

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE THEME OF SUFFERING
AND REDEMPTION IN THE NOVELS OF
PATRICK WHITE

by

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STATEMENT

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no copy or paraphrase of material previously published or written by another person, except when due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Ruth Bernard

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SUMMARY

There is a remarkable continuity and coherence of thought in the work of Patrick White. In this thesis, an attempt has been made to show the development of the underlying and recurring theme of suffering leading, ultimately, to redemption. It has been possible to trace a clear progression from the nihilism expressed in the first two books to a positive avowal of faith in the later and more mature novels. This seems to reflect a personal development in the author during the years 1939 to 1961, and, for this reason, his work has been treated chronologically.

In chapters I and II, dealing with Happy Valley and The Living and the Dead, the suffering of the main characters is shown to reflect a sense of hopelessness and despair at the inevitable loneliness of man and at the futility of life itself. The Aunt's Story, discussed in chapter III, contains a more positive statement that truth is revealed to those who suffer; however, as revelation and peace seem attainable only in madness, the implicit hopefulness of The Aunt's Story remains questionable. There is a decisive change in the next

book and this has been noted in chapter IV. In The Tree of Man, there is a very real attempt to see life in broader terms and to transform suffering into a beneficent experience, leading to humility and serenity. Humility is the key-word to Voss and the redemptive theme culminates in Riders in the Chariot. The author's concepts of humility, of good and evil, of revelation and redemption, are examined in chapters V and VI.

Throughout, the imagery used by Patrick White, his symbolism, his mysticism, his predilection for the simple and simple-minded, even the mad, his violent reaction against the ugly manifestations of this "plastic" age and its dehumanising effect on people, his use of irony and social satire, are related to his central theme. The theme itself is, fundamentally, religious: Patrick White proclaims his belief that, by striving and suffering, man is redeemable.

CHAPTER I HAPPY VALLEY: A STUDY IN FUTILITY

Existentialism, in helping to form and in expressing the intellectual climate of our time, has had a marked influence on serious writers of the mid-twentieth century. In its reaction both against the complacent "bourgeois" world and mentality and against the mechanisation of life with its reduction of the individual to a cog in a social and technological machine, in its insistence on personal liberty and responsibility and in its concentration on man as a free and rational, an ex-sistent, being, existentialism has attempted to analyse and rationalise some of the crises facing modern man. It has expressed the utter loneliness of man and the futility and frustration of his deepest aspirations. He stands bereft of God and rootless in a complex and sophisticated culture, deprived of the traditional means of self-identification. In the oft-quoted words of Sartre, he is seen to be "une passion inutile". From his confrontation with a world which seems meaningless, he experiences the feeling of nausea, described by the existentialists. He finds himself divorced from his fellow-men and from life itself and, in this detachment, he observes and accepts - to use

the terminology of Camus - the "absurdity" of the human situation.

In Thus Spake Zarathustra, Nietzsche, who is now regarded essentially existentialist in his philosophy, describes how Zarathustra meets the Saint, who praises God; Zarathustra, when alone, cries: "Can it indeed be possible! This old Saint in his forest hath not yet heard that God is dead!"¹ F.C. Copleston, in his paper on existentialism, writes:

The philosophy of Camus, so far as I know it, seems to me to be simply a very clear perception of the situation attendant on the 'death of God'. It is, if you like, unblinker atheism.²

The bleakness of a philosophy of "unblinker atheism" with its concomitant acknowledgment of cosmic chaos and individual loneliness does not help modern man meet the problems he has to face. It offers little hope or comfort. There is no message of salvation in either Sartre's or Camus's philosophy. In some of the other existentialist thinkers, notably Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Jaspers, grouped loosely as existentialists in their

1 Friedrich W. Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra, ed. Ernest Rhys, trans. A. Tille, London, 1946, p.5

2 F.C. Copleston, Existentialism and Modern Man, Paper read to the Aquinas Society of London, 14 April, 1948, Aquinas Paper No.9, London 1951, p.16

common concern with the problems of existence and individual responsibility, there is an orientation toward the transcendental and a seeking of God. It is, however, the pessimism, propounded by Sartre and Camus, which reflects the mental climate of the time.

This pessimism is the legacy of the writers of the past two generations and our mid-century literature emerges from the shadows of gloom and despair cast by Strindberg, O'Neill, Kafka and the early Eliot. In the between world wars period and its aftermath, the doctrines of communism and of the church offered to certain writers a promise of order and meaningfulness, but for most they failed to sustain positive belief. In our more recent post-war era, pessimism has become endemic and has found new and sardonic expression in what has been described as the "theatre of the absurd", in plays by Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Albee. The symbolism, the ludicrous situations, the bitter irony of their tragi-comedies portray the anguish of modern man, his loneliness, perplexity and sense of loss. By inference, they seem to express a frustrated longing for acceptance, hope and salvation. This same basic theme is developed in the writings of Patrick White.

The evolution of Patrick White's thought and belief

can be traced clearly in his novels. There is a definite progression from the barren nihilism of the first two novels toward a transcendentalism, containing a message of salvation, in his later work. Throughout, the concept of suffering is his premise: in the beginning, suffering is seen as futile, arousing, at best, a stoic acceptance of fate, but later, the suffering of man is conceived as teaching him humility and leading him, ultimately, to redemption. Suffering is given a mystical connotation in a largely Christian context and Patrick White emerges as a profoundly religious writer, not in terms of orthodox faith but in the seeking of an essentially religious truth. In his later work, he supports a doctrine of hope and a belief that man is redeemable. This belief is expressed more and more unequivocally in his novels. So strong is his apparent desire for a cosmic order and meaningfulness, that he will, at times, sacrifice the artistic unity and balance of his work for an assertion of a positive faith. In certain areas, to be discussed in the chapters dealing with his later novels, particularly Riders in the Chariot, the expression of his faith is in conflict with plausible characterisation and plot and he subjugates the latter to his beliefs.

In his first novel, Happy Valley, as in all his subsequent books, Patrick White is preoccupied with the concept of suffering. We are introduced to the theme of the novel by an epigraph, quoting the Mahatma Ghandi:

It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering, which is the one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is measured by the amount of suffering undergone ... the purer the suffering, the greater is the progress.

and each of the main characters, as well as most of the minor ones, suffers, partly from deliberate or unconscious acts of cruelty by others and partly because of the private torment which exists in his own mind. Mostly the characters in Happy Valley accept their suffering dumbly and submissively; where, in rare flashes of rebellion, they try to control their own destiny, they are thwarted and struck down again by circumstance or fate. Their suffering is ordained; it is an immutable part of their lives.

In the light of Patrick White's later development, it is interesting to note that the characters in Happy Valley are not purified by their suffering, despite the author's choice of an epigraph which attaches virtue to suffering. This is perhaps significant in that it indicates an early manifestation of Patrick White's desire to look for a

meaning and justification in suffering, yet his inability at that stage to fuse his intellectual apperception and his portrayal of character and action into one artistic whole. It is only in his third novel, The Aunt's Story, that his belief in the intrinsic value of suffering begins to grow organically from the book. From then on, this belief runs as the leitmotif through all his novels and rises to a crescendo in Riders in the Chariot. His statement and restatement of the redemptive theme becomes almost obsessive. In the crucifixion of Himmelfarb in Riders in the Chariot it has reached a climax. It is the point of parturition and it will be interesting to see whether, in future novels, he will feel compelled to pursue the same theme.

Happy Valley is imbued with an unmitigated, truly existentialist, pessimism. The seeming hopelessness of life is given form and substance in the portrayal of the town, Happy Valley. There is an all-pervading atmosphere of gloom and doom hanging over Happy Valley. The town is a living organism, ugly, bleak, uncompromising, evil. Its name is an irony as there is no happiness in Happy Valley. One feels that happiness could never blossom there, only hatred, malice, discontent and, at

best, sullen acceptance. Patrick White writes of it:

There never was co-operation in Happy Valley, not even in the matter of living, or you might even say less in the matter of living. In Happy Valley the people existed in spite of each other.... In summer when the slopes were a scurfy yellow and the body of the earth was very hot, lying there stretched out, the town, with its cottages of red and brown weatherboard, reminded you of an ugly scab somewhere on the body of the earth. It was so ephemeral. Some day it would drop off, leaving a pink, clean place underneath.¹

In summer, the slopes are "a scurfy yellow" and the town is "an ugly scab". The "scab" image reappears later in the book. Elsewhere, Patrick White describes the hot, dry dust of summer and the waves of dust churned by passing cars. In winter, it is bitterly cold and wet in Happy Valley; there are frosts; there is slush and mud in the streets. The houses of Happy Valley are squat and ugly, the roads rutted. The school has a flapping roof and water drips into an enamel basin when it rains. The teacher is asthmatic; the school inspector considers the standard of intelligence at Happy Valley the lowest in the state; the children spend their school-break throwing stones at the corrugated iron of the urinal wall. There is one hotel in the town with baskets of dead ferns hanging from the verandah

¹ Happy Valley, London, 1939, p.28. All references to this novel are to this edition.

ceiling and trailing on to a dirt floor; the publican has a sharp, drawn face with lips going in on the gums. It is as dismal a town as one could find.

Thus, at best, Happy Valley is derelict and dirty, "poor and dirty, with skinny old women rooting about in their backyards, like so many rickety fowls".¹ At its worst, Patrick White imbues it with a malignancy quite its own; it generates hatred and despair: "There is something relentless about the hatred induced by human contacts in a small town",² and: "...the township of Happy Valley with its slow festering sore of painfully little intrigue".³ He says: "Happy Valley is pain"⁴ and "Kambala or... Happy Valley was a choice of evils".⁵ The references to evil and pain, to hatred and intrigue, are underlined by the image of the town as a "festering sore" resulting in "an ugly scab somewhere on the body of the earth". The imagery expresses the nausea noted by the existentialists. There is a feeling of physical disgust, as in the description of "the dead bodies of flies bloated and obscene upon the window-sill",⁶ and a deliberately morbid preoccupation with death.

1 ibid, p.46 2 p.191 3 p.18 4 p.277

5 p.15 6 p.117

The most frequently recurring image is the dead geranium in Mrs Everett's window-box:

That was Happy Valley. God, that street. And the window was stuck. Across the way a geranium had died in Mrs Everett's pot.¹

...the geranium dead on old Mrs Everett's window-sill, with Mrs Everett's geranium face wilting and inquisitive above the pot. Mrs Everett, like her geranium, no longer underlined the seasonal change. She twittered in a dead wind.²

...that old woman virulent above a dead geranium in a window-box, ... So you let loose a wind of hate that flapped in the dead geranium leaves.³

These are but a few of the references to the geranium, which is dead, like Happy Valley; Mrs Everett, one of the town's representatives, has a wilting "geranium face" and, like a dead and desiccated plant, she "twittered in a dead wind". Later, the "dead wind" has become "a wind of hate" which "flapped in the dead geranium leaves".

Patrick White evokes an atmosphere of death, decadence and decay. The bloated corpses of flies, the shrivelled plants, the "virulent" old women watching from behind window-boxes, the "dead wind" and the "wind of hate", shroud Happy Valley in an aura of evil.

On analysis, this evil or malignancy is as startling

¹ p.37

² p.115

³ p.218

as the malevolence of certain characters appearing in some of Patrick White's later novels, for example, Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack in Riders in the Chariot or Theodora's mother, Mrs Goodman, in The Aunt's Story. Patrick White's main protagonists have to overcome not only their inner conflicts but are confronted also with a living, external force of evil. Mrs Flack in Riders in the Chariot actively precipitates the death of Himmelfarb and it is only by the supreme sacrifice of the crucifixion that the evil engendered by the two women, Mrs Flack and Mrs Jolley, is rendered ineffective and turned back upon itself. Theodora, in The Aunt's Story, in the realisation that she cannot be free in the sense of finding her self until she has rid herself of the evil force surrounding and holding her, contemplates matricide. Shortly after that painful inner conflict, Mrs Goodman dies and it is only then, when the external evil has disappeared, that Theodora can escape into self-fulfilment. In Happy Valley, Oliver Halliday and Alys Browne know intuitively that they can never achieve happiness in the strangling atmosphere of evil which pervades Happy Valley. They try to flee, yet their fleeing is in itself a destructive act against Oliver's

wife and children and therefore evil. Thus their failure to escape the evil of Happy Valley saves them from generating further evil. Oliver writes an agonised letter: "But, Alys, I can't, I won't willingly destroy, ...".¹ Then he and his family leave Happy Valley, but Alys cannot go away. The aggression against Hilda has been stayed but, in the process, Alys' hopes of happiness have been destroyed. She is condemned to remain in Happy Valley and the evil character of the town continues to exist. The phenomenon of evil is unresolved. This is one of several instances in the novel of an uncertainty of purpose: problems are raised tentatively and left unanswered.

There is no rational basis for the implied evil of the town Happy Valley; it is comparable to the animism which appears throughout Patrick White's writing. Certain inanimate objects are endowed by him with spiritual values of goodness; others are evil. Stan Parker in The Tree of Man fills his mouth with "righteous" potatoes;² "I believe in this table"³ says Theodora

1 p.294

2 The Tree of Man, London, 1956, p.42

3 The Aunt's Story, London, 1958, p.159

All references to these novels are to these editions.

Goodman in The Aunt's Story when asked by General Sokolnikov whether she believed in God, and "God is in this table"¹ says Himmelfarb in Riders in the Chariot; "Only chairs and tables... are sane"² says Theodora and "only bread is good"³ says Lieselotte in The Aunt's Story. Conversely, Miss Hare in Riders in the Chariot says: "Plastic is bad, bad!"⁴ The instances are numerous and this unusual facet of Patrick White's writing is discussed fully in the chapter on The Aunt's Story. In Happy Valley, the animism finds expression in the pulsing evil of Happy Valley and in the sense of futility which permeates the town. Happy Valley is not wicked; it is no Sodom and Gomorrha; the people are not more sinful than people in other places; but from Happy Valley there emanates a pervasive atmosphere of malignancy and also doom. The town is shrouded in a cloud of foreboding, waiting and futility. Patrick White writes:

¹ Riders in the Chariot, London, 1961, p.159. All references to this novel are to this edition.

² The Aunt's Story, p.176

³ ibid, p.236

⁴ Riders in the Chariot, p.90

Spring was a transitory humour or exhalation that dried and evaporated, disappeared with the barley grass and the weaned lamb. Happy Valley became that peculiarly tenacious scab on the body of the brown earth. You waited for it to come away leaving a patch of pinkness underneath. You waited and it did not happen, and because of this you felt there was something in its nature peculiarly perverse. What was the purpose of Happy Valley if, in spite of its lack of relevance, it clung tenaciously to a foreign tissue, waiting and waiting for what? It seemed to have no design. You could not feel it. You anticipated a moral doomsday, but it did not come. So you went about your business, tried to find reason in this. After all, your existence, in Happy Valley must be sufficient in itself,¹

Here we find again the image of the scab which is "peculiarly tenacious" and "peculiarly perverse" in clinging to the face of the earth, seeming to wait for something to happen to release it from its suspense of waiting. As nothing happens, the waiting is futile and absurd. Patrick White emphasises the absurdity with its undercurrent of despair by posing a disguised question at the end of the passage. The very assertiveness of the statement "existence in Happy Valley must be sufficient in itself", prefixed as it is with "After all", twists it into a denial of its truth. In this context, it is highly ironic.

In Happy Valley, Patrick White makes frequent and effective use of this form of irony. For example, he writes:

¹ Happy Valley, p.116

Hilda Halliday was almost forty. Oliver was, thirty-four. But they were happy, she said.¹

or again, of the spinster, Alys Browne:

It will rain and rain, and I shall not go out, and to-morrow perhaps it will rain, she said, and I am perfectly happy, why, she said.²

In both passages, the protestations of happiness, qualified as they are in the first statement by "but" and in the second by "why" become unwitting confessions of unhappiness.

The unhappiness of the characters in Happy Valley is expressed most poignantly in their knowledge of the hopelessness of waiting. They are unwilling captives in a hostile environment, waiting for an external force to change their lives but submitting finally to their destiny, which is to go on waiting. This waiting and its agonising futility, precursory to Beckett's Waiting for Godot, the unfulfilled expectation, the sense of life suspended, are in their way quite brilliantly portrayed by Patrick White. He writes: "At Happy Valley man was by inclination static"³ and shows his protagonists frozen into inactivity by a feeling of hopelessness or drifting without purpose.

Some of the characters, admittedly, have tangible expectations. Hilda Halliday is waiting for the letter

¹ ibid, p.69

² p.43

³ p.115

which will confirm a promised exchange of medical practice and will enable the Halliday family to leave Happy Valley for Queensland and, in the end, her wish is fulfilled. Her son, Rodney, who is waiting to escape from the tortures of his more brutal schoolmates to boarding school in Sydney, also attains his goal.

Others are not so rewarded. Ernest Moriarty, the sick schoolmaster, who is waiting for the Board to move him to another school in a more equable climate, professes determination but secretly acknowledges defeat. His vain and shallow wife, Vic, overtly waiting for the move to a more fashionable town or suburb, has learnt to compensate herself for the apparent hopelessness of their situation. Others again, like Oliver Halliday and Alys Browne, are waiting for something undefined. Oliver feels:

You were always waiting for something that you did not say, that perhaps after all you could not say. But you felt you ought.¹

For Alys, waiting has become a chronic state:

Nowadays she always seemed to be on her way between two points, or waiting, she waited much more than in the past, though now with a sense of fulfilment in waiting, as if it were some end in itself.²

Waiting is her life and she thinks: "... but waiting as waiting is not so much waste time if it is part of a

design".¹ However, Happy Valley provides no basis to suppose that there is "a design". On the contrary, Patrick White writes: "Waiting, waiting for what, Happy Valley waiting in the dark, is the question without answer",² expressing the seeming purposelessness of waiting, of suffering, of human endeavour and of life itself. This expression of purposelessness is, of course, at variance with the avowed thesis of spiritual progress wrought by suffering, as intimated in the Ghandian epigraph.

