portrait of an individual artist it will become the overt subject of the narrative.

As the quotation from Langer indicates, an investigation of White’s “underlying idea” of the artist entails treating the novel as an art-symbol, in the sense of a container for meaning rather than a didactic treatise. As Wittgenstein would say, a creative work always “shows” more than it “says.” My approach falls in line with those studies that see White’s style as crucial to the embodiment of his vision, such as Edgecombe and Morley, or Beatson (134) who points out that White’s images are not fixed but flexible. Karin Hansson further suggests that just as Blake

described Jesus and his apostles as artists, so are Voss, Himmelfarb and Arthur in White's novels (188). So, indeed, are Mary Hare, Mrs Godbold and, of course, Dubbo. The next step is to include the writer himself as quester or rider in the Chariot of his own work, struggling to view objectively the total picture by means of his own subjectivity. And, as Jean Crowcroft maintains, White's concern is less with the artist in society than with the artist as internal explorer of his own faith (qtd. in Hansson 16). The novelist's role, like that of Dubbo the fourth rider, is one that evolves by means of observation, noting the interaction of differing qualities and trying to extract their essence. While technically a 'super-visor,' he is emotionally an instrument of his own work and its destiny. The writer's mentality develops alongside his faith in the life of his own work, which gradually gathers credibility as these distinct strands of being become integrated into a focused single vision characterized by its ability to encompass "the Whole" (*Vivisector* 370).⁴ I am concerned with the implicit ideas of creativity that find their expression as part of the art-symbol as a whole, and that gradually take shape as the author continues to write. Such ideas are accessed by observation and description; and although they relate closely to certain insights pertaining to modern psychoanalytic models of the mind, I refrain from the reductive application of psychoanalytic theory, since ultimately a descriptive approach brings us closer to the creative mind in action.⁵

I. The Limits of Imagination and Intellect

The novel begins in Coleridge's Xanadu, that sumptuous monument to human imagination and artisanship which nonetheless never realized what Coleridge called the "self-circling energies of Reason" (his later term for faith). Its man-made vision, an indulgent "pleasure dome," is embedded in a riot of natural process which appears to add to its glory, whilst subtly undermining its stability. We are drawn into Xanadu when we relinquish the "flickering eyes" of our everyday vision (12) and follow Mary Hare, a "speckled and dappled" creature of nature, as she tunnels her way through the undergrowth to "watch her vision form," which she always sees "as if for the first time" (18). It is a house—and a mentality—inherited from her father. But like that of Kubla Khan,

Norbert Hare's vision is destined to crack, indeed must crack if those "caverns measureless to man" are ever to be revealed, and men to be rescued from "the rubble of their own ideas" (345). All the same it is a nest of visionaries by comparison with the house-of-bricks minds of Mrs Flack and Mrs Jolley, whose sensation-seeking is conveyed luridly by the "monstera deliciosa" squirming triffidly outside their window (462). They are squeamish about such big old houses and their inhabitants: "And Them, laying upstairs, in Irish linen. Dreaming" (255). White is explicit about the Romantic origins of his philosophical quest: Xanadu, however faulty, is the rich and fertile soil of all creative work.

Norbert Hare is one of those whose dreams are buried in his own rubble. But he does have sufficient imagination to suspect that there are "moments of illumination" that indicate a "splendour beyond himself," and that his daughter has contact with such moments. In the episode when he is drowned in his own well, Mary holds out a "pole" to him; she is herself an instrument of the Chariot, "a fearful beam of the ruddy, champing light, reflected back at her own silly, uncertain father" (25); here "fearful" has its ambiguous sense of both being afraid and of inducing fear. Although her intention is "merciful," the directness of her beam-like approach blinds and terrifies him; it is another representation of those "emotions whirling, spokes of whitest light smashing" between them (61). In this sense she kills his preconceived notion of the beautiful, his own narcissistic creation; but in doing so she is responding to his own desire to transcend, for his eyes are searching beyond his "native grey raggedy scrub of cynicism" and are occasionally "appeased" not by Xanadu but only by his sense of something beyond, on the horizon, unattainable (16). This something is experienced by him as ugly, like Mary herself, a foreign otherness, "ugly as a foetus ripped out too soon" (61). Norbert in his weakness is unable to tolerate the ugliness of the unknown, hence fails in his artistic aspirations. Mary as artist succeeds where he failed, although her talent is engendered by his. Her "primeval panentheism" (D'Costa) informs her hypersensitivity to the hidden spiritual beauties of natural form.