The prevailing theme in Happy Valley is suffering. The story begins with the labour pains of Mrs Chalker, a seemingly senseless suffering which leads to a still-birth. Everyone suffers. Hilda Halliday, Oliver's wife, suffers both physically from incipient tuberculosis and nervous tension and emotionally from her knowledge of Oliver's infidelity and her own inadequacies in their relationship. Rodney, their son, suffers from persecution by other children. In a scene of sheer brutality, three boys attack and castigate Rodney behind the school urinal during the break. These boys are forerunners to Blue and his "Lucky Sevens" who crucify Himmelfarb in Riders in the Chariot. Their fear of

¹ p.220

² p.263

whatever is different and outside the narrow confines of their understanding finds its natural outlet in physical violence. Margaret Quong, the part-Chinese girl in Happy Valley, also suffers from the cruelty of the other children, who reject her, but suffers even more because she is thwarted in her tender, adolescent love for Alys Browne. Ethel Quong, Margaret's mother, suffers from what she feels to be the indignity of being married to a Chinese and the Quongs all suffer from being Chinese in a xenophobic, white community. Chuffy Chambers suffers from the overt disdain of the young girls and his dim awareness that he is retarded. Vic Moriarty suffers from sexual frustration and lack of social recognition. Clem Hagan suffers from a sense of inferiority for which he tries to compensate by behaving in a brazen manner. Sidney Furlow suffers from boredom and discontent. Patrick White writes: "It made you cry, having nothing to do, or read a book, or read a book",¹ emphasising, by repetition, her desperation and exasperation. Her parents, Mr and Mrs Furlow, suffer from the shock of social disaster in their daughter's deliberate notoriety and mésalliance.

¹ p.84

Apart from the suffering caused by external circumstances, there is the suffering inherent in the personalities of the main protagonists. Intelligent and sensitive, aware of currents within currents, they stand alone; they are strangers in an uncomprehending world. Like the existentialist hero in Henri Barbusse's L'Enfer, who says: "An immense confusion bewilders me. It is as if I could not see things as they were. I see too much and too deep",¹ they see below the surface but cannot come to terms with the everyday problems of life. They are signally inept at managing their lives. They live more intensely through their heightened emotional and intellectual awareness but are unable to transform their experience into positive action. They suffer from a sense of unreality and a sense of failure.

Oliver Halliday is acutely aware of his failure as a husband and father and of his failure to penetrate the outer layers of human intercourse. Following a shooting expedition with his son, he thinks: "... the day had been a failure, he was a failure in relationship with Rodney, in relationship with Hilda".² He is a failure in his inability to act. Having drifted,

¹ Quoted by Colin Wilson, The Outsider, London, 1963, p.9

² Happy Valley, p.192

without volition, into a loveless marriage, he drifts later into an illicit love-relationship, and succeeds only in almost destroying the former without consolidating the latter. His one positive action is when he tries to escape with Alys, who is as ineffectual as he. Their initiative is thwarted when they are stopped just outside the precincts of the town by almost running over the body of Moriarty, lying dead on the road. Oliver, as a doctor, has to attend to Moriarty and the lovers return to the town before their absence has been noticed. But Moriarty's body is not a *deus ex machina*. One cannot help feeling that, if it had not been Moriarty's death on the highway, something else would have intervened to prevent Oliver and Alys from living out their resolution, which quickly crumbles in the face of an obstacle. They both return and are prepared to accept, for ever, the hopelessness of their situation, to accept failure and to suffer.

Both Oliver and Alys, in their doubts and procrastinations, in their inability to give shape to their lives, in their recognition of failure, are forerunners to Elyot Standish in The Living and the Dead,

who fails to commit himself to another person, to an idea, to life itself. Their implied failure is underscored by the manifest failure of the sick, pathetic, cuckold schoolmaster, Ernest Moriarty. Ernest knows he is a failure as a husband, as a provider and as a teacher: "I'm a failure, he said. You see, I'm a failure, he said".¹ Toward the end of the book, after he has murdered Vic, Ernest feels: "All your life you had been going round in circles for a purpose, at least you thought, you did not know it was non-existent"² and: "But the only alternative was to go round and round, and going round and round was how many years, was a lie".³ Finally, Ernest walks to his death on the highway, thinking: "The chief reason was there was no reason".⁴ There is no hint of redemption here, only nihilism and despair. The suffering has been in vain.

In Happy Valley, written in the thirties, as well as in The Living and the Dead, we find an expression of the intellectual climate of the time. Patrick White's heroes are Eliot's "Hollow Men". In technique and style, Patrick White was also influenced by the current

¹ p.125

² p.269

³ p.272

⁴ p.273

literary vogue and large sections of both books are written in the genre of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein and the "stream of consciousness" school. Throughout Happy Valley, the interweaving of thought with action past and present, the exposition of character and happenings through introspection, are realised with great skill, but some passages read like Gertrude Stein, as for example:

The wind is wind is water wind or water white
in pockets of the eyes was once a sheep before
time froze the plover call alew aloo atingle
is the wire that white voice across the plain
on thistle thorn the wind pricks face the
licked fire the wind flame tossing out distance
on a reel.¹

In other passages, Patrick White has combined straight narrative with a form of "stream of consciousness" to further the action of the story, to reveal motive or to expose to ridicule in biting satire the foibles and weaknesses of his characters. Thus he writes of Vic Moriarty:

She yawned, her whole face yawned, the little golden curls quivered at the side. When she went to bed at night she took a comb and frizzed them out. Ernest said she had pretty hair. Oh dear, she said, this place isn't good for your asthma, Ernest, she said. They don't give you a proper screw. You're killing yourself, she said, which was as good as saying you're killing me. Only I'm fond of Ernest,...²

¹ p.185

² p.36

Here, the description of the "little golden curls" which quiver at the side and are frizzed out at night and the yawning face create a visual image of Vic, her fluffy blonde and rather too obvious prettiness. This narrative description merges almost imperceptibly into stream of consciousness, with a comment by Ernest within the expression of Vic's thoughts. These thoughts which, in part, take the form of an imaginary conversation, show all the disingenuousness of a conversation and reflect the basic egotism of Vic: her avowed concern for Ernest is essentially a concern for herself. Despite the disingenuousness, she is tacitly aware of her own egotism, as she immediately proceeds to defend her position by saying: "Only I'm fond of Ernest".

The satirising of pretentiousness, of meanness clothed in self-righteous respectability, of social aspiration and folly, which emerges more and more in Patrick White's later books, is richly evident in this, his first novel. The satire is milder, less devastating in Happy Valley than in, for example, Riders in the Chariot, but it shows early promise of a strong satirical vein and the cartoonist's ability to

highlight certain features to expose a person in caricature, if not as a fully rounded character. With skill Patrick White reveals not only the superficiality and egotism of Vic Moriarty, but also the overconfident, self-satisfied ostentation of the wealthy grazier's wife, Mrs Furlow, and the antics of the Belpers, the well-to-do bank manager and his wife:

Mentally, Mrs Furlow always wore a tiara ... when she swept into a room in an excessive number of pearls everyone said, MY DEAR, which, if overheard, Mrs Furlow always interpreted to her own advantage.¹

She looked at her husband all the same and waited for him to follow up, because the Belpers were like that, a kind of perpetual vaudeville act, or concert party. The Good Sorts, who bandied about a clumsy ball both for their own entertainment and their audience's discomfiture.²

Mrs Furlow, with social aspirations to Government House where tiaras are worn, is blissfully unaware of the vulgarity of her appearance. The Belpers, insensitive, tiresome and indomitable in their determination to show a "good" front, are frequently referred to as "The Good Sorts". It is a label. As a result, they and other victims of Patrick White's satire, tend to become stereotypes, and, as such, are often deficient in

¹ p.81

² p.130

character realisation. More will be said of this tendency in the chapter on Riders in the Chariot where the "plastic ladies" assume stereotypical and consequently unreal proportions but where their dramatic function compensates in part for deficiencies in characterisation. In Happy Valley, Patrick White's condemnation of the Mrs Moriartys and Mrs Furlows of the world is not as absolute as it becomes in Riders in the Chariot: they are not the embodiment of evil, as are Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack; however, they are typical targets and one can feel Patrick White sharpening his pen on them.

Where, on the one hand, social satire is evident in all of Patrick White's writing, becoming more pungent and devastating in each book, and, on the other hand, his preoccupation with the concept of suffering is developed and refined, there is concurrent with the satire and the central theme of suffering a rare continuity of thought. This continuity finds expression in recurring symbols and images, characterisations and situations, which, in turn, lend cohesion to the underlying theme. Thus, on the second

page of his first novel, Happy Valley, there is a reference to a crucifixion which reappears as the crisis in the finale of his most recent novel, Riders in the Chariot:

... on another occasion a drover from the Murray side ran amuck and crucified a roadman on a dead tree. Old Harry Grogan found the body. It was like a scarecrow, he said, only it didn't scare. There was crows all over the place, sitting there and dipping their beaks into the buttonholes.¹

The incident in Happy Valley is of little significance: it is only background music and helps to set the tone, but it is perhaps indicative of an unusual fascination which certain ideas have for Patrick White so that he returns to them with a persistency which is not, as it would be in a lesser artist, a sign of poverty in imagination.

The hawk, another incident or symbol, appears early in Happy Valley only to appear again in The Aunt's Story and Voss. In Happy Valley, the hawk seems to symbolise an extension of man himself in his spiritual striving; at the same time, it arouses man's irrational desire to destroy that which he does not understand and, perhaps,

to destroy himself. There are several references to the hawk:

The air was very cold. In it a hawk lay, listless against the moving cloud, magnetized no doubt by some intention still to be revealed.¹

If he (Oliver) had a gun he'd take a pot at that hawk, put a shot in its belly for lunch, and it would fall down and lie on the snow, its blood red on the snow, dead. But there would be no pain before annihilation.²

The hawk continued to circle in wide empty sweeps ... I'd shoot that bird if I had a gun, Clem Hagan said.³

Both Oliver and Clem are moved to thoughts of destruction which could be a form of self-destruction. Two books later, Theodora Goodman does shoot the hawk, and by that time it has become quite clearly a symbol of her self and the act of shooting is an act of self-annihilation. In Voss, Patrick White describes Voss thinking of Jesus Christ and writes:

The vision that rose before the German's eyes was, indeed, most horrible. The racked flesh had begun to suppurate, the soul had emerged, and gone flapping down the ages with slow, suffocating beat of wings.

As the great hawk flew down the valley, Turner did take a shot at it, but missed. It was the glare he blamed.⁴

¹ p.9

² p.18

³ p.22

⁴ Voss, London, 1962, p.211. All reference to this novel are to this edition.

Here the hawk is the soul of mankind, personified by Christ, and the attempt by Turner to shoot it is an act of recrucifixion.

As a youth, Oliver Halliday in Happy Valley finds himself in a church in Paris where the organ playing Bach moves him to tears and the intensity of his feeling on this occasion remains with him as an emotional milestone throughout his life. Ruth Godbold in Riders in the Chariot has a similar experience as a young girl in the cathedral of her native town in England and her sense of exaltation is later linked with her vision of the chariot.

There is, of course, also a ball in Happy Valley, the ball or dance which recurs in every one of the novels and is always of considerable significance. It is at the Race Week Ball in Happy Valley that Oliver Halliday and Alys Browne decide to escape together, that Clem Hagan and Sidney Furlow are forced to acknowledge their attraction for each other and that Vic Moriarty realises she is about to lose her lover, Clem. It is at the somewhat sleazily bohemian party-cum-dance that Mrs Standish in The Living and the Dead loses the last shreds

of her dignity and is left to face nothing but her sickness and death. Theodora Goodman shows a blazing spirit at a ball in The Aunt's Story and succeeds in throwing Frank Parrott, a possible suitor, into confusion, attracting and repelling him in turn. It is at a country dance that Amy of The Tree of Man meets her future husband, Stan Parker. One of the few men almost to penetrate the invulnerable outer shell of Laura Trevelyan, determinedly dedicated to Voss, is the ship's surgeon, Dr Badgery, who tries to reach her and almost succeeds at a ball in Voss, and it is at the ball at Xanadu in Riders in the Chariot that the ugly Miss Hare has her fragile moment of intimacy with her cousin Eustace Cleugh, who remains her lifelong benefactor. Patrick White cannot resist a ball: his impressionistic style is at its best in the scintillating eddy of human beings in a social whirl. In Happy Valley, the ball offers an opportunity for him to bring together in one place almost all the characters in the book, to allow them to meet, to observe each other, to have private thoughts and express public ones and, in the heightened excitement of the moment, to experience a fluctuation of feeling and a change in relationships, if not a climax

to their lives. In his control of the ball scene, Patrick White has shown a mastery of technique. He allows characters to reveal themselves in action and thought, he propels the story forward and underlines what is happening by using the town's gossiping women as a kind of Greek chorus, and, by darting from one character to another, he leads the reader in a giddy dance without obscuring the issues at stake in the story.

The unusual consistency of patterns, images and symbols in Patrick White's work has been discussed very fully by H.P. Heseltine in his article in Quadrant on "Patrick White's Style".¹ It is notable that certain characters also appear and reappear in the novels. The midwife in Happy Valley, "Mrs Steele, the old woman with the puffs of hair, (who) always came to assist at a birth or a death"² is a twin sister to the widwife, Mrs Child "with all her curls a-jingle"³ in Voss. Patrick White shows his manifest distaste for both ladies. Mr and Mrs Furlow's bewilderment in Happy

¹ H.P. Heseltine, "Patrick White's Style", Quadrant, vol. vii, no. 3, 1963, pp 61-74

² Happy Valley, p.11

³ Voss, p.244

Valley at their daughter Sidney's wilful act of social suicide in claiming publicly - and untruthfully - to have been the mistress of their overseer Hagan is comparable to the bewilderment felt by Mr and Mrs Bonner in Voss when their niece Laura decides to keep the maidservant's illegitimate child and bring it up as her own. The two middle-aged couples are very alike: essentially kindly but superficial, they are the very pillars of society; but, socially and financially secure, they have never ventured to look beneath the surface and are most vulnerable when suddenly confronted with a situation which is so unconventional as to be completely outside and beyond their level of experience and understanding. Vic Moriarty, with social aspirations but essentially vulgar, is the forerunner of numerous silly women in Patrick White's novels; Chuffy Chambers, the backward youth, is related to the idiot Bub Quigley in The Tree of Man and to Harry Robarts in Voss; and Alys Browne is the first of the many sensitive spinsters who haunt Patrick White's works.

Much of the characterisation in Happy Valley is quite remarkable in a first novel and would be so on any count. Some of it is not fully realised. The

character of Sidney Furlow is shallow and melodramatic in conception. The idea of her striking the overseer, Clem Hagan, across the face with her riding crop after he has kissed her is trite. Some of the characters who appear in the book are, as has been mentioned, stereotypes; others are strangely vapid. With some, notably Amy Quong, Hilda Halliday and Ernest Moriarty, Patrick White seems to vacillate between sympathy with and distaste for his own creations.

To some extent, this vacillation in attitude is evident throughout his work. It seems to indicate an essential conflict between a humane and emotional view of life and a pungent mind. The compassion he feels for mankind in theory is eroded by the sharpness with which he observes every shabby detail that is part of the weaknesses of man. His disgust is channelled into satire, so that there is a see-sawing of Patrick White the cartoonist and Patrick White the humanist, who is both novelist and philosopher. As cartoonist, he emphasises the idiosyncratic and gives undue prominence to certain features. As a result, some of his characters emerge in caricature rather than as complicated and variously motivated human beings.

However, alongside his often venomous satire, there is Patrick White's quite remarkable psychological insight and perception and his capacity for writing at several levels so that, whilst observing a character's overt behaviour, one may enter his thought and feelings. His exceptional skill as novelist is shown even in Happy Valley, his first novel, by his sensitive probing into character, his ability to convey a complex of emotions in an economy of words, his control of plot and his strong sense of dramatic climax. Finally, as philosopher, he is concerned with the meaningfulness and purpose of life and with man's place in the universe.

In this variegated approach lies much of the fascination of Patrick White's writing; mostly he succeeds in welding the strands into one artistic whole. In Happy Valley, he is not entirely successful, mainly because the philosophic basis of the book is neither clearly stated as a problem, nor resolved. The predominant theme of the novel is suffering, but, unlike the suffering in the later novels from The Aunt's Story on, it is suffering without end and to no purpose. At best, some of the characters develop a certain stoicism and immunity, but they are not purged and there is no real

evidence of spiritual progress, despite the Ghandian epigraph. On reading the book, one feels that whereas Patrick White thought, in theory, that suffering should lend insight and awareness and should lead to an ennobling of mind and character, he could not fully accept this belief or realise it artistically. His thesis does not grow organically from the story. It seems that on writing the novel which, in its intricately interwoven and compelling plot, its sensitive observation and introspective analysis, its skilful use of stream of consciousness technique to reveal desires, actions and motives, is eminently successful, Patrick White felt compelled to give it depth and significance. He added a central philosophic idea: the meaning and purpose of suffering. But, the meaningfulness of suffering in Happy Valley seems superimposed and the author's apparent intention is not fulfilled.

CHAPTER II THE "EXPRESSIONLESS MALAISE" OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

In The Living and the Dead, we find a restatement of the theme of suffering and loneliness. Patrick White is again preoccupied with the spiritual isolation of man, his search for self-knowledge and his quest, largely unsuccessful, to make life meaningful. But, unlike Happy Valley, which has an engagingly earthy quality, The Living and the Dead, is a cerebral novel: in describing the sterility of its central characters and the futility of their lives, the novel itself becomes lifeless, grey and, in parts, tedious. The Living and the Dead is the only one of Patrick White's novels with a wholly non-Australian setting. His absorption of the literary values in vogue in London in the thirties - R.F. Brissenden says that the book reads almost like a parody of Virginia Woolf¹ and H.G. Kippax comments on its Lawrentian overtones² - coupled with his prolonged

¹ R.F. Brissenden, "Patrick White", Meanjin, vol. xviii, no.4, 1959, p.414

² H.G. Kippax, "An Early Novel by Patrick White", The Sydney Morning Herald, 19 January, 1963

absence from Australia may well account for a certain barrenness in the novel. Some years later, Patrick White himself seems to have been aware of the need to return to his spiritual sources when he wrote:

Demobilisation in England left me with the alternative of remaining in what I felt to be an actual and spiritual graveyard, with the prospect of ceasing to be an artist and turning instead into the most sterile of beings, a London intellectual, or of returning home, to the stimulus of time remembered.¹

The book begins with the ending. Using a technique of flashback, as he does in varying degrees in all his books, Patrick White establishes in the opening chapter the character of the main person, Elyot Standish, and his setting, which is London and, in particular, the house in Ebury Street. The circle closes in the concluding chapter, where we find Elyot, as at the beginning, uncertain of direction but accepting his own aimlessness, the distances between himself and others and the continuity of patterns in life. In the opening scene, Elyot, having seen off his sister Eden at the station, returns to the empty house in Ebury Street. On his way home, walking through the tumult of the wet, neon-lit streets of London at night, he watches a drunk

¹ "The Prodigal Son", Australian Letters, vol. 1, no.3, 1958, p.38

man sway precariously from the kerb into the path of an oncoming bus. Instantly Elyot realises that he must act, that he, and only he can save this man from death, but the moment passes in petrified inaction.