Mary appears happier than her father owing to her Blakeian innocence. She can "recognize the Hand in every veined leaf" (67) and feel

“the little soft feathers of the wheels” of the Chariot furrowing cloudlike through the sky (344). Why then, we wonder, does she import the forces of philistinism into her life in the form of Mrs Jolley? It is of course traditional in poetic modes of writing for the source of inspiration (figured here by the Chariot) to have its false counterpart in the narcissistic self-imprisonment that Mary terms the “chain of evil” (343). As Blake writes, “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro narrow chinks of his cavern” (154). Mrs Jolley is one of those with enclosed perception, not so much unartistic as anti-artistic; she has “a blue eye that would see just so far and no further” (47), a caricature of the sky. With her eyes “blue for mothers” and her pink birthday cakes “for a bad girl,” she is a caricature of the wise and homely Peg who served Mary with motherliness as a child, and who is superseded by Mrs Godbold who nurses her when she has pneumonia. The archfiend Mrs Flack says her son Blue “has eyes which will see what I want to know” (254). The pseudo-artist projects his own misconceptions and is not open to revelations beyond his own control. When confronted by a manifestation of Chariot-lit “joy” between two people, joyless Flack and Jolley are simply “baffled,” because it is beyond their comprehension (240, 247). Their badness takes the anti-artistic form of blurred vision, a substitution for the spiritual realities to which art can penetrate.

Yet there is also a sense in which Mary and Mrs Jolley are partners in crime—not literally, but in terms of feelings of guilt. Mary feels she has ‘killed’ her father with her beam of vision—the “crime of seeing” (39)—and Mrs Jolley feels she has killed her husband while holding his cup of tea. The pair do not simply contrast; they interdigitate, in a way that stimulates the story’s development. Mary terms their relationship “trial by Jolley” (68). Paradoxically, she brings in the housekeeper to begin to destroy the house: to put her in touch with the idea of guilt and innate sinfulness. Without the intimacy of their collision, founded on a recognition that “evil is also good” and anyway “who is to decide what is bad?” (88), there would be no story. Xanadu would crumble gently into the soil as in Mary’s idealized escapist desire to “sink into it and [to see/know that] the grass will grow out of me” (172). Like many a Romantic

she would like to fade far away into the forest dim. But there would be no cracking, no conflagration, no piercing the walls of the cavern. Despite her insistence that “my experience will remain” (88–9), there would be decay but no revelation. Her self-enclosed dreaming needs to reach out to piebald humanity to become truly artistic.⁶ The spiritual education of all the riders is co-extensive with the cracking of Xanadu, through to the point at which it is replaced by ordinary houses for ordinary people to live in: not the values of Jolley ‘claustrophilia,’ but the daily life inspired by the Godbold heritage, open to the sky—a new heaven and a new earth. White’s integrated artistic vision is built out of the ruins of the old Romanticism, its fertile bedrock.

The strange, antagonistic companionship with Mrs Jolley opens up the house of memories for Mary Hare and provides the dynamism for reviewing her buried past history as an ugly, unloved child. This relationship is the precursor to her discovery of Himmelfarb in the garden and consequently, to her finding a love-object in the human not merely the animal world. The crisis of Mrs Jolley killing the snake whose “confidence” she never quite won (92) sends Mary out to the Plum Tree, nature’s church, where she encounters the Jew—who ironically describes himself as a “snake” (116). He emerges as if he were indeed a natural, snake-like emanation of the Edenic garden: “And he came out from under the branches” (98). The plum tree’s white blossom brings colour back to the sky; the sun hangs on its branches like a premonition of the jacaranda in the crucifixion scene. It is one of those fluid moments, reminiscent of Wordsworth’s “spots of time,” that White describes as “islands” of reciprocal recognition and understanding in the midst of everyday bustle. These “epiphanies” as they have been termed (Beatson 73–78; Edgecombe 56) are marked by the interpenetration of ethereal Chariot imagery with earthly forms—melting moments in the sky, a watery state of “confusion and solution,” the tracery of undergrowth, a “hatching” of light and shadow that causes familiar material forms to disappear. In such a “tent” of semi-materiality Mary Hare and the Jew “go to hell” together, and back. Trial by Jolley has strengthened Mary’s capacity to contain evil within her compass of vision; she is ready to serve humanity.

White's narration of the holocaust (one of the earliest fictional recordings) has a documentary quality that makes it read like a novel within a novel, marked halfway by a brief pause to remind us of the existence of protagonist and listener. From it, on a more metaphysical—and Whitean—plane, two significant figures emerge who are instrumental in guiding Mordecai in the direction of confronting his identity. On the female side there is the enigmatic Reha, whose conversation is purely practical, of jelly and shopkeepers, yet who may or may not have an unspeaking inward perception (152). Certainly she is conscious of the fact that there is an “end” and it is nigh. However Mordecai cannot live up to her desire for him to be a Messiah-figure. Her silent faith is in this sense misplaced, and he betrays it, as imaged by their dead dog awaiting him on the threshold of their violated home, after he has run away. Reha reappears in various forms—most hauntingly the Lady from Czernowitz, epitome of the “dark women” of his race whose mysterious music originated, one supposes, in the “strange inexpressible words” that flowed “out of the mouth” of his mother (107), the origin of artistic attentiveness. By the time he arrives in Australia Mordecai has decided that “the intellect has failed us” (221). He takes a job drilling holes at the Brighta factory in order to discipline his arrogance, lest his mind “take its own authority for granted” (337). Reha has helped to rescue him from the sterility of his “niggling intellect” with its “masks of words”: something paralleled by White's own suspicion of the verbal; he described himself as “hobbled by words” (Herring and Wilkes 34). She is partnered in Mordecai's mind by a male promoter of truth in the form of the dyer: who likewise appears a humble character at first, yet turns out to be another hand of God, like Shakespeare's “dyer's hand” (Edgecombe 52), running the Chariot blood-colours through the history of the people, leading to his communion with Dubbo. These aspects intermingle “in the moment of perception” when “all the inklings were married together: the dyer's image was with him for always, like his new wife, or his own fate. Now he was committed ... or must deny his own purpose, as well as the existence of the race” (143).

At the moment when Reha appears at her most perceptive, with her hair-thicket echoing the spokes of the Chariot, shining with an inner

light (151), Mordecai is pathetically scribbling on a piece of paper, attempting to draw the Chariot in non-verbal terms, yet without the technical or imaginative capacity. Reha implicitly shows him that he is no artist—at least, not yet. As he says to Mary, “it is not clear how we are to use our knowledge, what link we provide in the chain of events” (337). He is waiting to be used as a link in some greater picture, perhaps by White’s Vivisector-God (*Vivisector* 259, 307). For White also, as author, depends on the links that tie his complex narrative together to make themselves clear as he progresses. He too relies on the sensuous, musical and pictorial qualities of symbolism to touch his story into life—brushed by the Chariot-wheels.

II. Double vision

Mordecai’s story is a reminder of the pitfalls of the controlling authorial intellect which hampers poetic inspiration. The pseudo-artistic vision is gloriously satirized in the Brighta Bicycle Lamp Factory at Barranugli. Brighta is White’s everyday hell: a benevolent institution with regular holidays, wage-packets, efficient secretaries and rhythmical breaks for the infernal pleasures of “smoke-o”. Its barren, ugly garden of earthly delights, Bosch-like, is modelled on Milton’s Pandemonium (also one of the original sources for Coleridge’s Xanadu), a “temple” of light and music from whose “arched roof”

Pendent by subtle magic many a row
Of starry lamps and blazing cressets fed
With naphtha and asphaltus yielded light
As from a sky. (*Paradise Lost*, I: 727–30)

The casually dropped phrase “as from a sky” is the source of Jolley-blue, the world of imitation mother-values that is espoused with a certain pathos by both Mrs Jolley and Shirl Rosetree in her comic but desperate search for social belonging to cover the wound of her internal lostness. What are people—real living people—if they cannot be Jews? She wonders, and comes up with the formula that they are “methos” (Methodists). “That is what people are, it seems”—meaning, that is a way of being that should guarantee survival.

Brighta is on one level a caricature of the Chariot with its light-full revelations, and Rosetree's efficiency a caricature of the artist's virtuosity. Yet (as with Mary and Mrs Jolley) this is not a purely antithetical contrast. The factory turns out to be a place where individual identities can emerge from the crowd and as at Xanadu, "islands" of fruitful communication can form unexpectedly, even absurdly. There are hints of the heavenly spheres in Dubbo's earthly revolutions of "sweeping... swept and swept ... an occupation to be endured" (223). The Chariot of artistic inspiration works through music and movement, as well as colour and imagery.⁷ Dubbo, the dauber who glories in oilpaints, is a revival of the dyer from Mordecai's previous life (just as Reha reappears in the form of Ruth). His mechanical sweeping is what brings him closer to the Jew, who is analogously drilling and drilling, in expiation of his own sins—not those of the world, as he does eventually come to realize (337, 469). White pursues the implications of his own descriptive language with its sensuous word-clusters, until connections begin to form. He has already located Himmelfarb's need to connect with a non-intellectual mode of seeing, through his scribble-drawing of the Chariot. Alf Dubbo can create images that are capable of "seeing" his ongoing inner anguish, just as Mary Hare has absorbed his story into her imaginative house of memories. This is confirmed, comically, by the foreman's diagnosis that Himmelfarb "needs a mate" (346), which is then prophetically fulfilled by his "meeting the silence" of the abo in the midst of the noise of the factory. At the same time the drill echoes the vibrating of the voices of the dark women inside him, a type of music (228). When the black's sweeping comes "level with the Jew's drill" there is "a certain warmth of presence" (229). There is an engagement of wheels. The picture of artistic activity is enriched by the emotional links sparked by their disparate, apparently opposing, talents: Mordecai's intellectual faith will learn to harmonize with Dubbo's repudiation of his religious upbringing, creating between them something more authentic than either, in terms of artistic insight.