I must do this, his mind shouted, tossed out into the screaming of the bus. The lights spun. The whole neighbourhood moved. Except his feet. He was anchored where he stood. He was the audience to a piece of distant pantomime.¹

The drunk man is knocked down by the bus and injured, perhaps fatally. Elyot goes on home. The incident, although it has no direct bearing on the story and the lives of its protagonists, is of the utmost significance in that it is the key to Elyot's character, his endemic inability to act and his disturbing failure to associate himself with his fellow-men. By introducing it in the opening chapter, Patrick White successfully establishes also Elyot's function in the novel: he is the observer, the "audience"; life to him is "a piece of distant pantomime". There is repeated emphasis on distance and detachment, on life seen as a charade, throughout the novel.

In many ways, Elyot Standish is an extension of

¹ The Living and the Dead, London, 1962, p.14.
All references to this novel are to this edition.

Oliver Halliday in Happy Valley and, one feels, of the author himself at the time of writing. He is the intelligent, sensitive man who sees too much and too deeply and is thereby paralysed into inaction. In failing to commit himself, be it to an idea, an action or, most importantly, to a human relationship, he is condemned to stand outside the maelstrom of life, always an observer but not a participant. He is aware of his failure to live in a warm, vital, vibrant way, but cannot overcome his self-inflicted inhibitions. He is born to aloneness and finally accepts his own detachment. "It was a remoteness once alarming, then inevitably accepted".¹ Patrick White traces the development of Elyot, who even as a child is acutely conscious of his isolation as he stands outside the surge of activity and emotion around him. For example, when his mother imparts to the two children, Elyot and Eden, the news of their father's death, Elyot remains unmoved:

He had no part in this crying. He could not cry. He had no part in anything. It frightened him a little.²

and

¹ ibid, p.13

² p.106

He stood a long way off and watched.¹
 He began to develop a perpetual frown.

Much later in the book, Mrs Standish, watching her adult son, remembers: "He chose distance even as a child".²
 By reiterating this concept of distance and withdrawal, of having "no part" and standing "a long way off", Patrick White establishes quite unequivocally this one important aspect in Elyot's personality development.

Characteristically, Elyot, on coming down from Cambridge, immerses himself in scholarship; sitting solitarily in his study in an upstairs room in Ebury Street, he writes critical books on some of the more obscure works in French and German literature. "He felt happiest behind a closed door",³ but, unlike the younger, donnish Himmelfarb in Riders in the Chariot, who also escapes from life into literary studies, Elyot is not permitted to rise later to revelations far beyond the pedantries of intellectual exercise. Also, he is not really happy. He is acutely conscious of the sterility and emotional poverty of his life. In theory, he would wish to be a part of a warm, human relationship, but, in reality, shrinks back at the mere thought of it. He cannot shed his reserve nor control his instinctive

¹ p.106

² p.246

³ p.111

withdrawal at the slightest touch of another person's feelers, yet is aware and regretful of his emotional deprivation. Thus he experiences acute frustration when he finds himself replying flippantly and thereby destructively to the Spaniard who tries to establish some bond of communion with him:

Yes, Elyot Standish wanted to say, the Elyot who sat upon the edge watching the charade, would have spoken, without the warning of the shadow that participated. Instead, he switched flippantly.

At least the dinners are sometimes good, he laughed. Even in England.

He hated his own voice in the fog, an echo of Gerald Blenkinsop. They were drifting apart in the fog, saying goodbye, it was doubtful if they would meet again. You were always dismissing people. It was seldom you came any closer. You dug the ferrule of your umbrella in the pavement with a cold metallic hatred, walking homeward,¹ as if you wanted also to deny the cold, ...¹

Significantly, Patrick White refers to "charade", the pantomime of life, and to sitting "upon the edge", to emphasise Elyot's apartness and his function as an observer. On another occasion, in an inadequacy of words, Elyot lets pass by an opportunity to speak to Joe Barnett, his sister's lover, at a level of understanding and communion:

¹ p.204

You wanted to say, no, you wanted to say, there is something, Joe Barnett, that it is possible for us to communicate, as two people, standing at this moment on a common pitch, if only this, the universality of two people, surely, Joe Barnett, it is possible to learn.

It'll be late, said Elyot, by the time you get to Clerkenwell.

He heard his voice. This was the way it would close, as always, in a closing of words, of doors. He watched the back of Joe Barnett, anxiously making for the passage.¹

By combining stream of consciousness in disjointed expressions of thought with actual dialogue, Patrick White here as elsewhere conveys the pressure of unfulfilled hopes and desires. He has a special genius in revealing the limitations and frustrations of human relationships where words and gestures are mostly totally inadequate to communicate the true content of thought and emotion. He achieves this effect by writing at two levels, simultaneously as it were: the level of conventional social intercourse and the level of unexpressed conscious, or sub-conscious, feeling. For example, in the passages quoted above, the levels merge and intermingle, so that at first we are inside Elyot's mind, then hear him speak and say the commonplace remark which is so utterly divorced from his inmost thoughts and, finally, are given a

¹ pp. 236-7

combination of external description: "He heard his voice" and thought: "This was the way it would close, ...". The merging of techniques is managed so skilfully that the reader is carried from one level to another almost without noticing it. The effect is impressionistic; the achievement a study in depth. In this way, Patrick White can make his characters react and interact in full complexity and can, at the same time, express most forcibly the frustrations of unsatisfying, because inadequate, communication.

Elyot is aware and regretful of his failure to communicate and his consequent isolation, but, despite this, cannot give any part of himself and remains remote, even with the women in his life. His relationship with women seems altogether totally unsatisfying, so that neither the congested, teutonic romanticism, spiced with antisemitism, of Hildegard Fiesel, nor the metallic and meretricious sophistication of the Jewess Muriel Raphael, make a deep or lasting impact, although both women hold some physical attraction for him; conversely, it is only cultivated self-control and civility which prevent him from treating the pathetic and abject offerings of love from Connie Tiarks with open disdain and the streak of

sadism they arouse in him. Throughout Patrick White's writing, it is only relatively minor characters, such as the Stauffers in Riders in the Chariot or the Custances in "A Cheery Soul", who achieve a truly satisfactory love relationship. It is invariably denied to the main protagonists, who suffer in non-fulfilment.

More alarming to Elyot than his lack of contact or warmth in his relationship with women or comparative strangers is his complete spiritual and emotional estrangement from his family. From earliest childhood he feels separate and withdrawn and shuns emotional scenes. He avoids intimacy of relationship with his mother, who senses this but is unprepared to make the effort or is unable to reach him:

Elyot was a shadow that fell across the substance of her friends, the men who brought her presents, who filled her drawing-room with conversation and cigar smoke. Elyot standing sideways. His manner was perpetually sideways. Smoothing his hair, she could sense his withdrawal. Or they sat in untidy silences.¹

The images of sitting "in untidy silences" and "standing sideways", of Elyot as a damper: the "shadow that fell", are evocative of the strain in the relationship between

¹ p.132

mother and son. A similar strain exists between Elyot and his sister, Eden, although there the rejection or failure to reach a level of understanding is even more hers than his.

Eden is possibly one of the least successful of characters created by Patrick White. According to the publisher's précis at the beginning of the book, Eden represents "the living" of the title and Elyot "the dead", but one is inclined to agree with Marjorie Barnard, who says: "It is an unhappy book; all the characters are lost or frustrated or decadent so that it is difficult to know who are the living and the dead".¹ Eden is strange and remote, drained of all life and devoid of human qualities. Although Patrick White apparently conceived her as a warm-blooded girl, eager to experience the fulness of life, she emerges as little more than a silhouette. Throughout the book, she fails to arouse interest, let alone warmth. Where Elyot, with all his hesitations, his withdrawal, his fear of commitment, is a person in his own rights, perhaps ineffectual, perhaps desiccated, but a person one has met if not known intimately, Eden lacks credible reality; she is a shadow who is presumed to have importance in the book but adds

¹ Marjorie Barnard, "The Four Novels of Patrick White", Meanjin, vol. xv, no.2, 1956, p.161

nothing to its texture.

Patrick White describes Eden as a quicktempered, spiteful child, given to screaming, but offers little indication of her inner life as basis for her overt behaviour, as he does with Elyot. She grows into a dark, withdrawn, contemptuous, unforgiving and somewhat forbidding young woman, whose cynicism terrifies the dull but conventionally kindly Connie Tiarks. She approaches her first sexual experience with intrepid detachment: "This then was sex, the rumpled bed, the sense of aching nausea, the dead weight"¹ and returns dutifully for a re-enactment of an experience that gives her no pleasure. She has an abortion, then a nervous breakdown and finally turns to communism with the same humourless determination with which she pursued vicious games as a child. Even her supposed love for the carpenter Joe Barnett, who is the servant Julia's cousin, is an unconvincing affair. She appears to be drawn to him because of her belief in his worth and rightness as a working man rather than for his sake as a person and, with his - despite communism - deeply ingrained consciousness of class barriers, there is little joy in their relationship. A key passage in the book in which Eden gives expression to her beliefs

¹ The Living and the Dead, p.147

shows the kind of cardboard figure she is:

I believe, Joe, but not in the parties of politics, the exchange of one party for another, which isn't any exchange at all. Oh, I can believe, as sure as I can breathe, feel, in the necessity for change. But it's a change from wrong to right, which is nothing to do with category. I can believe in right as passionately as I have it in me to live. This is what I have to express, with you, anyone, with everyone who has the same conviction. But passionately, Joe. We were not born to indifference. Indifference denies all the evidence of life. This is what I want to believe. I want to unite those who have the capacity for living, in any circumstance, and make it the one circumstance. I want to oppose them to the destroyers, to the dealers in words, to the diseased, to the most fatally diseased - the indifferent. That can be the only order. Without ideological labels. Labels set a limit at once. And there is no limit to man.¹

This may, or may not be, an interesting treatise, but it is the most unnatural piece of dialogue in the book, made even more so when it is realised that it is intended as conversation between lovers. When Joe finally goes to fight in Spain and is killed, Eden receives the news both of his departure and, later, of his death, with the numbness of a woman whose life has long been frozen into insensibility, or never awakened. It seems she has no passion, either in love or sorrow, and this despite references to her as a passionate girl. She does not even want to remember Joe as a physical being. She is prepared to accept the sacrifice of his life as a

¹ pp 239-40

sacrifice for an idea:

Yes, she said. The futility of Joe, as Joe.
Just another drop. But the many Joe Barnetts,
Elyot. It's the drops that fill the bucket.

Her voice began to sound hollow from behind
her hands.

It's the bucket that'll make the splash, she
said.¹

Finally, when she, in the same passionless state, decides
to go to Spain herself, she does so for the sake of the
idea she has accepted and to which she feels she is
committed.

It is this commitment for which Elyot envies Eden;
he feels she has penetrated the mystique of reality, which
always eludes him. Unlike Elyot, Eden does not shrink
from the demands which life makes on her: when she is
pregnant, she has an abortion; she accepts Joe, the
carpenter, as her lover together with communism; when
Joe is dead but his beliefs remain, she goes to Spain
unflinchingly, perhaps also to die. She has the strength
of conviction so manifestly lacking in her brother, but,
whereas Elyot, a modern Hamlet, wavering, unsure, uncertain
and uncommitted, is a universal figure, Eden's involvement
with communism seems strangely unreal. This is so partly,
no doubt, because changes in the international political
climate in the past thirty years have dated it, but mainly
because Patrick White has failed to present Eden as a

¹ p.331

living human being.

There is little doubt that the question of commitment to the social and political ideals of the thirties, which moved and preoccupied many authors and other intellectuals at the time, prompted Patrick White to choose this particular conflict as a major theme in this book. However, by transferring the centre of interest from Eden, who sees her way clearly and without doubts, to Elyot, who despite or because of his intelligence cannot find his way through the labyrinthine complexities of thought, Patrick White has personalised and enlarged the theme. It is not only a question of commitment to an idea and the acceptance of the consequences of one's beliefs, it is a question of commitment to life and living. The meaningfulness of life in terms of human relationships is examined through Elyot's eyes and it is his suffering at the knowledge of his failure to live with intensity of feeling and to communicate with his fellow-men which forms the true theme of the book. It is significant that by far the greatest portion of the novel is devoted to Elyot and not to Eden; even Mrs Standish occupies many more pages than Eden, the supposed representative of life and the living.

Although the focus in The Living and the Dead is on Elyot rather than on Eden, it is through Eden that Patrick

White introduces another theme which grows more prominent in later books: the theme of self-destruction. Eden sets little store by her physical life and is prepared to die for the sake of having committed herself to an idea and to what she conceives to be the fulness and reality of being. With concentrated determination she throws away, in turn, her virginity, the security of class status, and, finally, her life. In these wilful acts of self-annihilation, Eden foreshadows Theodora Goodman in The Aunt's Story who also destroys herself in a desire to achieve self-realisation and knowledge.

Not only Eden, but also her lover, Joe Barnett, and her mother, Catherine Standish, are bent on self-destruction; the Freudian death-wish is in evidence in much of Patrick White's writing and is expressed most forcefully in Voss and in the Himmelfarb story in Riders in the Chariot. In The Living and the Dead, Joe's self-destruction by courting death in the Spanish Civil War is treated simply and without enlargement by Patrick White, but the description of the final moral, spiritual and physical collapse of Mrs Standish is a brilliant psychological study. The humiliation of her dependence on the love of the young saxophonist, Wally Collins, the tawdriness and vulgarity of their relationship and the

inevitability of the débâcle, in fact, the whole painful story is observed in unflinching clarity. This episode, although its theme has been exploited by others, notably by Tennessee Williams in The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone, is quite outstanding in The Living and the Dead and is an example of Patrick White's extraordinary ability to observe frailty and failure with merciless and embarrassing accuracy but, in so doing, to arouse compassion for the pathos of the human condition and the misery that life can be. He strips Mrs Standish of all her carefully nurtured affectations and shams, just as he strips the Lady from Czernowitz in Riders in the Chariot of corset and wig and false pretension. The Lady from Czernowitz is forced to face her naked self in death; Mrs Standish, too, humiliated, degraded and deprived of all protective layers, must die. There is a The Hound of Heaven quality in Patrick White's philosophy: "Designer infinite! - Ah! must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn with it?"¹ Many of his characters are pursued quite relentlessly but, whereas in Voss and Riders in the Chariot the destruction of Voss and Himmelfarb has been converted into a Francis Thompson hymn of salvation, the humiliation and death of Mrs Standish in The Living and the Dead is wretched and pitiful. There is, however, an inevitability in the

¹ Francis Thompson, The Hound of Heaven, London, 1963, p.23

dénouement which is an important ingredient in Patrick White's work: in all his writing there is a strong sense of Greek tragedy, with the characters hurtling toward their doom.

Mrs Standish is the superficial and sensual woman who, together with Vic Moriarty in Happy Valley, Mrs Lusty in "The Ham Funeral", Amy Parker in The Tree of Man, Belle Bonner in Voss and others, stands in marked contrast to the intense, introverted, almost ascetic Eden or Theodora Goodman in The Aunt's Story or Laura Trevelyan in Voss. She enjoys amorous adventure and the admiration of men; she relishes material possessions, clothes and gilded bric-à-brac; she likes music, champagne and laughter. She is undoubtedly the most vibrant character in the novel and in some ways the most interesting, because, underneath the superficiality, Patrick White has exposed, like a quivering nerve under the smooth enamel of a seemingly healthy tooth, her doubts, fears and utter loneliness.

Each of the three main characters in the book, Catherine Standish and her two children, Elyot and Eden, lives in a cocoon of loneliness and it is this terrible isolation, this failure to make contact, which forms the

predominant theme of the novel. In this, The Living and the Dead is in direct line with The Tree of Man where the characters are lost in a well of loneliness through their inarticulateness. But, in The Tree of Man, Amy and Stan Parker, in their simplicity, derive some satisfaction from their closeness to the soil; they can find joy amongst the cabbages and peace whilst leaning against the warm and palpitating flanks of the cows they are milking; they can abstract a meaning to their life from the rhythmic change of the seasons. By contrast, the life of Catherine Standish and her children in the upper middle class social setting of London is quite desolate. The barrenness of their existence ⁿmeshes them in a grey net of polite boredom and a frustrating sense of futility.

Mrs Standish, who began her life as Kitty Goose, a bright and lively girl, flirtatious in an imitation sealskin tippet and muff to match, settles down to an existence of genteel ennui, of concerts, art galleries and French novels with their pages uncut. The first chapters of The Living and the Dead trace the early life and marriage of Kitty, or Catherine as she becomes on social elevation (until she closes the circle of her life vomiting on the carpet at a gin party in Maida Vale,

as "Kate"). In the beginning, Catherine and her husband, Willy Standish, "settled down ... to the amusing business of marriage".¹ But, although they are in love, physically in love, Catherine has moments of doubt and misgivings, moods of a nameless nostalgia and "an uneasy suspicion of being alone".² Gradually the "amusement" of marriage wears thin, the relationship deteriorates; Willy is unfaithful, he becomes evasive and resentful, they begin to go their separate ways. In an attempt to cement their marriage they spend a holiday in France but it is a dismal failure. They return and "Mrs Standish resumed the building of a protective cocoon inside ... her house".³

The "cocoon" is one of the most frequently occurring images in The Living and the Dead. The people in the book are presented as being enclosed: they are referred to as shut in a "room", a "box", an "envelope"; a person's face is a "compartment", a house a "receptacle"; there is much reference to closed or the closing of doors. By using this imagery, Patrick White underlines the sense of isolation felt by almost everyone in the book. The house in Ebury Street assumes a symbolic function and the three main characters are often described as sitting alone in

¹ The Living and the Dead, p.38 ² ibid, p.41 ³ p.62

their rooms. They are "three people in the same house, each in a distinctive box, there was little intercourse between these".¹

Houses, of course, are invariably important in Patrick White's books. In Happy Valley, Alys Browne and Oliver Halliday find a kind of peace and contentment in Alys' little house. In The Tree of Man, the Parkers' life revolves in and around the house he had built himself. In The Aunt's Story, Theodora has a strong attachment to her childhood home Meroš' and, even more importantly, finds in the end and retreats into a deserted house. Himmelfarb in Riders in the Chariot, has a strong emotional involvement with his house at Barranugli. He is compelled to buy it:

As soon as he discovered that white ant, borer, dry rot, inadequate plumbing and a leaky roof had reduced the value of the wretched cottage, and brought it within reach of his means, then his carefully damped desires burst into full blaze, quite consuming his strength of mind. He could only think of his house, and was always returning there, afraid that its desirability might occur to someone else. He grew sallow, bonier, more cavernous than before. Until, finally, spirit was seduced by matter to the extent that he rushed and payed a deposit. He had to buy the derelict house.²

and it becomes his sanctuary, a temple, a holy of holies to which he is "admitted":

¹ p.157 ² Riders in the Chariot, p.221

When he arrived.