Later it is the sweeping cycle-movement that also links Dubbo with Mrs Godbold and her ironing "in long, sad, steamy sweeps, singing as she did" (257), her own mode of worship (257). Her "skill in passing

the iron over the long strips of fresh, fuming, glistening sheets” echoes the Chariot-language of strips of gleaming light and circling repetitive movement. This is the way she fulfils her personal mission, which was set in motion after she failed to save her brother as a child being crushed by the wheels of the haywain, the cruel or deadly Chariot of fate: “as the wheel of minutes ground . . . as the wheel of the cart trundled, lurched” (267). So she learns the limits of her personal strength, realizing that she cannot of her own will “hold off the weight of the entire world.” This traumatic episode is necessary to establish her faith, which then shines through in her personal solidity as “white maid,” “white pillar,” “white tower,” its means of expression her “white ironing board.” She becomes a vehicle for the Chariot’s light: like a work of art herself, her white sculptural being takes shape, with its spiritual–connotations (the wheels of solid gold). When the desperate Mrs Chalmers-Robinson begs Ruth for a “peep” into her tower of inner strength she finds it hard to accept that “[i]f I was to tell, it doesn’t follow that you would see. Everybody sees different. You must only see it for yourself” (299). “Tell, Ruth, tell!” begged the mistress.” From the flatness of the fens, which are echoed in her bone structure and visage, emerges Ruth’s scaffolding of internal harmony like Ely Cathedral itself.⁸ Ruth’s encounter with Dubbo reinforces her own inner identity, and enables her to emotionally detach herself from the “weaker side” of herself that had found its false vocation in supporting her useless husband Tom. When Tom dies, so does “Mrs Godbold’s self” (323). Ultimately her own children will be in a position to profit from her experience and to make better, more equal, marriages of reciprocal give and take; they will become a model for a new artistry of living.

Thus the cyclings that occur in the cycle-lamp factory are not merely mechanical but also spiritual encounters, Chariot-tinged. Mrs Godbold’s ironing, and the similar movement of washing, resulting from the gashing of the drill and the blood pouring in the washroom at Brighta (‘strangely, fascinatingly beautiful’), is what brings all three riders together: “so the golden chains continued to unwind, the golden circles to revolve” (247). Reha is relived in the form of Ruth, from whose statuesque form emanates the final message Himmelfarb has to take on

board: namely that when all the faith-colours run together on the banks of the last river, and it is finished, “it is the same” (500). Artistic vision, we learn from the novel, is essentially comprehensive, though it may be flawed by dogma as a result of the artist’s personal imperfections. The picture of the artist that develops as the novel progresses increases in complexity as the author appreciates the psychological and spiritual tensions generated by his characters’ interaction. The links made not only between characters but in overall symbolic structure reflect back into the psyche of the novelist, if we continue to regard his writing as exploratory rather than preconceived, as indeed White always insisted himself (“Patrick White” 26). The idea of the artist lodges not in any one character but in their interweaving into “the Whole” of the art-symbol.

III. Integration and Recognition

Dubbo’s history is the last to be narrated, since his job is to gather the threads of the narrative together into the fabric of the novel, integrating the vision of the writer. His name derives not only from his colour-daubing but also from the doubling of his parental figures. His ancestors are referred to metaphorically as a mixture of Irish descent and the “Great Snake” of the aboriginal dreamtime (353; also known as the “rainbow snake”); they are white and black, English and colonial. There is also a sense in which his biological and his foster-parents represent different aspects of the same couple. On the one hand there is his whore-mother with her client; on the other, the sexually unfulfilled parson-father whose platonic “sister” is obsessed by the “strength and loveliness” of some imaginary dead previous husband (363). Mrs Pask introduces Alf to the sensuality of oil paints yet is horrified by what he does with them—producing vermilion foetuses that will later reappear in the form of aboriginal whorls and dreamtime markings in his painting of the Deposition. Calderon points out that she has merely “uncovered his imagination.” In effect this is what he does himself when he reveals the sad, soft-hearted “white worm” at the core of his being, the vestigial shadow of his sexuality. Alf has a “piebald soul” (415) and needs to find some way of integrating these double-parents within himself if he is to fulfil his artistic mission. His mind is like not one but “two fish,