When he touched the Mezzuzah on the doorpost.

Then, when the Sh'ma was moving on his lips, he was again admitted. He went in, not only through the worm-eaten doorway of his worldly house, but on through the inner, secret door.¹

It is significant that the house is destroyed together with Himmelfarb. It is a part and expression of his self and as such arouses the hatred and malice of Mrs Flack. In Riders in the Chariot, Alf Dubbo also has to lock himself into his room to attain his final revelation and to express his inmost being in his art, and Miss Hare's life revolves around Xanadu, her father's "Pleasure Dome". Miss Hare's own decline is mirrored in the gradual deterioration and disintegration of the house, and the final bitter note of irony is sounded when Xanadu is demolished to give way to a housing development - symbol of the apparent victory of materialism.

Houses, to Patrick White, are not merely places of abode but stand in intimate relationship with the people who live in them. Thus the evil Mrs Flack in Riders in the Chariot lives in one of the red brick boxes, resplendent in furnishing typical of the suburbia so detested by Patrick White. In the short story "Down at the Dump", the generous Daise, who is brimful of life

¹ ibid, p.219

and love, lived happily in a "poky little hutch", whereas her socially conventional sister Myrtle, - who is capable of hatred and meanness and av^arice,

... had the liver-coloured brick home - not a single dampmark on the ceilings - she had the washing machine, the septic, the TV, and the cream Holden Special, not to forget her husband. Les Hogben, the councillor. A builder into the bargain.¹

The implied ugliness, the shiny glitter of new and mass-produced possessions, are used to express the poverty of soul, the greed and materialism of its inhabitant.

In The Living and the Dead, the house in Ebury Street reflects the decline in fortune, financial and otherwise, of Catherine Standish. In the beginning, it is a delight to the young bride and Patrick White succeeds in letting a certain joy shine through his satirising of superficiality:

... the delightful Mrs Standish, who sat at home in her drawing-room, and smiled to herself when she heard the chiming of her French gilt clock. This had a golden tone. She surrounded herself with yellow gold, the brocaded curtains from Liberty's, and the flowered wallpaper, the neat, small, sprigged flowers which were just the thing at the moment. She was all day long going up and down stairs, just for the pleasure of going up and down stairs, for enjoying possession of her territory. Or she would run to the window, call to the maids in her excitement, to watch soldiers passing in the street.²

Later, it becomes a refuge to which she can flee: on

¹ "Down at the Dump", The Burnt Ones, London, 1964, p.289. All references to this book are to this edition.

² The Living and the Dead, p.39

discovering Willy in the park with Maudie and realising that he is being unfaithful, she turns to the house for comfort and reassurance:

I must go home, she said, I must make a scene, or not make a scene, I must escape to something more familiar. Above all she wanted to open her own door, hoping perhaps to find behind it a solution, or some contradiction of what she had seen.¹

Later still, when they have to economise, the house is divided and gradually, like its mistress, it deteriorates into genteel decay:

Noticing the dimmer colours, the encrustations of virtu in her once pretty room, Mrs Standish decided the effect was less shabby than interesting.²

and

A place where the stringy background of the carpet had appeared was covered by the little footstool that everyone inevitably kicked. But optimism and perhaps an unconfessed weariness got Mrs³ Standish past the shortcomings of her room.

From the "yellow gold" of the room and the running "up and downstairs" of the young Mrs Standish, there is a downward progression to "dimmer colours", "encrustations" and implied shabbiness and finally to the stringy appearance of a threadbare carpet and the "unconfessed weariness" of Mrs Standish.

¹ p.53

² p.131

³ p.209

Much of Catherine Standish's time is spent inside the house in Ebury Street, sitting in her "salon". Estranged from her husband, she suffers at times from a sense of the unreality of existence. Sitting alone in the house on winter afternoons, she has

... the intruding kind of nostalgic thoughts that are not unknown on winter afternoons before the curtains have been drawn. It was sometimes difficult then to believe in the substance of things, whether the furniture, or events, ...¹

At supper with friends, she is overcome by an awareness of the transience of life, her self, her surroundings:

It was immaterial, whether you discussed the subtleties of lobster thermidor, or what. It was like this. Everything was becoming like this. You had become a detached shimmer of phosphorescent green on the surface of facts, of events. Some day perhaps would come the bang. Only it was difficult still to believe in bangs.²

Discovering, at that time, that she is pregnant, she is slightly reassured: "It was a safeguard, she felt unconsciously, against the expressionless malaise",³ but her consolation is shortlived as the children soon become an abstract concept:

Even the child in the womb, so personal, tangible, in its way, still remained an abstraction. Months, even days after birth, sealed the envelope, wrapped it in the strangeness, the aloofness of a foreign personality, resentful of possession.⁴

¹ p.41

² pp 42-3

³ p.47

⁴ pp 131-2

As she watches the children grow, her spiritual isolation is in no way diminished. Even when quite small "her children were already very often their own enclosed entities"¹ and later she realises that she does not know them at all. Like her son Elyot, the much more physical Catherine Standish suffers from a sense of complete aloneness. Despite her taste for material things, she retreats from life into inertia and is haunted by the phantom of unreality. Thus the mature Mrs Standish voices the vague misgivings of her younger self when she cries in the midst of the social chit chat of an "at home": "I mean, one loses contact, one loses contact with the substance of things".²

In this novel, Patrick White uses frequently the concept of "substance" as opposed to "shapelessness"; both words appear repeatedly, the one representing the essence of being and a desired solidity, the other the sense of unreality which haunts the main characters. A sharp contrast is drawn between the ineffectual, vague and spiritually lost Mrs Standish, groping for a belief in reality, and her servant, Julia Fallon, who lives in a world of reality.

Julia's whole existence, past and present, was very real and tangible. She had an unconscious respect for the substance of things.³

¹ p.63

² p.211

³ p.59

References to Julia contain, almost invariably, if not the word, the concept of substance. Thus Patrick White writes: "... Julia lingered, perceptibly, in the objects she had touched. There was a correspondence between Julia and the form of the yellow table, ..." ¹ and says of her that she "could achieve contact through the humble, factual detail". ²

Julia, for whom "wiping the dribble from the baby's mouth was a gesture of humility, and deep respect", ³ is the idealised prototype of a character who appears frequently in Patrick White's novels, achieving always an integrity and goodness through what is stressed as utter simplicity and humility. Patrick White has a strange predilection for this character, who is seen first in embryonic form in Chuffy Chambers in Happy Valley and finds fuller realisation in Julia in The Living and the Dead, and later in Pearl Brawne in The Aunt's Story, in Stan Parker in The Tree of Man, in Harry Robarts and Rose Portion in Voss and finally in Ruth Godbold in Riders in the Chariot. These are all simple, uneducated people, whose function in life is to serve their fellow-men and they do, in fact, occupy mostly positions as servants. Julia is solid, strong and square:

¹ p.16

² p.132

³ p.59

She had all the integrity, the dignity, the directness of a Flemish primitive. Watching her grave, slow movements with the child, there was an absorption in them that reassured. Julia Fallon and the objects that she touched were united by this strain of absorption. The basin she held in her red hands rounded into shape with those same hands. She breathed rather hard in her absorption, whether down on her knees scrubbing the floors, or sitting with the baby in her lap. Ungainly perhaps. But you overlooked ungainliness, as in the Flemish primitive, for the sake of economy and logic, and the effort that lends integrity.¹

From the young girl servant, "the Flemish primitive that held the baby in her lap",² she becomes in time "the older woman, a comfortable Vermeer".³ Patrick White's image setting for Julia of a Dutch interior painting, creates the impression of imperturbable solidity and honesty of purpose. She is very much like Pearl Brawne and Rose Portion and, above all, like Ruth Godbold, the washer-woman who is a latter-day saint in Riders in the Chariot. Their rock-like qualities are stressed. They are big women. Mrs Godbold is often referred to as a "rock" or "statue"; Pearl was "white and big" and her hair "was thick heavy stuff, as coarse as a mare's plaited tail";⁴ Rose is presented as bovine: in the opening sentence in Voss, she "stood breathing"⁵ - just as Julia "breathed rather hard" in the passage quoted above; later when, in the early stages of pregnancy, Rose falls like

¹ p.58 ² p.231 ³ pp 231-2 ⁴ The Aunt's Story, p.34

⁵ Voss, p.9

"a full sack", Mrs Bonner, "who was a Norfolk girl, remembered how cows used to fall into the dikes during the long winter nights, and moan there, so far off, and so monotonously ..."¹ The bigness, heaviness and stolidity of these women is emphasised. Julia is "stolid as yellow cheese".² It is interesting to note that the similes used by Patrick White in connection with Julia are often "table" and "cheese", both things to which he attaches a mystical quality of goodness, integrity and reality of existence. This aspect of mystical connotation in his work will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

As is the case with the characters mentioned in the later books, Patrick White idealises the simplicity and humility of the stolid servant woman, Julia. In his basically - and in this day and age, strangely - class structured novels, he seems to be looking to the 'lower' classes for qualities which are lacking in the upper-middle class and intellectual world in which his main characters move. Not unlike Rousseau's 'noble savage', the uneducated are better equipped to deal with life. The simple Julia is endowed with an intuitive knowledge and understanding and an implicit goodness. It is she who understands Elyot:

¹ ibid, p.55

² The Living and the Dead, p.16

Because Julia knew Elyot intimately, whatever difficulty others had. She knew how to alter her voice according to the shape of his back. This was her approach. She could sense very keenly through the shape of things.¹

Here again she is like Rose in Voss, who has the intuitive understanding denied her mistress, Laura Trevelyan. It is Rose who 'knows' things. "Oh, I know. There are things you can tell by knowing",² she says, and "Rose looked, and saw, and understood - there was very little she did not -".³ In The Living and the Dead, it is Julia who is the only constant factor, the only peg of reality on which Elyot and Eden and their mother all depend for support. In one of his brilliant flashes of compressed meaning, Patrick White says: "Light began with Julia every morning. She was the motion of the curtain rings".⁴

It is Julia who suffers most keenly at the news of the death of Joe - another of Patrick White's idealised working class characters - and it is, in fact, Julia, who is felt to be more warmly alive than her effete masters, including Eden, who is supposed to represent 'the living'. It is interesting to note this disparity between avowed purpose and actual achievement in the themes of the first two novels when compared with the clarity of design in the

¹ ibid, p.237

² Voss, p.81

³ ibid, p.171

⁴ The Living and the Dead, p.326

later novels. As discussed in chapter I, Patrick White intended in Happy Valley to attach virtue to suffering and to show that it lends insight and awareness, but wrote instead a novel in which the suffering of the main characters remains meaningless and brings them no closer to illumination and salvation. In The Living and the Dead, his second published novel, Patrick White set out to draw a sharp contrast between the person who is vitally alive and prepared to accept life in all its implications, including death, for the sake of intenser living, and the person who withdraws from life, or lives vicariously, and, by failing to take the leap into the unknown, becomes the living 'dead'. In Elyot, he has, in fact, given us an interesting portrait of an intellectual who accepts as inevitable his remoteness from others but is burdened with a sense of failure and suffers because of his spiritual and emotional isolation. However, in Eden, he has failed to achieve the sense of 'living' and has only drawn an improbable portrait of a young woman, bent on self-destruction, who achieves precisely that and apparently no more. The illumination in madness gained by Theodora in The Aunt's Story following the systematic destruction of her social self is not accorded to Eden, nor does an intensity of belief in an idea vouchsafe for Eden an intenser form of living; she walks through the

pages of the book more as a frigid somn^mbulist than as a flesh and blood woman.

In the play "The Ham Funeral", written in 1947, Patrick White resolves the problem raised in The Living and the Dead by merging the characters of Elyot and Eden into one, the Young Man. The Young Man, who is like Elyot, sensitive, intelligent and fearful of life, emancipates himself from the sheltered seclusion he had hitherto sought, again symbolised by his room, and commits himself to living like Eden, by walking out of his room and out of the house. In the novels written thereafter, the way followed by the main characters is clear-cut: they must suffer and learn simplicity and humility to gain insight. Unlike Elyot, they are not afraid, and, unlike Eden, they achieve redemption.

The Living and the Dead is essentially a pessimistic book in an existentialist sense. Its people are unhappy and there is no prospect of change. It expresses the nihilism noted already in Happy Valley. The terrible isolation and the sense of the unreality of existence which floats in the consciousness of the three main characters form the leitmotif of the novel. There is no hope for the people of The Living and the Dead, who meet

and converse but never touch. They wither in emotional starvation. They are truly the victims of an "expressionless malaise", which was, one feels, the author's own at the time of writing.

CHAPTER III

THE AUNT'S STORY

... there is sometimes little to choose between the reality of illusion and the illusion of reality.

(The Aunt's Story, p.293)

There is a definite line of demarcation between the two first novels, Happy Valley and The Living and the Dead, and Patrick White's later work. The Aunt's Story, first published in 1948, and the play "The Ham Funeral", written at about the same time, are both signposts to the direction taken by Patrick White from then on. Although the theme of suffering has been foremost in his thought from the very beginning, as is evident in the epigraph to Happy Valley, the significance of suffering in an affirmation of its intrinsic worth does not take shape in his writing until later. In Happy Valley and The Living and the Dead, the people suffer but their suffering can, at best, call forth only their stoic acceptance of immutable fate; they gain nothing and their suffering is felt to be futile, their life meaningless. Although Patrick White takes sides in these two novels and passes value judgments on his characters, he does not mete out reward and punishment: the good and the bad, the

sensitive and the insensitive, suffer alike and they suffer to no apparent purpose and with no hope of ultimate salvation. In The Aunt's Story, there is a sharp divergence, as Theodora's suffering is deliberate and purposeful and leads her to self-knowledge and peace.

H.P. Heseltine has commented on the transition in an article on Patrick White. He says: "Instead of saying that The Aunt's Story stands between the early and the late work, it might equally well be said that it stands between the novels of non-commitment and the novels of commitment".¹ It is to be noted that Heseltine does not here refer to the conflict between commitment and non-commitment which forms a theme in The Living and the Dead, but to Patrick White's personal commitment and judgment in assigning a special kind of worth to the suffering undergone by his characters. In saying that The Aunt's Story stands "between" the novels of non-commitment and commitment, Heseltine is dealing specifically with Patrick White's style, claiming that it did not emerge in its characteristic and mature form until the novel after The Aunt's Story, The Tree of Man, but that these new features of style "were developed in

¹ H.P. Heseltine "Patrick White's Style", Quadrant, vol. vii, no.3, 1963, p.71

response to some significant new attitudes which were becoming apparent in The Aunt's Story".¹ In general terms and particularly in reference to themes, The Aunt's Story cannot be regarded as standing "between" the two distinctive groups of novels but rather as being the first of the latter group. Thematically, it is in direct line with Voss and Riders in the Chariot and presents, in any case, a noteworthy reversal from the nihilism of the two earlier books. In The Aunt's Story, Patrick White makes, for the first time in his novels, a positive statement of faith.

Elizabeth Loder in her article on "The Ham Funeral"² has also drawn an interesting contrast between the early and later work and has established the period of the writing of the play "The Ham Funeral" and the novel The Aunt's Story as the turning point in Patrick White's philosophy. In both these works, he accords value to suffering and allows his protagonists to emerge with a deepened knowledge and understanding of self and the very mystery of life; Theodora Goodman in The Aunt's Story and the Young Man in "The Ham Funeral", as well as the main characters in the later books, are made to

¹ ibid, p.71

² Elizabeth Loder, "The Ham Funeral: Its place in the Development of Patrick White", Southerly, no.2, 1963, p.83

suffer and learn humility, and are saved. The Young Man who, at the beginning of the play, is shut in his room, withdrawn from life like Elyot Standish in The Living and the Dead, learns ultimately to accept life both in its physical aspect, as represented by Mrs Lusty, and in its moral and spiritual aspects through Will Lusty, the landlord. He is chastened, made humble and liberated from doubt and hesitation, the non-commitment of Elyot. Having come to terms with what he formerly despised and feared, the Young Man is free to go out into the world and is prepared to face life in all its implications and varied demands. Theodora Goodman also finds in the end the freedom of spirit and the serenity she has sought throughout her tormented life.

The Aunt's Story is a quite extraordinary book. At one level it could be read as a brilliantly perceptive psychological analysis of madness. Theodora's gradual but progressively more definitive withdrawal into herself in part one of the book, the splintering of personality in part two and the final severing of all social ties and the escape into apparent unreality in part three, would form an interesting case history. By all the usual standards, she is quite mad; indeed, she is mad to a

degree where she is finally taken away to an institution and is thought mad long before that by all who sense her difference and hold in contempt what they cannot understand. But, The Aunt's Story is not taken from a psychiatrist's notebook; Patrick White is not concerned with madness as such, but with the greater apperception, insight and understanding vouchsafed to one who is considered mad in contrast to those who are considered sane. In the end, one wonders which state is more desirable, sanity or madness, and, indeed, is tempted to ask: who is mad?

Patrick White has a marked predilection for the odd, the queer, the mad and the simpleminded. Madness in any of Patrick White's characters means almost invariably instinctive knowledge and goodness; some are born with this knowledge and goodness and, those who are not, are often driven toward its attainment through madness. The simpleminded, like Harry Robarts in Voss and Bub Quigley in The Tree of Man and, to some extent, also Chuffy Chambers in Happy Valley, have a certain saintliness and the wisdom of the Shakespearean fool. Voss says of Harry to Laura: "His simplicity is such he could well arrive at that plane where great mysteries are revealed",¹

¹Voss, p.232

and there is a Lear-like quality in the dialogue the boy has with Voss before his death:

The man was maddened finally.
 "Are you not going to sleep?"
 "Oh, there is time for sleep. Sleep
 will not pass. Unless the dogs dig.
 And then they only scatter the bones."
 "You are the dog," said the man.
 "Do you really think so?" sighed the
 drowsy boy.
 "And a mad one."
 "Licking the hands."
 "No. Tearing at one's thoughts."¹

Of the idiot Bub Quigley in The Tree of Man it is said:
 "He was obviously good",² and the mad Clay in the short
 story by that name "was born with inward looking eyes".³
 The concept is perhaps expressed most cogently in The
Tree of Man: "Or else the purposes of God are made clear
 to some old women, and nuns, and idiots".⁴

Other, more complex characters in Patrick White's
 books, like Theodora, or Miss Hare in Riders in the
Chariot, and also Voss, are driven through suffering
 culminating in madness toward a final illumination. It
 is as if one had needs be mad to begin to comprehend the
 significance of life, and Patrick White has, in many
 instances, presented the conventionally sane as the
 destroyers of life and the mad visionaries as its

¹ ibid, pp 406-7 ² The Tree of Man, p.48

³ "Clay", The Burnt ones, p.119 ⁴ The Tree of Man,
 p.218

interpreters and as saints. In primitive cultures, the madman or the epileptic is often assumed to have occult knowledge, superior wisdom and magical power. In our society, we admit that the lines of demarcation between the perception granted to the creative mind and madness are often faint; the genius of men like Blake, Nietzsche, Van Gogh, Nijinsky, Lawrence, Pound, bordered on or ended in madness yet opened up new areas of experience. Those who, like Theodora in The Aunt's Story, are not creative artists, yet, by virtue of their intelligence and heightened sensitivity see things differently, have a range of perception akin to that of creative genius. The degree of difference in their perception marks them off from the rest of the world. In consequence, they become isolated and their difference, even in external matters, gains in prominence until they are finally so different as to be considered mad. They become objects of derision and victimisation by the sane, who act in self-defence against what they feel to be an attack on the security of their established beliefs. Theodora's madness becomes, therefore, a question of values.

By creating in Theodora a character who commands our respect as a woman of intelligence and integrity, Patrick White has weighted his argument in favour of an acceptance

of her madness in preference to the sanity of the others in the book. Theodora is most likeable as a person and, in her greater sensitivity and essential honesty, which allow her to analyse her self and to see shades of meaning in relationships but which destroy her rapport with a less sensitively attuned world, she arouses the reader's sympathy and his complicity in her stand against the world. In this respect the book is an unhappy testimonial to society and its values. It implies that it is not easily possible to reach a higher level of understanding and perception within the accepted norms of society. Theodora does, in the end, gain insight and understanding but, to do so, she must first become an outcast. She represents "the outsider"¹ to the nth degree. Her madness and her divorce from the rational world become the logical conclusion to the loneliness and separateness felt by man in terms of existentialist philosophy. However, the serenity she achieves in madness introduces a new note of hopefulness. Although the desirability of her personal salvation set against her loss is questionable, the fact that she does achieve a form of salvation is an advance on the nihilistic

¹ Colin Wilson, The Outsider, loc. cit.

philosophy expressed in Happy Valley and The Living and the Dead, where much is lost and nothing gained.

Marjorie Barnard, in an article on Theodora, says:

At last she accepts quite simply the dictum of society that she is mad. Always she has asked less and less in the faint hope that she might be allowed that modicum. Always it is denied her. The world is arraigned, not Theodora.¹

This is the reverse side of Theodora's salvation and in The Aunt's Story it is indeed the world, or society, in its materialistic, egotistic and possessive destructiveness which stands accused. Patrick White has cast his lot with Theodora; by presenting her sympathetically he has secured the reader's acquiescence in the condemnation of a world which, by insensitivity if not active cruelty, has made her an outcast and has forced her to seek salvation in madness.

In his first two novels, Patrick White has shown a remarkable talent for satire and some of the most sparkling and witty passages in both books expose the foibles, weaknesses, social aspirations and pretensions of characters such as Vic Moriarty, the Furlows and the Belpers in Happy Valley or Mrs Standish, Muriel Raphael,

¹ Marjorie Barnard, "Theodora Again", Southerly, no.1, 1959, p.54

the Fiesels, the Blenkinsops and others in The Living and the Dead. However, in those two books, all are to some extent vulnerable targets and it is not until The Aunt's Story that Patrick White begins to barb his satire with venom and to direct it principally against certain types of characters. These represent society as a destructive force aligned against the good. At best, society as presented is destructive in complacent egotism; at its worst, it is evil and finds expression in viciousness and deliberate cruelty.

Mrs Goodman, Theodora's mother, whose "hands were small and bright with rings. But hard as a diamond"¹ is positively evil in her destructiveness. She is presented as glittering, brittle and hard and Patrick White associates her almost invariably with jewellery: "Mother's voice crackled at the fire. She warmed her rings. Her small head was as bright and as hard as a garnet beside the fire".²

The image of ring, garnet and other jewels in connection with Mrs Goodman recurs throughout the book, and a similar image is created for Una Russell, Theodora's equally destructive school-mate:

¹ The Aunt's Story, p.67

² ibid, p.27

Una Russell, whose father was a jeweller, had a set of silver hairbrushes with irises embossed on the back. Her belt buckle was solid silver, and she wore a turquoise ring.¹

The hands of Una Russell had an air of experience, arranging the silver brushes on top of the chest of drawers, that you could not help watch, the pale thin hands with the turquoise ring.²

Una Russell went out of the room, and her bangles expressed her contempt.³

"Oh, it was one of those letters", said Una Russell, and she shook her bangles, because she hated Theodora still, she hated what was unexplained.⁴

Una is characteristically bedecked in rings and bangles and, like Mrs Goodman, derives pleasure mainly from material possessions. Mrs Goodman liked "to arrange things, the ornaments in cabinets, or on little tables in the drawing room, then to sit and watch what she had done".⁵ Sister to Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack in Riders in the Chariot, to Mrs Hogben in "Down at the Dump", to Mrs Polkinghorn in "The Letters", Mrs Goodman is tied irrevocably to the glitter of objects, the triviality of possessions and to narcissistic reminiscences: she can never know the despair nor the ecstasy, the mystery behind the mystery, which alone can give meaning to life in Patrick White's philosophy. She is hard and demanding,

¹ p.48

² pp 48-9

³ p.52

⁴ p.63

⁵ p.26

and, in retribution, Patrick White denies her insight:

To Mrs Goodman everything had a form, like bronze or marble. She saw clearly, but not far. She saw the cattle going down to drink. She saw the sunlight as it lay among the brushes on her dressing table. She heard the passage of her own silk.¹

She can see the obvious, tangible things and she can see clearly, but she cannot see "far". However, ensconced in what she feels to be the rightness of her life, she has a withering effect on her surroundings. It is she who forces her kind but weaker husband into financial recklessness to satisfy her extravagances, who would twist a knife in his side "to watch the expression on his face and scent the warm blood that flowed",² who refuses to sit down to table with her husband's old friend, the Man who was Given his Dinner, and who cruelly rejects Theodora by showing unconcealed and often deliberately wounding preference for the pretty sister, Fanny. She, and others like her, are destroyers, yet society accepts them as normal, whereas Theodora is considered mad. In sharp condemnation, Patrick White passes judgment on society's values by depicting the evil destructiveness or the callous complacency of its representatives and the shallowness of their existence; they live wholly on

¹ p.67

² p.68

a material plane. He writes of Frank Parrott, Theodora's brother-in-law: "He was what they call a practical man, a success, but he had not survived".¹ There is no doubt in The Aunt's Story who are "the living" and who "the dead", and, as mentioned earlier, the reader's sympathy is with Theodora, who is spiritually alive.

This brings us to the main thesis of the book, the theme which has become predominant in Patrick White's later work, particularly in Voss and Riders in the Chariot: that the truth is revealed only to those who are prepared to suffer, to forego the comforts and security of social conformity, to plumb the depths of self-analysis to the point of self-destruction, madness and death, gaining thereby the greater knowledge which alone can make life worthwhile. The Aunt's Story is principally the story of Theodora's uncompromising search for self-knowledge, humility, spiritual freedom, understanding and serenity.

Like Miss Hare, like Voss and Himmelfarb, Theodora is ugly, gaunt and ungainly. She often thinks of herself and is referred to as a "stick" - as are also Miss Hare, Alf Dubbo and Himmelfarb in Riders in the Chariot. Thin, angular and in later life with a

¹ p.14

moustache, Patrick White frequently uses the colours "yellow" and "brown" to describe Theodora. Her setting is the black hills surrounding Meroë, which is linked in name to "the black country of Ethiopia",¹ the Abyssinia to which Theodora wishes in the end to return. The image of Theodora is a sombre one.

From earliest childhood, Theodora is driven to turn inwards upon herself. It is the sister, Fanny, who is "pink and white as roses in the new dress"² beside Theodora, sallow in a yellow sash; it is Fanny who plays the piano so that it is "a whole bright tight bunch of artificial flowers surrounded by a paper frill"³ as against Theodora's tortured, still and angular interpretation of Chopin, seeking therein depths which are hers rather than the nocturne's; it is Fanny who does the pretty embroidery whilst Theodora walks alone "in the garden of dead roses"⁴ against "the long black bitter sweep of the hills";⁵ it is Fanny who is 'lovable' and loved and Theodora who is alone.

But Theodora is shown to have rare sensitivity and a burning desire to penetrate beyond the fringes of understanding. As a child, she says: "I would like to

¹ p.23

² p.26

³ p.28

⁴ p.28

⁵ p. 28

know everything".¹ "Theodora ... has great understanding"² says her father, and, years later, her young niece, Lou, says: "... you know things".³ Moraftis, the Greek cellist with whom she forms an immediate affinity, confirms the receptive knowledge which is hers: " 'It is not necessary to see things,' said Moraftis. 'If you know.' "⁴ Her perception and capacity for depth are recognised by the Man who was Given his Dinner, who prophesises: "You'll see a lot of funny things, Theodora Goodman. You'll see them because you've eyes to see. And they'll break you. But perhaps you'll survive".⁵

In an instinctive, animal-like way, Miss Hare, another of Patrick White's "demented spinsters",⁶ has this power to see through the masks, the shams and facades of human behaviour: an instantaneous recognition of motives based on close observation. Thus Patrick White says of Miss Hare:

An absence of interested upbringing had at least left her with a thorough training in observation, and although she looked deeper than was commonly considered decent she often made discoveries.⁷

¹ p.39

² p.31

³ p.136

⁴ p.113

⁵ p.45

⁶ From a talk by Maxwell Geismar in the A.B.C's To-day's Writing, August, 1964:

"Mr. White has a peculiar affinity for talented and demented spinsters, who are always in the background - or the foreground of this provincial society."

⁷ Riders in the Chariot, p.28

But Miss Hare's perception is on a more physical and on a more intuitive level, whereas Theodora's is intellectual. In this, as in other things, Theodora has closer kinship with Voss and Himmelfarb.

The story of Theodora's search for self-realisation, the story of the book, is one of the disintegration, and an increasingly deliberate destruction by Theodora herself, of her personality. Her early self-identification with the little hawk with the reddish-golden eye and her deliberate shooting of the hawk some years later, destroying thereby not only the fumbling, uncertain attentions paid her by Frank Parrott but also an important part of her own being, is recognised by her as an act of self-annihilation: " ... I shall continue to destroy myself, right down to the last of my several lives."¹ By repeating the shooting incident at the fun fair rifle gallery, she again rejects social acceptance and the stability of marriage as offered by the worldly and securely established Huntly Clarkson. This theme of self-destruction, which appears in embryonic form in Happy Valley, where Alys Brown knowingly enters a hopeless relationship with Oliver Halliday who has overriding

¹ The Aunt's Story, pp 73-4

professional and family responsibilities, and, with greater emphasis in The Living and the Dead, where Mrs Standish, her daughter Eden and Eden's lover, Joe, are all bent on self-destruction, is realised fully in The Aunt's Story, where it forms a major motif.

Consciously, or unconsciously, Theodora is quite unswerving throughout the book in her progress toward social isolation and toward self-annihilation, her paths to true understanding, humility and peace.

In part two of The Aunt's Story, in "Jardin Exotique", Theodora continues to destroy herself; she sheds her self and becomes a receptacle for the thoughts, dreams and memories of the strange, uprooted, homeless guests at the Hôtel du Midi. There is in "Jardin Exotique" a constant flux between fleeting reality and fantasy; there is no transition and Patrick White creates thereby a kaleidoscopic effect. The tone is lighter than in part one: the imagery of dead roses, of brown land and black hills gives way to scintillating sunlight, exotic flowering cacti and a pirouetting and tango-singing waiter. Theodora, previously rejected and an outsider, is now most sought after and becomes the very pivot of activity in the mad

world of "Jardin Exotique". Marjorie Barnard has very aptly referred to part two as "the scherzo" in the structure of book.¹

Theodora is caught up in a kind of crazed dance and there is a quality of music and ballet in "Jardin Exotique". Such is the meeting between General Sokolnikov, walking along the seafront with Theodora, and Mrs Rapallo in her crimson cape:

With beautiful glissando the crimson was advancing, flurrying, slashing, flirting with the wind. It moved outside the rigid Mrs Rapallo. The cloak was leading a life of its own. Sometimes it toppled, not so much from weakness as from pleasure. To test the strength of the wind, to toy, to flatter.

"She will blow away," Theodora cried.

"Never," said the General feelingly.

"Oh, but she is a beauty," Theodora said.

And she clasped her hands for all that is gold, and crimson plush, and publicly magnificent.²

This is further developed when all three are entwined in the cape:

Then they were all caught up, the three of them, in Mrs Rapallo's cape, tulipped in crimson that the wind waved.

"There now, you see, I will have you," Mrs Rapallo said. "There is no escape for some of us."

Theodora laughed. Warmed by her own

¹ Marjorie Barnard, "Theodora Again", Southerly, no.1, 1959, p.54

² The Aunt's Story, p.191

pleasure, she was also afraid that a piece of Mrs Rapallo might break. The motion of her limbs was audible.¹

In these passages, Patrick White creates an extraordinary visual image of movement. The cloak becomes a living thing, "leading a life of its own", and is partner to an intricate dance: it is seen to be "advancing", "flurrying", "slashing", "flirting with the wind"; it moves and topples and toys and flatters and finally it envelopes them all so that, as if contained within the red petals of a bell-shaped flower, they are "tulipped in crimson". The colours are crimson and gold and the whole tenor of the passages is one of sheer delight: the cloak advances in a "beautiful glissando", it topples "not so much from weakness as from pleasure", and Theodora clasps her hands and laughs with joy, "warmed by her own pleasure".

The description here is typical of the light, effervescent tone of "Jardin Exotique". Even in its climatic moments, Patrick White creates a stylised dance effect as in the scene depicting the struggle for possession of the coveted nautilus:

And the nautilus became a desperate thing of hands. Theodora heard the crack of bones. Hands were knotting the air. Then, hands were hands.

"Then it has happened," Theodora said.
She looked at the shivered shell.²

¹ p.192

² p.225

The fire which destroys the Hôtel du Midi with its Jardin Exotique is also a brilliant, fantastic and grotesque dance, with Mrs Rapallo appearing at the window which is "encrusted with fire" in a "stiff jewelled splendour of its own"¹ and the wraith-like Katina Pavlou walking with hands outstretched through the burning house.

In its ebb and flow and its chiaroscuro effects, "Jardin Exotique" is quite breath-taking; like an abstract painting, it defies rigid interpretation. It finds expression in abstract visual images and musical connotations: Mrs Rapallo laughs and lets fall "a shower of serious teaspoons on to the pavement",² and one is conscious of the metallic tinkling of Mrs Rapallo's laughter; this has been represented formally by a shower of spoons which tinkle as they strike each other and the pavement; that the spoons are "serious" is, of course, absurd, but heightens the bizarre effect. The use of colour images in abstract juxtaposition adds to the grotesquerie, as when Theodora hears "the crimson protest of Mrs Rapallo's parasol drowning in blue, and blue, and still deeper blue".³ There are some fantastic, ludicrous descriptions, such as when Theodora sees that Edith, General Sokolnikov's ex-wife, has been "poured right up to the lips of her kid gloves. Her cairngorm eye was

¹ p.261

² p.192

³ p.234

fringed with pebbles, slate, and fawn, that never closed";¹ these and like descriptions create the impression of a verbal painting in the style of Picasso in his surrealist period. The effect is that of a brilliant extravaganza.

Through^{ov}t the phantasmagoria of "Jardin Exotique", and despite its obscurities, one can trace Theodora's progress toward self-effacement. She enters the lives of the characters in the Hôtel du Midi, be they real or the figments of an unhinged mind, and relives their experiences. She shares the terror of the earthquake with the young girl, Katina Pavlou, repeatedly becomes Ludmilla, the exiled Russian General - who is not a general - Sokolnikov's sister, acts as Mrs Rapallo's servant and companion and even takes the shape of a cupboard so that the poet Wetherby may store his thoughts and letters therein. She identifies herself with the hopes, fears, loves, hatreds, petty quarrels and grand passions of the fantastic characters who have completely taken over her life, soothing them, pacifying them, suffering for them, learning to understand and to forgive and, in the process, learning humility. She discards her own personality until "her identity became uncertain"² in preparation for the final act of self-destruction in the finale, the third part of the book.

¹ p.190

² p.206

In "Jardin Exotique", Lieselotte says: "We must destroy everything, everything, even ourselves. Then at last when there is nothing, perhaps we shall live".¹ In part three, "Holstius", Theodora purposefully severs the last ties to her past and destroys the last vestige of her self. She leaves the train which is taking her home in the middle of the night at a small and unknown siding, she tears up her rail and steamship tickets and finally renounces even her name by introducing herself as Miss "Pilkington":

Theodora could have cried for her own behaviour, which had sprung out of some depth she could not fathom. But now her name was torn out by the roots, just as she had torn the tickets, rail and steamship, on the mountain road. This way perhaps she came a little closer to humility, to anonymity, to pureness of being.²

The tearing out of her name, a part of her personality, "by the roots", the attainment of "anonymity", is a necessary, even logical, step toward the annihilation of her self.

As discussed in chapter II, houses have a special significance in Patrick White's writing. Before her final act of abnegation, Theodora clings to a last haven, a derelict house, empty except for a few of the objects "that people had not valued. The things that were old or broken. And dust".³ Like Voss, who is brought to

¹ p.176

² p.284

³ pp 289-90

face his own insignificance in a twig hut in the Australian inland desert, like Himmelfarb, who finds eleventh-hour comfort in his small, brown house at Barranugli, Theodora crawls into the womb of the deserted house before she is ready to face annihilation, and revelation.

Theodora's progress toward self-destruction is developed further in Voss and Riders in the Chariot, where not only Voss and Himmelfarb, but also Le Mesurier and Palfreyman, and Alf Dubbo and Miss Hare, are caught in an avalanche of self-invoked doom. In common with the mystics of the East, Patrick White proposes in The Aunt's Story and Voss and Riders in the Chariot the denial of selfhood as the first step toward the attainment of the higher good. In their moments of truth, Theodora and Voss and Laura and Himmelfarb realise this and accept it as their only way. Reflecting on orthodox religion, Theodora knows that "it will not be by these means ... that the great monster Self will be destroyed, and that desirable state achieved, which resembles, one would imagine, nothing more than air or water",¹ and she does not hesitate to turn to the 'other' means, the means of self-annihilation. Through a lifetime of spiritual aloneness and suffering, she is purged, stripped to the

¹ p.134

bone. Whereas in the first part of the book, she seeks vicarious satisfaction in aunthood - "this thing a spinster which, at best, becomes that institution an aunt"¹ - she denies herself, step by step, the luxury of the warmth in human relationships and, eventually divests herself even of aunthood. In part two, she says: "For a long time now ... I have been an ointment. I was also an aunt once",² and in part three, she breaks all ties with past and present. In the end, she is nothing, but, in the extinction of her individuality has achieved a unity of spirit akin to the nirvana of Buddhist religion.