since the white people his guardians had dropped another in” (393). His seduction by his father becomes a type of initiation rite, driving him out of the parental home. As with Ruth Goldbold, a moment of trauma launches him into life. His vocation, he discovers, is to wander the banks of the archetypal river which is the “lifestream of all outcasts, goats and aboriginals” (351), investigating the rubbish-dump where the townsfolk keep their “true selves” (378), using his talent to explore the hidden reaches of humanity. He is sent by his destiny to live with maternal whores, through whom he learns about those other, original (aboriginal) parents whose “metho love” flickers with “livid jags” of passion, like lightning, as they “danced together on the squeaky bed” (361). The pun on “metho” with its purple flames highlights the contrast with Mrs Rosetree who believes that being a “metho” is the way to become safe and respectable. She seeks refuge in an institutional badge and in consequence becomes a lost soul; whereas what is (in appearance) the same word signifies for the nascent artist the colour-play of an inner “fire”.

At Mrs Khalil’s, Dubbo is their “pet abo” (311). The warmth of this alternative family sponsors another link in the artistic chain of being: his semi-mystical communion with Ruth Godbold. Ruth is searching for her renegade husband Tom, but finds Dubbo; and their pathways are redirected. Dubbo is drunkenly singing an absurd travesty of a song of praise:

And Brighta Lamps,
To see with,
To see see see,
And be with ... (315)

It is an invocation to the imitation Chariot, or is it the real one, in earthly disguise? In its light, lying on the floor, with sidelong gaze, Dubbo discovers a new angle on things. He holds his arm across his face “to see better” and says “Now I think I see ... I will get it all in time.” The two riders participate reciprocally in one of those dreamier moments of abstraction—“not exactly watching, for they each had their thoughts” (320). It is another island of contemplation in the midst of the “commotion of life,” an artistic dream where confused emotions can

take symbolic shape. In the mind of Mrs Godbold, “watching the scaffolding of music as it was erected” (318), Dubbo’s drunken chant conjures the cathedral of her childhood in the Fens, where the same phrase “scaffolding of sound” had created a golden ladder heavenwards “as if to reach the window of a fire” (264). The same imagery recurs later, linking Chariot and cathedral, when Mary imagines the Jew’s face on its pillow-pillar of fire being the source of a “canopy of golden stalactites” (471). For Dubbo, at Mrs Khalil’s, the scene is now set for the time when his “secret self” will be “singing at last” (397). His nascent creativity is drawn out by the bright human pageantry before his eyes.

Meanwhile, back at Brighta, Dubbo has put out an unconscious invitation to intimacy in the form of the Bible left open in the washroom at the passage with Ezekiel and the Chariot. As part of his artistic development he needs to remake, or repair, his internal contact with his pastor father, and he intuits Himmelfarb’s pastor-like ability to read the sacred book. Himmelfarb (heaven-touched) and Calderon (cauldron) are complementary father-figures; they constitute a type of marriage of heaven and hell in Dubbo’s mind—and as Blake knew, both elements are required for artistic vision. The communion is mutual: now it is Himmelfarb’s turn to discover a voice that is “utterly his own,” as he reads aloud to the musical accompaniment of tap and cistern. Reciprocally, this link puts Dubbo back in touch with his formal education. Dubbo claims to read the Bible “not for any of *his* reasons” (his father’s) but because “you can see it all” (349). Nonetheless beneath this specious distinction he seems to suspect a way in which he has “betrayed” the pastor by renouncing his upbringing; and at the same time, a way of atoning or making reparation for it by means of contact with the Jew. It is not, of course, the normal contact of a relationship, but an engaging of Chariot-wheels, a brushing of feathers. Indeed, one of Alf’s characteristics is an emotional detachment that goes with his sense of artistic vocation; when he appears to smile, it is not a spontaneous expression of joy as with Mrs Godbold, but a trick of light “concentrated on the planes of his excellent teeth” (351). He has by now renounced the hypocritical “agreeable voice” in which he had told Mrs Pask he would like to paint Jesus Christ, and is discovering instead the deeper blood-identification

which will lead to his imprinting a “little dirty trumpet” on the pillow, his soul’s voice or signature. His tubercular disease becomes his personal receptor of the “jarring emotions” of those he brushes against on street corners, river banks, factory floors. The emotions then emerge in colour through his finger-tips, in artistic response (393, 398). The “jewellery of wounds” flows equally from “blood or paint” (487).

Yet another duality, between Himmelfarb and Rosetree, again hides a deeper congruence within its contrast, and leads us to the denouement—the mock crucifixion. From the moment of their first encounter the rider and his alter-ego are touched into unwilling recognition. It begins with the Shakespearean transaction at the employment office, when Himmelfarb is directed by a minor character—comically unconscious of the truth he is enunciating—to enrol under the “kinda continental” management of the factory—“made for you personally” (222). Himmelfarb is Haim-Harry’s name-echo and core of identity, the dark voice from his own aboriginal roots that has found employment within his own version of Xanadu—the factory.⁹ He acknowledges this voice and face as dangerous, no longer because of the holocaust without but because of the holocaust within. His “rosy” daughter understands this, with her fascination with saints and roses, and so does his wife, but she prefers to shut out the knowledge through her ruthless jolley-materialism. The crucifixion scene is felt by many to be “overplayed” (D’Costa 2), an example of authorial enforcement rather than of artistic faith in the story’s evolution. If we consider its wider context, however, this picture of the self-sacrificing or missionary qualities of the artist becomes more complex. As throughout the novel, the qualities of an individual are modified by those of other characters and play their part in a definition of artistic faith that is still in process—hence the governing metaphor of the Chariot with its continually turning wheels. Thus the artistic nature of Himmelfarb himself has similarities with White’s earlier Christlike hero Voss, whom he described as “megalomaniac” (*Flaws* 104). He appears to be an example of artistic hubris. Yet in *Riders* he is not alone but one of a pair, and this affects the emotional balance and hence the meaning. It is not the difference between Mordecai and Haim that gives the final holocaust its aura of transcendence, but rather, their

fusion. It is intellectually absurd, but artistically inspired. Himmelfarb's fate is the expression of Rosetree's inner state when faced with a demand to commit himself to his own identity.

The prelude to the mock crucifixion is when Rosetree sees Himmelfarb's two eyes framed but "set at discrepant angles." He then sees how they fuse together, like beams or spokes, to make more than their sum: "all the lines of vision that could be traced from the discrepant eyes, fell into focus ... to make the one great archetypal face" (424). It is "disturbing, exhilarating, frightening"—is it anger or joy? It is perhaps a mixture of all these that leads Harry-Haim to see himself as he is—as "Himmelfarb," touched by rosy-fingered heaven—and then to begin to write "Mordecai" (the word of death) in the steaminess of the bathroom mirror (503). The mirror takes over from the hatchway as frame for his self-recognition. It is a form of painting, a self-portrait. Like rosy strings of sunset clouds, "the least vein in his terrible eyeballs was fully revealed to him" (503). The burnt-out childhood of the archetypal scapegoat smokes heavenward in the two-faced, one-faced Jew, in empathy with what has happened to his alter-ego in his own factory, his own mental world. Seeing through the glass darkly, steamily, smokily, is the prelude to seeing face to face. His own scribble-painting picks up Mordecai's earlier attempt to draw the Chariot, under Reha's observation; and vindicates his death as a type of symbolic poetry. Rosetree's meeting in the mirror is analogous to the meeting of Himmelfarb with his father Moshe in the "acetylene nebula" of his semi-conscious state as he drifts into death on Mrs Godbold's kitchen table, finally achieving the heart attack that releases his spirit (485).

At the end of the death scene, Mrs Godbold observes that "He was, you might say, overlooked" (501). It is perhaps a riskily over-cerebral pun on White's part, given that the writer is close to establishing his own overview of his materials. But the sensuous links work—leading forwards into the mirror-scene with Rosetree, and backwards to the eyes in the hatchway, then to Dubbo watching the deposition scene through the window of the shed. A small movement confirms the transference of emotion: when young Maude Godbold thinks she "sees a face" by the fire's dying purple light, and we then realize it is Dubbo's (485).

These events are framed as on a canvas, like the Table that contains the Whole—chairs, children, cows and asses, poets and prophets—in its chain of being. Dubbo's watching reminds us faintly of Flackeian voyeurism—of which the artist probably always has some tinge, rather as the war correspondent is always looking for a subject, even to the extent of stealing a scene. There is a resonance here with centuries of religious painting in which a self-portrait of the painter, however small and insignificant, is included at the foot of the Cross. Himmelfarb is, of course, unconscious of Dubbo watching through the window. His identification with him as a Chariot-rider, however, has been expressed throughout in terms of both flowing river and mechanical circling movements. Now on the banks of the interminable and ultimate river, "he who had drilled holes, could not stop now for souls, whatever the will, whatever the love." This description can be seen as a musical expression of how his strictly Jewish identity, when acknowledged rather than denied, has eventually led him to greater universality (491).