As mentioned in chapter I, Patrick White is essentially a religious writer, although he is in no sense orthodox in his beliefs. The influence of Eastern philosophy is seen not only in The Aunt's Story, with its insistence on the abnegation of the self, but also in his later work, where certain characters, notably Stan Parker in The Tree of Man and Rose Portion and Harry Robarts in Voss and also Mrs Godbold in Riders in the Chariot, find serenity in mute acceptance of their fate. They never try to divert the stream of life to serve their own ends but instead allow themselves to be carried by the stream; they have implicit faith in divine order and the ultimate

¹ p.10

² p.171

goodness of the universe. Alongside this essentially Buddhist concept, Patrick White has relied on the beliefs and used the variegated symbolism of the Jud^{ae}o-Christian faiths to explore and express his vision of life. To reveal the pattern of his beliefs, which are often too intricate and too transcendental to permit realist presentation, he has, at times, resorted to mysticism. For the same reason, he has sometimes deliberately distorted character and incident, as well as style, and these distortions of character and plot will be discussed fully in the chapter on Riders in the Chariot, where they become most conspicuous.

In The Aunt's Story, the mysticism appears mostly in a form of animism, noted already in the chapter on Happy Valley. Patrick White attributes qualities of goodness, stability, sanity, etc., to certain inanimate objects; these assume a mystical significance. In The Living and the Dead, Elyot Standish found comfort in the solidity of bread and cheese:

Here, he said, is why. The bread and cheese. There was something solid, soothing about the yellow wedge. Only to look at this. He was not hungry.¹

In The Aunt's Story, Theodora ventures much further and says that she "believes" in a pail of milk "with the blue

¹ The Living and the Dead, p.16

shadow round the rim"¹ and that she "believes" in a table.² In an earlier scene in The Aunt's Story, Patrick White writes: "There is perhaps no more complete a reality than a chair and a table",³ and it is to be remembered in this connection that Julia Fallon in The Living and the Dead who had knowledge of the "substance" of things, the reality of being, was likened to the form of a table. In The Aunt's Story, Theodora feels, when confronted with her hotel room for the first time, that: "She could not love the chair, or rather, she could not love it yet",⁴ implying a mystical revelation to come in the love for the chair. Later she says: "Only chairs and tables ... are sane".⁵ The table becomes a very intimate part of her being in the cathartic Holstius episode, her final conflict with her self:

"I suspect myself," Theodora said, feeling with her fingers for the grain in the table.

"Yes," he said, "you have been groping that table like a blind thing for the last ten minutes."

Then she began to hate the revealing honesty of his face. She dug her nails into the wood.

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

Her breath beat. The walls were bending outward under the pressure of the hateful fire. Then, when the table screamed under her nails, he said quietly, "Ah, Theodora Goodman, you are torn in two."⁶

¹ The Aunt's Story, p.159

² ibid, p.159 ³ p.141

⁴ p.144

⁵ p.176

⁶ pp 292-3

After this climax, she undertakes a symbolic washing of the board floor in the deserted house:

She approached close, but respectfully, to the wood, so that she might appreciate its ingrained humility and painful knots. If Holstius had returned at that moment he would have approved, to see her as simple and impervious as a scrubbed board.¹

There is an affinity between Theodora, who is "brown" and who is a "stick", and wood, but the mystical significance of wood, tables, chairs, as well as that of other objects, of milk and bread and cheese, continues to play an important role in the later novels. For example, in Voss, having established Laura Trevelyan's religious scepticism, Patrick White writes of her:

She did believe, however, most palpably, in wood, with the reflections² in it, and in clear daylight, and in water.²

and of Willie Pringle:

So he would look at the heartbreaking beauty and simplicity of a common table or kitchen chair, and realise that in some most important sense their entities would continue to elude him ...³

Voss himself thinks

... how he would talk eventually with Laura Trevelyan, how they had never spoken together using the truly humble words that convey the innermost reality: bread, for instance, or water.⁴

Himmelfarb, in Riders in the Chariot, says: "God is in this table".⁵ Without making a detailed study of the

¹ ibid, p.294 ² Voss p.11 ³ ibid, p.70 ⁴ ibid, p.203

⁵ Riders in the Chariot, p.159

use of symbols in Patrick White's writing, there is yet ample evidence that he attributes certain qualities such as humility and intrinsic goodness to certain things. This animism or mysticism of objects in Patrick White's writing has disturbed some critics, who have regarded it as too personal and esoteric. This is not a valid criticism, for however vague and intellectually untenable it may seem that some things are "better" than others, it is a belief which enjoys a certain recognition and acceptance in the community at large. It strikes a ready chord. In protest against technological advances there is to-day, in economically developed societies, an undefined desire to return to what is felt by some to be a lost innocence. Amongst artists, this appears in a tendency to use a primitive form of representation to express the primeval verities. Amongst others, there is often a pseudo-interest in pottery and stoneware, in home-weaving and various handicrafts, in organic farming, and, concomitant with these interests, a belief that natural farm products, such as milk and cheese, fruit and vegetables, and natural materials, such as wood, are healthier or more beautiful and therefore "better" than processed foods and synthetically produced materials. Patrick White has extended this belief to a pantheistic conception of God

in things derived from or close to nature and unpolluted by man's sophisticated and materialistic inventiveness. He therefore attributes qualities of intrinsic goodness, selflessness, loving-kindness and humility to certain things, which, in themselves, become bulwarks of sanity and reality in a world of brittle and false values. This pantheism emerges more clearly in The Tree of Man, where Stan Parker finally sees God in the jewelled reflections in a gob of spittle, and finds its climax in the creation of the animal-woman, Miss Hare, in Riders in the Chariot.

Despite the fact that the mysticism of objects reflects an undefined but existing contemporary thought, it is perhaps regrettable that Patrick White has, in this, associated himself with a pseudo-type belief. It seems to introduce into his writing a spurious note which is out of keeping with the intellectual integrity of his work. At the same time, it must be conceded that he creates thereby a certain aura in which his people move and this in itself contributes to the imaginative presentation of his theme.

Where, on the one hand, mystical properties are sometimes attributed to things, people in Patrick White's writing often assume symbolic functions. In The Aunt's

Story, the role of the symbolic Holstius is similar to that of the Girl in "The Ham Funeral", who is the Young Man's anima and guides and directs him toward a resolution of his inner conflict. Holstius, who is an understanding and protective father-figure, recalling to Theodora's mind her father, George Goodman, and the Man who was Given his Dinner, is also Theodora's alter-ego. In much the same way, Laura becomes Voss's alter-ego in Voss. Holstius, Theodora's conscience and teacher, is a projection of herself; he is her childhood, her whole life, the sum total of her experience and knowledge gained. He analyses her conflict:

"You cannot reconcile joy and sorrow," Holstius said. "Or flesh and marble, or illusion and reality, or life and death. For this reason, Theodora Goodman, you must accept. And you have already found that one constantly deludes the other into taking fresh shapes, so that there is sometimes little to choose between the reality of illusion and the illusion of reality. Each of your several lives is evidence of this."¹

and teaches her acceptance and brings her peace. It is through him that she learns to become "a world of love and compassion".²

At the close of the book, Theodora has reached the end of her tortuous and tortured road, but whereas, at the realist level, in the judgment of society, she has passed

¹ The Aunt's Story, p.293

² ibid, p.299

into the shadowy land of insanity and is committed to an asylum for the mad, at the other, deeper level and the one with which Patrick White is most concerned, she has attained beatitude. The book is an indictment of society and its values, but, at the same time and more importantly, it expresses a belief in the possibility of salvation. If salvation at the expense of self-destruction and madness is a bleak thought, the concept contains nonetheless an avowal of faith. This avowal is a noteworthy departure from the nihilism of the two early novels. Patrick White does not return to the hopelessness expressed in Happy Valley and The Living and the Dead, but continues to pursue in his later books the more positive theme of The Aunt's Story: Theodora's progress through pain, suffering and self-annihilation toward humility, knowledge and serenity is re-enacted by Voss and Himmelfarb.

CHAPTER IV. THE TREE OF MAN: GROWTH AND CONTINUITY

In one important aspect, The Tree of Man stands apart from the mainstream of Patrick White's novels. Although there are many obvious and important links with preceding and subsequent books - in style, in satiric comment, in symbolism and in the author's predilection for certain concepts and images - there is not, in The Tree of Man, the thematic emphasis on suffering and redemption which predominates in The Aunt's Story, Voss and Riders in the Chariot. The redemptive theme appears also in The Tree of Man, but not as the source of action. Some readers have found this wider range preferable to the intensive and overriding purposefulness in theme shown in the other novels; Vincent Buckley, for example, has indicated that one of his reasons for considering The Tree of Man Patrick White's finest work¹ is that the author's emotions, which tend to distort and inflate themes and situations, notably in Voss and Riders in the Chariot, are defined by the situations they energise in The Tree of Man.

The Tree of Man is undoubtedly a more subdued book, more equable in tone, more balanced in its "Weltanschauung", than the book preceding and the two books following it

¹ Vincent Buckley, "The Novels of Patrick White", The Literature of Australia, Adelaide, 1964, p.426

chronologically. In contrast to the fantastic and often deliberately esoteric quality of Voss and Riders in the Chariot, The Tree of Man story revolves around ordinary people, commonplace things and everyday events. It seeks to find its truth not in crisis but in continuity. It is an epic story, the story of mankind, of man taking root, growing, broadening, searching for a meaning in life, glimpsing a poetry and finally dying, whilst around him life continues to grow and spread, "So that in the end there were the trees ...So that, in the end, there was no end".¹ It is a family saga, a chronicle of life with its rhythmic ebb and flow in floodtime and drought, fire and storm, with its seasonal growth from springtime through summer and autumn to the decline of winter and the promise of another springtime. Like the four seasons, the book is divided into four parts and these correspond to the seasons in Stan and Amy Parker's lives: their youth, their maturity, their mellowing and their old age. R.F. Brissenden has drawn attention to the symphonic structure of The Tree of Man² and H.J. Oliver has pointed to its universality:

¹ The Tree of Man, p.499

² R.F. Brissenden, "Patrick White", Meanjin, vol. xviii, no.4, 1959, p.420

It suggests admirably that, just as the small shack will become in time part of a home, then of a settlement, and then be all but swallowed up by a metropolis, so man himself will become in time part of a family, then part of a society, and finally be involved in mankind; ...¹

Vincent Buckley has also stressed this aspect of universality in the book. He says that what Patrick White has done

... is to take one of the conventional subjects of Australian fiction - pioneering man, the bushman hero, the emerging primitive community - and treat it in a completely unconventional way. He has, in fact, de-mythologised one of our national literary myths; and he has tried, in the process, to analyse the humanity,² not the Australian-ness, of Australian man.

The book is conceived on a Tolstoyan scale: it takes a wide, panoramic view of life and has the ever recurring, elemental and universal concerns of man as its theme.

Patrick White himself has described his motives in writing The Tree of Man as follows:

... I wanted to try to suggest in this book every possible aspect of life, through the lives of an ordinary man and woman. But at the same time I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people,³ and incidentally, my own life since my return.

¹ H.J. Oliver, "The Expanding Novel", Southerly, no.3, 1956, p.168

² Vincent Buckley, "Patrick White and his Epic", Twentieth Century, vol. xii, no.3, 1958, p.239

³ "The Prodigal Son", Australian Letters, vol. 1, no.3, 1958, p.39

Thus, at one level, The Tree of Man is a family story, the story of mankind, of growth, seasonal change, death and continuity. However, at another level, it is the story of man's spiritual isolation, the essential separateness of people and their frightening inability to communicate. At a third level, Patrick White has imposed on the novel the theme of simplicity and humility leading to an understanding of the mystery of life. In an examination of the development of the major themes in the writing of Patrick White and, particularly, the theme of suffering and redemption, it is the second and third of these levels which are of greatest interest.

In The Living and the Dead, which has as its dominant theme the isolation of man, Elyot Standish, the intellectual, the littérateur and scholar, is, in his own way, as inarticulate as the simple farmer, Stan Parker, and his wife, Amy. Elyot and his mother and sister live in a cocoon of loneliness; in The Tree of Man, we are again presented with a family unit of which the members fail to communicate significantly with each other or with the outside world. Reverberating through both books is the theme of inarticulateness and spiritual and emotional deprivation.

Stan and Amy Parker, the man and the woman of The Tree of Man, fail in their understanding of each other and, as the years pass by and their hopes and attempts at communication become more desperate with failure, they drift more and more apart and sink back into the shell of their own selves. Their inadequacies are summed up by Thelma, who, explaining her parents' life to her husband, says: "Just the business of two people discovering each other by degrees, and not discovering enough, as they live together".¹ Certainly there are moments in their early life when Stan and Amy melt into one being in their physical love for each other and in their great need of each other in the face of the elements and an often hostile environment; these are moments of closeness and insight, underlined frequently by the impact of external calamities: the man and the woman cling to each other in the storm² and experience a meaningful intimacy of spirit on meeting again after the floods.³ But, these moments are rare and transitory; unexpressed, they quickly lose substance. The reality of the situation remains: neither Stan nor Amy can say the things they want to say and which sometimes need to be said. In a passage typical in its exposure of their

¹ The Tree of Man, p.344

² ibid, pp 44-5

³ p.86

predicament, Patrick White describes Stan's return from the market town:

"Well," he said, hiding his love, "and what has happened? Anybody come?"

"Nothing," she said, diffident beneath her hat, and wondering whether she should offer some sign. "What do you expect," she said, "a steam engine?"

Her voice broke the cold stillness too roughly. She stood squeaking the handle of her bucket, a sound of which the air was less shy. She too was ashamed of her voice.

She was ashamed of not being able to say those things that she should. All day long she had listened to the bell on the cow, the laughing of a bird, the presence of her silent house. Her thoughts had chattered loudly enough, but took refuge now.¹

Both are forced to hide their true feelings because they do not know how to express them in words or gesture.

Gradually both Stan and Amy sense a void; they become aware of an aching desire to fill the emptiness in their lives but do not know how; they cannot bridge the gulf widening between them. Amy realises this in a flash of insight but is unable to break through the tight bounds of her being:

She began to walk away from the cow. She walked through the trees of the piece of land that belonged to them. There was a blurry moon up, pale and watery, in the gently moving branches of the trees. Altogether there was a feeling of flux, of breeze and branch, of cloud and moon. There would be rain perhaps, she felt, in the dim, watery world in which she walked. In which their shack stood, with

its unreasonably hopeful window of light. She looked through the window of this man-made hut, at her husband lying asleep on a bed. There were the pots standing on the stove. A scum from potatoes falling from the lip of a black pot. She looked at the strong body of the weak man. Her slippers were lying on their sides under a chair. She realised, with a kind of flat, open-mouthed, aching detachment, that she was looking at her life.

It should have been quite simple to break this dream by beating on the window. To say, Look at me, Stan.

But this is not possible, it seems.

So she was forced back from the poignant house, into the world of tree and cloud, that was at present her world, whether she liked it or not. Her feet drifting through the bracken. And this child I am to have, she said. That her body was making in spite of itself. Even the sex of the unborn child had been decided by someone else. She was powerless. Her skirt drifted against the rough bark of trees. Everything she touched drifted out of her grasp almost at once, and she must grow resigned to it.¹

This passage is both significant and typical. In it, Patrick White uses words and phrases to suggest a sense of unreality, despite surroundings which are, in fact, most real. The moon is "blurry", "pale", "watery"; Amy walks in a world which is "dim" and "watery", a world "of tree and cloud", a world which generates "a feeling of flux". She appears to be drifting helplessly in this dreamy world: her feet are "drifting through the bracken", her skirt has "drifted against the bark of trees", everything she touches has "drifted out of her grasp". She cannot break the spell; she cannot

¹ pp 60-1

beat against the window and call her husband and, to underline the helplessness and hopelessness of her predicament, Patrick White transfers the sadness and pathos of her situation to the house: the house is "poignant" and the light in the window is "unreasonably" hopeful. Here he draws the contrast between reality and Amy's emotive reaction to it. The fact of the lighted window shining out from amongst the raindrenched trees is reality; that the light from the window which normally signifies cheer and hopefulness should be unreasonable, sets the tone of despondency, even despair. At best, "she must grow resigned to it". The contrast is continued in the description of the real, everyday things seen through the window - the pots on the stove, the boiling potatoes, the slippers under the chair - and the dejection felt by Amy: she realises that her life is not only commonplace and circumscribed, but that it is also desperately lonely in that she is excluded even from the commonplace things she knows best. She is outside, an "outsider", looking in at the pots and pans, which are elusive despite their banality, and at the husband, whom she cannot reach.

Stan, too, is aware of their failure to make contact and of the growing distance separating them. On one

occasion, he dreams a dream wherein he longs to expose his inmost self to Amy but is repulsed by her:

Stan Parker, who had fallen asleep tired, in a draught, dreamed that he could not lift the lid of that box to show her what he had inside. It does not matter, she said, holding the dishcloth between, to hide. But he could not lift. It does not matter, she said, Stan, I do not want to see. I shall show, he said, pulling till the sweat came. But still not. No, she said, Stan, Stan, it has gone bad in there, it has been in there all these years. Pulling, he could not explain it was his act that had died, and grown wool, like a ram, and lived again. I am going, she said. The dishcloth blew through the doorway. Running through the kitchen. Grey water was flowing between them.¹

Not only is Stan's soul or inmost being shut in a box of which he cannot lift the lid, but, in this dream, Amy does not even want to see what is inside, does not want and is afraid to know him. She fends off his self-revelation with a dishcloth, which becomes a curtain separating them and also separating them from reality and truth.

By repeating references to frustrated attempts at communication, as in the two passages quoted above, Patrick White has given a moving account of the decline in a relationship between two people. Eventually, he writes, Stan and Amy "began to be kind to each other",² as strangers will show impersonal kindness and

¹ p.316

² p.318

consideration. Their life together draws to a close in a passionless acceptance of mediocrity and a lack of fulfilment in love:

Sometimes at night they would wake singly and listen to each other's breathing, and wonder. Then they would fall asleep again, because they were tired, and would not dream. Habit comforted them, like warm drinks¹ and slippers, and even went disguised as love.

It is a sad view of life, where people meet and live in close proximity without achieving the kind of understanding which alone could make their lives meaningful and worthwhile.

It is not only with each other that Stan and Amy fail to communicate. They fail also with those who appear briefly or for longer in their lives, and then pass by. As a young man, Stan has little contact with either his father or mother; he goes away as soon as his mother dies, so that "some people said that young Stan Parker had no feelings, but it was just that he had not known her very well".² But he never does know anyone "very well". Later in his life, he would like sometimes to speak to a friend, but does not or cannot. There are men, like Ossie Peabody, who hover just beyond the fringes of intimacy. Thus Ossie feels: "Because he would have

¹ p.342

² p.9

liked to talk to Stan, mostly he avoided him",¹ and Stan, in turn, often "thought of things he would have liked to tell Ossie, but Ossie was not there, and so he forgot".² These are recurring instances of frustrated intentions.

Stan, however, is more self-contained, self-sufficient and less harrowed than Amy, who makes desperate forays to penetrate the inner mystery of others, be they a small boy lost in the floods, a passing soldier back from the war and looking for relatives in the district, a young Greek farmhand or the painter husband of the postmistress, Mrs Gage. With each of these shadowy figures passing through her life without touching, she feels she could be on the brink of a disclosure, that the doors which will reveal all are about to open. They do not. The shadows move on and Amy remains preoccupied "with what could have been her relationship",³ with opportunities left ungrasped and human souls unexplored. Repeatedly throughout the novel, Patrick White hints at the unrevealed, undisclosed, unsolved. Amy remains inevitably unsatisfied. There is a sense of "might have" and "could have" and "if" and "but", as in the passage where she is thinking fretfully about the imminent departure of the Greek boy:

¹ p.154

² p.155

³ p.291

What, then, was so disturbing about it all? The young man, whose socks she had mended for a while, would leave the house, as was natural. But she might have told him something of herself, any day now, something that nobody else had been told, that she might have told perhaps to the child they had found in the floods, who was that blank sheet of paper which is necessary for such confessions of love, but who had gone while she still fumbled.¹

Her desire for understanding is frustrated and the mystery of human relationships remains always beyond her reach. Even in the more tangible friendships she has with the women of the district, with the inimitable Mrs O'Dowd and with Doll Quigley, Amy does not establish bonds of intimacy. As a recipient of a confidence in the harum-scarum ride to the floods with Mrs O'Dowd

... young Mrs Parker would have liked to offer her friend words of love and assurance, but she was prevented. And they were being washed farther apart. The waters were lapping at the spokes of the wheels. ²The two women began to accept the distances.

The "distances" in relationships are most prevalent in The Tree of Man. They are reminiscent of the "distances" in The Living and the Dead: in both books the loneliness of man and his consequent suffering form the basic theme.

The most dismal failure in both Stan's and Amy's lives and the one which causes them greatest suffering is their

¹ p.237

² p.81

total estrangement from their children. Stan tries, in a tentative way, to establish some communion of interest with the boy and to transmit to him his own sense of marvel and his love for the land with its miracle of birth and growth and rebirth, but fails. Amy tries, passionately, to possess her son with all a mother's longing and foolishness, with all the desperation of rejected love, and fails. Neither Amy nor Stan can penetrate the purposeful remoteness of their daughter. The two children, so different in appearance, character and ways, have one common aim: to escape from their parents and all that they represent, Ray to the flash life of the racecourse, nightclubs and petty crime, Thelma to the rarefied atmosphere of upper class respectability. In finally wrenching free, they expose the gaping hole of non-fulfilment in their parents' lives. The parents are only too aware of the emptiness. Thus Stan asks the rhetorical question: "Who has got what?"¹ in reply to his wife's nagging doubt whether Thelma has "got" her husband, and the same agonised question pursues Amy: "Then what have I got? she asked, as the void hit her".² The consciousness of a lack in their lives and their sense of failure are expressed poignantly in the scene where they

¹ p.357

² p.366

meet, having learnt, separately, of their son's death in an underworld shooting incident:

So she was still sitting, an old and heavy woman with her legs apart, when Stan came in, and from her distance she saw that he had suffered, and that she would not be able to help.

"What else are we intended to do if we have failed in this?" asked the old man, who had been creased by his journey.

His skull was hollow-looking.

"It is so late," he said.

Then she stirred, and shivered, choosing stupidity.

"There will be a frost," she said deliberately.

"And I have not attended to the fire."

"At our age," he pursued. "With nothing to show."¹

Finally Amy cries:

"When we have ourselves," said his wife, forcing back her unhappiness into her mouth.

"The mysteries are not for us, Stan. Stan? Stan?"²

They are two old people, lonely and perplexed.

As is evident from the two above passages, Stan is more willing to acknowledge failure than Amy, who is less meek. It is Amy who chooses "stupidity", who speaks "deliberately" about the frost and the fire to avoid having to face her personal tragedy, and who forces "back her unhappiness into her mouth". She is not prepared to bow to fate, like Stan; she is a more vital and ebullient person.

¹ p.464

² p.465

Amy emerges as one of the most convincing, most fully realised and fully rounded characters in Patrick White's novels and, despite, or because of, the elevation of Stan at the end of the book, The Tree of Man is largely Amy's story. It is Amy's growth and development, the fluctuations in her life, her passionate nature, her frustrations and her dreams, which are revealed clearly and in detail against the solidity of her background of husband and home. Stan's final elevation seems superimposed; to the extent to which Patrick White makes him serve a mystic and symbolic function, he is less acceptable as a living person. Although Amy, too, is symbolic in that she is referred to as "the woman" or "the ant woman", she is not an abstraction. She is neither good nor evil, but very alive, both at the superficial level of social intercourse with its see-sawing of genuine warmth and subtle cruelty, and at the deeper level of longing and groping for understanding and love. Amy's downfall is that she asks too much of life and remains unappeased. She is not a bad woman, but she is not particularly virtuous. In her spiritual and moral frailty, she is a human being. Stan, on the other hand, is good, and it is in the presentation of the goodness of Stan that Patrick White loses him as a person.

It is here that we strike for the first time in marked degree the phenomenon of goodness in Patrick White's writing. It forms an important element in the theme of redemption: those who are to be redeemed have first to attain goodness, which consists of selflessness, simplicity, humility and loving-kindness. It culminates in the implied saintliness of Mrs Godbold in Riders in the Chariot, who is inherently and inexorably good. The resultant flaws in the character realisation of the "good" Mrs Godbold will be discussed fully in the chapter on Riders in the Chariot.

Throughout his work, Patrick White has shown a strong tendency to associate goodness with the simple, uneducated, working class person, whom he idealises. This tendency is most evident in his treatment of Julia Fallon in The Living and the Dead, Pearl Brawne in The Aunt's Story, Rose Portion and Harry Robarts in Voss; it was discussed in the chapter on The Living and the Dead. It was noted there that these "good" people share an inborn goodness and integrity and an instinctive knowledge and understanding of the deeper mysteries of life. They stand in sharp contrast not only to the shallow, artificial people, whose lives revolve around social events and are circumscribed by material possessions, but also to the intellectually

honest but sophisticated and complex people, who are racked by doubts and tortured in self-castigation in their search for fulfilment. In Happy Valley, The Living and the Dead and The Aunt's Story, Oliver Halliday, Elyot Standish and Theodora Goodman belonged to this last group, whereas the simple, good people acted merely as foils to their trials. In The Tree of Man, Patrick White has chosen, for the first time, one of his idealised simple and good characters as protagonist.

By imposing goodness on Stan Parker, Patrick White has introduced a new and disturbing element into an otherwise uncomplicated book. As mentioned earlier, The Tree of Man can be analysed at several levels and three of these emerge very distinctly. It is, above all, a family saga: at this level, it is the story of a man and a woman and their children, their friends and neighbours, and the gradual unfolding and rhythmic flow of their lives. Their story in itself would have been sufficient justification for the book. Patrick White has, however, added a very poignant note in his portrayal of the deprivation felt by people who are inarticulate and unable to communicate with each other. At this level, the book is given emotional depth, but remains well integrated. It loses considerably in balance and harmony at its third

level, in the seemingly forced emphasis on the redemptive theme.

Stan Parker is accorded salvation because he belongs to the group of naturally good and simple people, but his goodness remains enigmatic. As a young man, he does not seem to contain the embryo of the "good" old man he becomes, nor is there convincing justification for the development of goodness in his personality. It appears without preamble. In the beginning, there is little to choose between the man, Stan, and the woman, Amy. They work, they make love, they witness storms and floods and fires, and they are inarticulate. But, as they drift apart, Amy into obsessive motherhood and later into lust and adultery, Stan is described as slowly laying the foundation for his ultimate revelation by cultivating humility. He sits in the rain and feels humble;¹ he does not bargain with Ossie Peabody over the sale of a heifer but just stands smiling at his boots, so that the sharp Ossie wonders and thinks to himself: "You're a funny sort of bugger all right, simple, or is it clever?"² He develops a spiritual longing and desires "to express himself by some formal act of recognition, give a shape to his knowledge, or express the great simplicities in

¹ p.152

² p.156

simple, luminous words for people to see".¹ He begins to hover on the brink of revelation and is, at times, illuminated so that he can see God with great clarity in a leaf or in the cracks in the path. He is altogether close to nature, to the soil, to the trees and leaves, to insects and birds and animals, and it is in his intimate relationship with all living and growing things that we find the pantheistic view of the world which reaches its climactic expression in the person of Miss Hare in Riders in the Chariot. By watching a horny lizard, a tumult of ants, the path of a snail, Stan finds the answer to life's mystery and a belief in God. In the end, he sees clearly "that One, and no other figure, is the answer to all sums"² and dies, saying: "It is all right".³

Except in terms of Stan's woolly-minded, if consoling, illusion, it is difficult to know what is "all right" or why it is so. His discovery of the One, or God, remains entirely subjective, and, even subjectively, fails to convince. There is a nebulousness about the world of Stan and an unreality about his person. As nothing seems to touch him or move him deeply, he fails to touch or move. He has no point of contact with other people and, unlike Amy, accepts this as being in the nature of things.

¹ p.225

² p.497

³ p.497

In consequence, he provides no point of contact with the reader. As a young man, neither the death of his father nor of his mother disturbs his equanimity; his marriage is a haphazard affair: he acquires a wife in much the same way as he acquires his farm and cattle; the flood, where he sees an old man hanging upside down in a tree, and the fire, from which he rescues Madeleine, make some impression and remain in his memory, but he does not, like Amy, create fantasies around these incidents or endow them with romantic and emotional significance: they play no apparent part in shaping his subsequent life and development; the experiences of war leave him singularly unmoved; his children are strangers to him; the one event which rouses him from his emotional immobility is the discovery of his wife's infidelity, but the end result of this traumatic realisation is a further dulling of sensibility in his response to people; by the time his son is killed and he visits his son's mistress in the city, his reactions have become dutiful but impersonal and his thoughts move more on the plane of the eternal mysteries than on that of human needs. Throughout the book he remains remote. Patrick White describes his evolution toward a pantheistic realisation of God, but fails to make this evolution a significant emotional and intellectual

experience. As with Eden in The Living and the Dead, the positive role assigned to Stan has been conceived intellectually by the author, but has not been realised artistically.

The pantheism of Stan is nonetheless interesting as indicative of a trend in the development of Patrick White's system of beliefs, noted briefly in the chapter on The Aunt's Story. Stan allegedly finds peace, revelation and redemption in nature. By contrast, his two children, Thelma and Ray, who are magnetised by the city, are lost and discontent; they have forsaken simplicity and abjured nature for values which, by inference, are false and inevitably unsatisfying. By aspiring to and accepting the pernicious artificiality of a life divorced from nature, Ray and Thelma, in their separate ways, are both corrupted.

Patrick White's descriptions of Thelma are masterpieces of satire. She is dissected and exposed in every frailty, from her early gropings in a yet unfamiliar terrain to her socially successful marriage, which gratifies her ambition but leaves her vulnerable. References to her are almost invariably barbed with sarcasm, as for example in the passage beginning with "Several nice people had

found Thelma Parker nice",¹ yet she is not a "bad" person in the sense in which Mrs Goodman or Una Russell in The Aunt's Story are bad; alone the fact that she is genuinely moved by music would seem to exonerate her, and, more importantly, her capacity for destructiveness is limited. She does not quite succeed in her attempt to forget her humble origin. She tries to uproot her ties to the past, but fails:

Till she remembered that her father's neck was shrivelling up. So she was pulled back. The cracks of his hands were catching in her dress. So she could not escape, ... and would in the end perhaps not be brutal enough.²

The expression of Thelma's dilemma in a visual image of Stan, the father, whose neck has become shrivelled from working in the sun and whose hands, calloused by hard and honest labour, catch in the delicate fabric of the daughter's dress, (her aspiration to more "refined" living), is an example of Patrick White's extraordinary imaginative insight. Here, as elsewhere, in a brilliant admixture of satire and compassion, Thelma appears torn by a confusion of conflicting emotions. She is haunted by memories of childhood, a limited but not extinct love for her parents and a submerged consciousness that the

¹ p.259

² p.259

values she is pursuing lead to a spiritual vacuum. Patrick White writes of her: "There is such nastiness in the evolution of a synthetic soul",¹ but allows her the saving grace of knowing, if not admitting, the inadequacies of her life. In depicting Thelma, his venom is directed more against the social pressures which have made Thelma into the kind of person she is, than against Thelma herself. She is a thin, lost, unhappy woman, who, in acquiescing in society's code of sham and artificiality, is more victim than agent of destruction.

The Parkers' son, Ray, although selfish and delinquent, is also a lost soul rather than intrinsically bad. There are moments when he tries to establish a bond with his sister and when he "would have liked to enter into a blameless kind of relationship with some human being".² Like Thelma, who surprises herself as well as her parents by frequent home visits, Ray also returns home in later life to look for a lost innocence, but drifts away again unappeased. Both Thelma and Ray are caught in the snares of a society which is either sterile or actively destructive and, divorced as they are from their sources, they remain essentially unsatisfied. The spiritual poverty of their

¹ p.386

² p.271

lives stands in sharp contrast to the fulfilment allegedly found by Stan in his closeness to nature. There is, in Patrick White's writing, evidence of a strong desire to retain or return to the grand simplicities. It is an emotional reaction against the prevailing cultural climate of our age.

In The Tree of Man, in a development of the tendency to attribute mystical qualities to objects, discussed in chapter III, the wholesomeness and wholeness of the "simple" and "natural" life is set against the desolation created by urban development. Over the years, the Parkers' home and property, hewn out of virgin land, is slowly but surely devoured in a suburban encroachment. In an indictment of the ugliness and soul-destroying quality of suburbia with its square, brick homes, the blare of radios, the chrome fittings and veneer on furniture, Patrick White writes:

Then those people would retire into the brick tombs which they had built to contain their dead lives, and tune into the morning radio sessions, and as they stood on the floral carpet, in a blaze of veneer, would wonder what simple harmonies had eluded them.¹

The houses are "tombs"; the people are spiritually "dead" and, in the midst of their possessions, conscious of an

¹ p.479

undefined sense of loss. This thought is developed further in the play, "The Season at Sarsaparilla", and in the short story "Down at the Dump"; it becomes most dominant in Riders in the Chariot, where viciousness and evil are associated with materialism and massproduced ugliness.

Although The Tree of Man does not form a strong link in the thematic chain of suffering and redemption which binds The Aunt's Story, Voss and Riders in the Chariot, it is possible to trace in it Patrick White's belief in the devastating and pernicious effect of alienation from nature and natural things. It contains many of the animistic concepts noted already in The Aunt's Story, in that certain things, like bread and potatoes, are "good" and some other beautiful if impractical things, like Amy's little silver nutmeg grater and the broken fragment of red glass brought by the boy lost in the floods and given finally by Amy to her grandson, are endowed with a mystical quality. It emphasises the isolation of man in his inability to communicate significantly, which forms the major theme in The Living and the Dead. Finally, there is in The Tree of Man an attempt to state the theme of salvation by revelation, following the cultivation of

humility, suggested in The Aunt's Story and pursued further in Voss and Riders in the Chariot. It is in the exposition of this theme that Patrick White is least successful in The Tree of Man, where Stan Parker's elevation and final illumination seem unjustified and superimposed. It is, however, the theme with which the author is most preoccupied in the two subsequent novels, where he treats it with greater intensity, certainty and skill.

CHAPTER V VOSS AND HUMILITY

Theodora Goodman, in The Aunt's Story, attains in the end a beatitude akin to the Buddhist nirvana: there is a serenity, a completeness, a sense of having arrived, contained in the nothingness she achieves by the negation of self. This concept is echoed in Voss:

Mediocre, animal men never do guess at the power of rock or fire, until the last moment before those elements reduce them to - nothing. This, the palest, the most transparent of words, yet comes closest to being complete.¹

Where, in The Aunt's Story, one of the characters in "Jardin Exotique" says: "We must destroy everything, everything, even ourselves. Then at last when there is nothing, perhaps we shall live",² Voss expresses the same thought: "To make yourself it is also necessary to destroy yourself".³ The two novels are linked closely in theme, and the continuity in thought and in expression, in form often hallucinatory, is quite astonishing, particularly when it is considered that there is a time lapse of nine years between the publication of these books.

Patrick White's preoccupation with suffering has been discussed in the chapters on the two first novels; his

¹ Voss, p.67

² The Aunt's Story, p.176

³ Voss, p.38

belief that it is possible to attain a kind of peace and acceptance and, by implication, salvation, by the destruction of the self was shown in The Aunt's Story. In Voss, as in Riders in the Chariot following Voss, he has directed his creativity in a concentrated, intensive artistic effort to expound his thesis that man is capable of achieving redemption but to this end must suffer and learn humility.

The key word in Voss is "humility", the Christian humility, the humility of man accepting the limitations of his manhood and bowing before God. The suffering of Voss and, indirectly, of Laura, is caused basically by Voss's desperate struggle against the concept and the fact of humility - desperate because in his inmost being he knows that in the end it is toward this humility that he must and will aspire. Voss is a man of destiny: purposeful and determined to succeed, both on the realist plane of exploring the unknown continent and on the metaphysical plane of self-deification, he is yet conscious of the inevitability of failure inherent in his undertaking. He is propelled toward failure in the tradition of Greek tragedy. That his actual failure contains the kernel of salvation is understood by Laura and it is Laura who personifies his repressed but

instinctive knowledge that redemption lies in the ultimate acceptance of human failure. It is for this reason that he is drawn to her and chooses her as contestant in the conflict between his avowed purpose of being God and his destiny of bowing to God.