As the threads of the artistic tapestry are pulled together, Mary Hare feels the "fluttering bones" of Himmelfarb's Chariot-wheels against her cheek (491) and is "translated. Her animal body became the least part of her, as breathing thoughts turned to being" (485). Her blind tunneling through the undergrowth around Xanadu is superseded, because now, "direction had at last chosen her" (493). In her individual way, like the others, she embodies artistic inspiration. At the end, she knows about the fire before she sees it, just as "when placed right at the core of her great house, she would sense mist climbing up out of the gullies" (472); she intuits the vaporous message of Coleridge's chasms and their heralding a new state of being. This state has the archetypal quality of the type of death that underlies classical tragic form—the commitment to a transformation which Kierkegaard would term a leap of faith. The "spokes burnt black" of her wicker hat show her empathy with Himmelfarb's condition, a conflagration caused by the Chariot, at the same time marking the cracks in the fabric of Xanadu that release her spirit from fleshly confines. What literally happens to her after this is left deliberately unknown, but her message is received by Dubbo when through painting he reinstates her in her natural habitat, a "ring-

tailed possum in a dreamtime womb.” The collapse of Xanadu in effect allows culture and artisanship to merge back into their aboriginal unconscious roots with its dreamtime “whorls” of wind, animals and water, the banks of the river “reversing the relationship between permanence and motion” (514). The whorls and whirling of primitive primary colours are held within a Chariot whose shape is only half-visualized, for the painter realizes it does not need to be realistically depicted. But the riders, he knows, must emphatically exist as paintable earthly presences (514). They provide something for us to identify with, and it is their inter-relationship that gives structure to the picture as a whole.

It is in line with this relationship that Mrs Godbold and her children remain to carry on the story, their earthiness and solidity comprising those “straight white shafts” that halt “the face of darkness” and “see further” than others (548). They see further than both the brick-box of philistine respectability and the grand ruin of imagination’s pleasure-dome. The beautiful ending of the novel echoes that of *Paradise Lost* when, with the conflagration of Eden in the background, the “hast’ning angel” leads Adam and Eve down the hill with “the world all before them.” The art of living transcends even that of dying; and Mrs Godbold supersedes Mary Hare who initially guided our eyes into the imaginary thicket:

Now she could approach her work of living as an artist after an interval will approach and judge his work of art.... She would lower eyes to avoid the dazzle and walk on, breathing heavy, for it was a stiff pull up the hill, to the shed in which she continued to live. (551)

The pull up the hill is the final revolution of the Chariot-wheels that crushed her brother. Like Brecht’s *Mother Courage* she carries on with the cart and the world on her back. She has learned to “avoid the dazzle” and so can “go further” than the relativist Hegelians, despised by Kierkegaard, without being swallowed by the impact of knowledge.

White referred to “the cast of contradictory characters of which I am composed” in *Flaws in the Glass* (20), and in *Riders*, we can see how the tensions set up by these contradictions, with their sensuous immersion

in artistic process, are combined into a greater “Whole” which ultimately defines the novelist’s credo. The four main characters illustrate various facets of the artist: Mary Hare’s absorption in natural process shapes her search for an object of devotion which will transform her being; Himmelfarb’s cerebral intellectualism is discarded when he realizes it was a futile attempt to deny his identity; Dubbo’s detached egocentricity facilitates his dabbling in the colours of the ancient unconscious; Ruth Godbold gathers her materials (both flesh and linen) into formal harmony on a table-top, an artistic frame for experience. They are all servants rather than originators of the Chariot’s impulsion, as artists often feel about their inspiration. They are all “elements” in the total fabric of the work, and serve its “underlying idea.” They have their individual guilts and talents. But only in the creative tension of their conjunction do they have communicative power, the backbreaking power to suspend disbelief and pull the reader up the hill. The artistic mind is one that can encompass and reflect this wholeness—the integration of disparate and disjunctive elements into an organically evolving art-symbol. The Chariot itself, which started as an authorial technical device, gradually gains authority as an integrating force as it touches the novel’s elements into life and its form acquires inevitability. In accordance with “learning from experience” in the psychoanalytic sense (Bion), there is a sense in which the author’s mind is made by its own creation. Identifying with this process, and with the riders’ varying artistry, the reader is empathically drawn along in the Chariot of the work in its quest for the integrity of artistic faith.

Notes

- 1 For the Cabbalistic significance of the Chariot as Deity see Morley (153–7), Chapman (107) and Hansson (134–5).
- 2 D’Costa defines Mary Hare’s religious tradition as primeval panentheism; Himmelfarb’s as mystical kabbalistic Judaism; and Ruth Godbold’s as in a Christian self-sacrificial tradition.
- 3 Both object-relations and Jungian psychoanalytic theory focus on the tension between the omnipotent part of the personality (the “forced” patterns noted in White criticism) and the creative object-driven unconscious through which a higher, more complex and integrated self is evolved. See Bion, Meltzer, and

Grotstein. The psychoanalytic vertex, based on clinical findings, does in fact support the predominance of a tension between egocentric and creative value systems. This tension was originally defined in poetic theories of creativity, both Renaissance and Romantic, with which White is not merely familiar but continuously preoccupied.

- 4 In relation to the Jungian “Whole,” White writes: “Mightn’t the Whole have been formally contained from the beginning in this square-legged, scrubbed-down, honest-to-God, but lacerated table?” (*Vivisector* 370.) His interest in Jungian ideas is mentioned in his autobiography (*Flaws* 146). See also Hansson and Bulma-May.
- 5 In present-day clinical psychoanalysis (as distinct from conventional Freudian literary criticism), “theories” about mentality are now termed “models” for use as an aid to observation.
- 6 Bion has described this creative mental movement as a “catastrophic change” that occurs when a “commensal” relationship between facets of the mind becomes dynamic and induces new developments (see Meltzer, 110–11).
- 7 White described himself as a “composer manqué” (“Prodigal Son” 23). See also Hewitt.
- 8 White’s characters grow out of their “landscape of childhood,” just as he insisted his own landscape ‘never left him’ (*Flaws* 16, 106). In *The Vivisector* the key to the artist’s echoing of divinity lies in “the unalterable landscape of childhood, and the revelations of light” (307).
- 9 Hansson sees their conjunction in terms of “parody” (52), but it seems to me to be climactic—a mutual revelation of opposites—rather than undermining.

Works Cited

- Beatson, Peter. *The Eye in the Mandala: Patrick White: a Vision of Man and God*. London: Paul Elek, 1976.
- Bernstein, Leonard. *The Joy of Music*. London: Panther, 1969.
- Bion, Wilfred. *Learning from Experience*. London: Heinemann, 1962.
- Bulma-May, James. *Patrick White and Alchemy*. Melbourne: Miegunyah P, 2000.
- Chapman, Edgar L. “The Mandala Design of Patrick White’s *Riders in the Chariot*.” *Critical Essays on Patrick White*. Ed. Peter Wolfe. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990. 107–21.
- Colmer, John. “Duality in Patrick White.” *Critical Essays on Patrick White*. Ed. Peter Wolfe. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990. 288–93.
- Crowcroft, Jean. “Patrick White: a Reply to Dorothy Green.” *Overland* (Spring 1974): 49–53. Qtd. in Hansson.
- D’Costa, Gavin. “Atonement and the Crime of Seeing: Patrick White’s *Riders in the Chariot*.” *Literature and Theology* 22.2 (2008): 162–79.
- Edgecombe, Rodney S. *Vision and Style in Patrick White*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1989.

The Evolution of Artistic Faith

- Grotstein, James. *A Beam of Intense Darkness: Wilfred Bion's Legacy to Psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac, 2006.
- Hansson, Karin. *The Warped Universe: a Study of Imagery and Structure in Seven Novels by Patrick White*. Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1984.
- Herring, Thelma and G.A. Wilkes. "A Conversation with Patrick White." *Critical Essays on Patrick White*. Ed. Peter Wolfe. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990. 28–37.
- Hewitt, Helen Verity. *Patrick White: Painter Manque*. Melbourne: Miegunyah P, 2002.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. *Fear and Trembling*. Trans. Alastair Hannay. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.
- Langer, Susanne K. *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*. London: Oxford UP, 1942.
- . *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953.
- Meltzer, Donald. *The Kleinian Development*. Strathay: Clunie P, 1985.
- Malouf, David. "Castle Hill Lear: Patrick White Reappraised." *Times Literary Supplement* 5 Jan. 2007:12–13.
- Morley, Patricia. *The Mystery of Unity: Theme and Technique in the Novels of Patrick White*. Montreal: McGill UP, 1972.
- Steven, Laurence. *Dissociation and Wholeness in Patrick White's Fiction*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1989.
- White, Patrick. *Flaws in the Glass*. London: Vintage, 1988.
- . *Riders in the Chariot*. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1961.
- . *The Vivisector*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.
- . "Patrick White." *Critical Essays on Patrick White*. Ed. Peter Wolfe. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990. 24–27.
- . "The prodigal son." *Critical Essays on Patrick White*. Ed. Peter Wolfe. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990. 21–23.
- Wolfe, Peter, ed. *Critical Essays on Patrick White*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990.