Few of the characters in the book are perceptive enough to sense this essential conflict which acts as his driving force. Laura does, and so does Le Mesurier. Others see in glimpses. Mrs Sanderson, for example, in a flash of insight, thinks: "He is a handsome man, of a kind, she saw again, and, I do believe, asking to be saved".¹ For the rest, he is but the acme of arrogance. They see only his outer shell: overbearing, perverse, preposterous even, and he himself acts out this part to the hilt.

Conscious of destiny but willingly accepting only that which he considers desirable and his due, Voss writes in his first letter to Laura: "The gifts of destiny cannot be returned. That which I am intended to fulfil, must be fulfilled".² At this stage, he refuses to contemplate failure. He repeatedly rants against humility: "Ah, the humility, the humility! This is what I find so particularly loathsome".³ But, it is humility which is the condition

¹ ibid, pp 161-2

² p.163

³ p.96

Laura places on her acceptance of him when he proposes marriage. In her first letter to him, she replies:

Only on this level, let it be understood, that we may pray together for salvation, shall you ask my Uncle to accept your intentions, that is, if you still intend.¹

In a later letter, which he does not, in fact, receive, although he is telepathically aware of its contents, she writes:

My dear Ulrich, I am not really so proud as to claim to be humble, although I do attempt, continually, to humble myself. Do you also? I understand you are entitled, as a man, to a greater share of pride, but would like to see you humbled. Otherwise, I am afraid for you. Two cannot share one throne. Even I would not wash your feet if I might wash His. Of that I am now certain, however great my need of you may be.² Let us understand this, and serve together.

Laura, as Voss's conscience or his better and aspiring self, has pointed the finger at his problem: "Two cannot share one throne". Throughout the journey, she continues to admonish him to be humble.

Voss, reluctantly and only partially accepting Laura's condition, replies to her letter:

...you have inspired some degree of that humility which you so admire and in me have wished for! If I cannot admire this quality in other men, or consider it except as weakness in myself, I am yet accepting it for your sake.³

¹ p.199

² p.256

³ p.230

but adds some paragraphs later:

... but I cannot kill myself quite off, even though you would wish it, my dearest Laura. I am reserved for further struggles, to wrestle with rocks, to bleed if necessary, to ascend. Yes, I do not intend to stop short of the Throne for the pleasure of grovelling on lacerated knees ...¹

There is frequent evidence of vacillation in Voss's purpose, as is shown in these two closely linked passages, the one at least partially accepting humility in accordance with the demands of Laura, who symbolises his submerged conscience, the other rejecting it for a concept of Nietzschean greatness. However, it is Laura who wins and it is she who states the basic theme of the book:

When Man is truly humbled, when he has learnt that he is not God, then he is nearest to becoming so. In the end, he may ascend.²

Following this pronouncement, Voss lives through his final agony:

Now, at least, reduced to the bones of manhood, he could admit to all this and listen to his teeth rattling in the darkness.

"O Jesus", he cried, "rette mich nur! Du lieber!"

Of this too, mortally frightened, of the arms, or sticks, reaching down from the eternal tree, and tears of blood, and candle-wax. Of the great legend becoming truth.³

Here, in the end, Voss is made humble. The Voss who, in the beginning, would be God is reduced to his "manhood", he is "mortally" afraid, afraid as feeble man,

¹
p.231

²
p.411

³
p.415

and cries out to be saved. At the same time, in accepting that he is man and not God, "he is nearest to becoming so": it is "the great legend becoming truth" and Voss is identified with the Christ-figure and his death with the crucifixion.

Thus, in its external framework, Voss is predominantly Christian. Voss is the Christ-man and his faithful followers his disciples. Various critics have focused attention on the symbolic function of some of the members of the expedition in a Christian context, although there is disagreement on the allocation of roles. David Martin sees Judd as Judas,¹ which, despite the similarity in names, seems a less apt analogy than that drawn by R.F. Brissenden² and Marjorie Barnard;³ they identify Jackie, the renegade aboriginal boy who delivers Voss to the sacrificial death demanded by his tribe, with Judas, and Judd, who betrays Voss but lives to spread the gospel, with Peter. Patrick White has undoubtedly borrowed heavily from Christian symbolism and the book abounds in Christian allusions. Describing, for example, the

1 David Martin, "Among the Bones", Meanjin, vol.xviii, no.1, 1959, p.54

2 R.F. Brissenden, "Patrick White", Meanjin, vol.xviii, no.4, 1959, p.423

3 Marjorie Barnard, "Seedtime and Voss", Meanjin, vol.xvii, no.1, 1958, p.97

gentle morning with its landscape of "passionless beauty"¹ on the day of the ship "Osprey's" departure, he indulges his almost obsessive interest in crucifixions:

No one would be crucified on any such amiable trees as those pressed along the northern shore.²

implying that a death by crucifixion would be possible and even probable in the less amiable and passionless desert region for which Voss is bound. Again, in the shack which Voss shares with Palfreyman at Boyle's station, Palfreyman, by a trick of moonlight, sees Voss momentarily decapitated:

... the head became detached for a second and appeared to have been fixed upon a beam of the wooden wall. The mouth and the eyes were visible.³

Toward the end of the journey, in an example of Patrick White's remarkable skill in bringing together the threads of multifarious ideas, Laura says to Voss: "Man is God decapitated. That is why you are bleeding",⁴ and, of course, Voss dies finally in a ritual beheading, which is strongly suggestive of a crucifixion.

Despite reliance on Christian symbols and despite Patrick White's preoccupation with redemption and revelation, he is not a Christian writer in the orthodox sense. There is a nihilism in Happy Valley and The Living

¹ Voss, p.100 ² ibid, p.100 ³ p.189 ⁴ p.387

and the Dead which is quite un-Christian and The Aunt's Story is more Buddhist in concept than Christian. Some critics have even seen his writing as diametrically opposed to Christianity. Colin Roderick has described Riders in the Chariot as "a fictional essay in Jewish mysticism, owing very little to Christian dogma except as a deus ex machina, and still less to rational philosophy",¹ and John Cowburn has given a Schopenhauerean interpretation to Voss with emphasis on Schopenhauer's theory of a cosmic Will in conflict with itself.² Cowburn draws an interesting parallel between Voss and Schopenhauer's concept of love as "suffering-with" others, of reality present only in pain and of salvation achieved only by a denial of the will to live, and claims that this philosophy is fundamentally opposed to the Christian view.

In Voss, as in his other work, Patrick White is concerned primarily with man's search for understanding, self-realisation and fulfilment, achieving or hoping to achieve thereby a higher state of being. By choosing humility as the path toward this state, the author has adopted an important tenet of Christian faith, although the belief in the desirability of humility is not

1 Colin Roderick, "Riders in the Chariot - an exposition", Southerly, no.2, 1962, p.62

2 John Cowburn, "The Metaphysics of Voss", Twentieth Century, vol.xviii, winter 1964, pp 352-61

confined to Christianity. By coercing his characters into self-destruction, he departs from orthodox Christian religion and Christian philosophy and moves closer to Buddhism, with its denial of selfhood, although again the wish to negate the self is not restricted to Buddhism. Of course where, at their most exalted level, the concepts of different religions merge, the importance of differences in dogma disappears. Patrick White has tried to express his belief in the universality of religious truth quite formally in Riders in the Chariot, where Himmelfarb combines the roles of the Christian Christ and the Jewish Messiah. In Riders in the Chariot, Mrs Godbold is made to emphasise the essential sameness when she brings Himmelfarb an offering of lamb for Easter and this is found to be identical with the one which he had set on his Sedar table, and when she tells Rosetree that the Jew Himmelfarb has been given a Christian burial, adding:
 "It is the same".¹

Patrick White's religion, if such it can be called, is a highly personalised religion. In common with poets like Rimbaud, Rilke, Yeats, he has developed an individual symbolism but has drawn on the symbolism of Christianity and that of other established religions where it has

¹ Riders in the Chariot, p.500

suited his purpose. It could be misleading, therefore, to attempt to make his work fit the mould of Christian dogma. When Voss, for example, in his agony, cries out: "O Jesus, rette mich nur! Du lieber!", the words are an expression of Voss's acceptance of his human frailty, put in the familiar terms of the religion in which he has been reared, and are not an expression of Patrick White's belief in Christ as Saviour. It is important to draw this distinction.

At this point, it is interesting to note also that those characters in Voss who actively support the established Church are the ones least likely to be saved. In the opening chapter, the Bonners, representative of complacent, middle-class materialism, are at church, whereas the intellectual but spiritually receptive Laura has ceased to believe in God and has remained at home. Throughout the book, Mr Bonner, the solidly-built, self-satisfied, prosperous draper, stands in contrast to the eccentric Voss, a tall, awkward, craggy figure, daemon-ridden and half-mad. Yet Voss, who refers to Jesus Christ as a "miserable fetish"¹ is driven through a desert of suffering toward spiritual salvation, whereas Mr Bonner, who supports the Church and its standard of values, learns nothing from life and makes no spiritual

¹ Voss, p.211

progress. Patrick White frequently underlines the contrast between the two men by placing them in juxtaposition. For example, when, after their first meeting at the Bonners' house, Voss takes his abrupt and uncouth leave to walk back to the town, he is described as resting beneath a "twisted tree", "racked by ... mortification", staring at "withered grass" and "slowly breathing the sultry air of the new country that was being revealed to him".¹ Immediately following, Mr Bonner is shown "wiping the fat from his mouth with a fine napkin".² Mr Bonner is repeatedly referred to as "jingling his money" in his pocket. He is tied irrevocably to his materialism. Patrick White writes of him:

No doubt he would have subscribed to a crusade, just as he would continue, if called upon, to support the expedition, but in hard cash, and not in sufferings of spirit. While approving of any attempt to save the souls of other men, he did appreciate the comfort of his own.³

or again:

How glad he was to be in his own home, and there was no prospect of his having to suffer.⁴

Ensconced in the security and comforts of his possessions, he closes his life as "a cheerful dotard" with the weather "his sole remaining interest".⁵ Voss, on the other

¹ p.30

² p.30

³ p.166

⁴ p.173

⁵ p.459

hand, knows from the beginning that "His soul must experience first, as by some spiritual droit de seigneur, the excruciating passage into its interior".¹ Laura, too, is of the same timbre as Voss and underscores the contrast with the Bonners and their life of padded comfort:

Only a few stubborn ones will blunder on, painfully, out of the luxuriant world of their pretensions into the desert of mortification and reward. To this ... category belonged Laura Trevelyan.²

Throughout the book, the spiritual trials of the members of the expedition emerge clearly and poignantly against the shallowness of life as lived by the social élite of mid-nineteenth century Sydney. Moving backwards and forwards between the two scenes, Patrick White highlights the difference. The physical deprivation and mental anguish of Voss and the other members of the party riding through the desert are set against the superficiality of the daily round of activity of the people in the town. Engrossed in making money and achieving social triumphs, they move from triviality to triviality, from morning visits to picnics, from garden parties to balls, until, as for Una Pringle, who has married the most eligible grazier in the colony, nothing remains for them to achieve "Unless the days upon days upon days".³ Everything, on

¹ p.146

² p.80

³ p.437

the other hand, is to be achieved by the expedition.

In the two above quotations referring to Voss and Laura, as elsewhere in the novel, Patrick White uses the images of "a passage" or journey into the interior of the soul and "the desert", which is a "desert of mortification and reward", as a mirror to the actual expedition undertaken by Voss. The expedition itself becomes heavily symbolic. The journey into the interior of the continent, the unexplored wastes of the Australian inland, is a journey into the recesses of the mind, the hidden depths of man's soul. Sylvia Gzell, in her article on themes and imagery,¹ has made an interesting study of the thematic significance of various colours and images which recur throughout the journey, emphasising its symbolic nature. The symbolism is underlined further by the sometimes dreamlike, sometimes hallucinatory quality in the expedition's progress through a changing landscape of lush or desolate regions, which reflect the state of mind of Voss and his men. In some descriptive passages, Patrick White's prose becomes sheer poetry, as, for example, when he writes:

By now the tall grass was almost dry, so that there issued from it a sharper sighing when the wind blew. The wind bent the grass into tawny waves, on the crests of which floated

1 Sylvia Gzell, "Themes and Imagery in Voss and Riders in the Chariot", Australian Literary Studies, vol.1, no.3, 1964, pp 180-195

the last survivors of flowers, and shrivelled and were sucked under by the swell. All day the horses and the cattle swam through this grass sea. Their barrels rolled and gurgled. All night the beasts were glutting themselves on dew and grass, but in the dreams of men the waves of grass and the waves of sleep were soon one. Dogs curled in pockets of the grass, shivered and bristled as they floated on their dreams.¹

The onomatopoeic suggestion of the grass issuing a sharper sighing, the alliteration of wind and waves, the rhythmic balance of "All day the horses and the cattle ...", "All night the beasts ...", the imagery of a sea of grass of which the waves have crests, where flowers are sucked under by the swell and where men and beasts swim through the waves in a merging of sleep and dreams, are poetic in form and, in content, evocative of a world of unreality. These dreamy landscapes, where thoughts float and souls assume elliptical shapes or fly like birds, are often reminiscent of certain mystical paintings by Sidney Nolan. External description is invariably interwoven with subjective development: the two are inextricably linked. Thus, nearing the end of the expedition's trials, Patrick White writes:

Very soon after this, the fat country through which they were passing began to thin out, first into stretches of yellow tussock, then into plains of grey saltbush, ...

Voss continued to grin. His flesh had been reduced to such an extent, he could no longer smile.

¹ Voss, p.177

So the party entered the approaches to hell, with no sound but that of horses passing through a desert, and saltbush grating in a wind.

... In the lyrical grasslands through which they had lately ridden, they had sung away what was left of their youth. Now, in their silence, they had even left off counting their sores. They had almost renounced their old, wicker bodies. They were very tired at sunset. Only the spirit was flickering in the skull. Whether it would leap up in a blaze of revelation, remained to be seen.¹

Here, the lush grasslands are associated with lyrical song and youth and the yellow tussock and grey saltbush grating in the desert wind spell death. It is the approach to hell and the men's bodies are thin and tired, they have "wicker bodies", like bundles of dry twigs, with but a skull for the head. The image of the spirit flickering in the skull reappears later, when Voss is seen as "a skull with a candle expiring inside".² In the above passage, Voss himself can no longer smile, but only grin, like the grinning skull of the figure of Death in Holbein's Dance of Death. It is a grisly and macabre scene.

Throughout the book, Voss is the focal point. He is a hero on the grand scale, in the tradition of Odysseus or Don Quixote or Faust. He has the stature of a Faust in that it is evident from the beginning that

¹ ibid, pp 358-9

² p.382

he is singled out for extraordinary conflicts and for a fall and ascent or salvation denied to lesser beings. He is in every way an exceptional man, Physically, he is tall and "sinewy, a man of obvious strength",¹ "a crag of a man"² who "beetles" above others, like an outcrop of rock. He is frequently referred to in terms of rock and stone. In the imposition of his will and personality, his strength seems so vastly superior to that of others that it sets him apart and thereby lends him even greater power. It is only the few very loyal and perceptive ones, like Laura and Le Mesurier, who sense his essential weakness. The others "could expect anything of Voss. Or of God, for that matter".³ To them; he is often the nearest thing to God.

Voss himself is supremely arrogant. He is the "Uebermensch", the superman, of Nietzschean philosophy, who denies divinity and himself would be God. Brother Müller recognises this when he says to Voss: "... you have a contempt for God, because He is not in your own image"⁴ and, although Voss is vaguely troubled by this comment, he discounts it in his overriding desire to accept his own self-sufficiency, his destiny to lead men and his divinity. Patrick White writes of Voss: "It

¹ p.29

² p.24

³ p.286

⁴ p.54

had become quite clear from the man's face that he accepted his own divinity. If it was less clear, he was equally convinced that all others must accept".¹ Voss is described as thinking: "All, sooner or later, sensed his divinity and became dependent upon him".² He says to Mr Bonner, his sponsor: "I have not learnt yet to influence the wind",³ joking, but implying nonetheless that, in time, he will. Like the God of Israel the Jews, he regards the Australian Aborigines as "his people". Thus he likes to ride with the two natives, Dugald and Jackie, because he "was happiest with his loyal subjects"⁴ and feels, on meeting a group of natives that he "would have liked to talk to these individuals, to have shown them suitable kindness, and to have received their homage".⁵ Even toward the end, when he is faced by a group which is obviously hostile, he struggles to maintain his divinity:

"Do they wish to kill me?" asked Voss.
Jackie stood.

"They cannot kill me," said Voss. "It is not possible."

Although his cheek was twitching, like a man's.⁶

¹ p.154

² p.188

³ p.124

⁴ p. 202

⁵ p.204

⁶ pp 388-9

He says of Jackie: "He will be my footstool".¹ It is thus a shattering realisation when he is forced to acknowledge Jackie's betrayal and denial:

"Then you do not believe₂ in me," said the German, suddenly sober.²

Voss's belief in himself as God is presented by Patrick White not only subjectively, but also through the eyes of the boy, Harry Robarts, and his divine status emerges therefore not merely as the megalomaniac fantasy of a madman but as something akin almost to an objective fact. It is a concept which inevitably must stir a certain amount of reader-uneasiness and resistance. There is something faintly shocking if not blasphemous in Harry's devotion and obeisance and his attitude of worship:

"Good Lord, sir, what will happen?" asked Harry Robarts, rising to the surface of his eyes.

"They will know, presumably," replied the German.

"Lord, sir, will you let them?" cried the distracted boy. "Lord, will you not save us?"

"I am no longer your Lord, Harry," said Voss.

"I would not know of no other," said the boy.³

In this short passage, there is a transition from the exclamation "Good Lord" to "Lord, sir", which could be either the exclamation "Lord" followed by the form of

¹ p.385

² p.403

³ p.390

address "sir" or a merging of the two, to the final "Lord" in "Lord, will you not save us?", which quite simply and openly assigns godhead to Voss. It must be noted, however, that it is only through Harry's eyes, apart from his own, that Voss is seen as divine, yet Harry is dim-witted and finds in Voss's superior intellect and more powerful personality the anthropomorphic reality he craves. The other two devoted disciples, Laura and Le Mesurier, accept Voss's assertion of divinity with reservations; to them, his arrogance, his pride, his god-aspiration, are but the premise to his trials and foreseeable end and a magnified expression of their own striving toward perfection. They are, in one sense, parasitic and live through him; in another sense, they are the props to the superstructure supporting him. All the other members of the expedition, although they sense Voss's strength and a certain superiority, reject him as God.

Harry's reverence and adulation of Voss are essential to the symbolic structure of the book and, within this framework, psychologically acceptable. Harry, who is simple and good, as the half-witted are wont to be in Patrick White's writing, sees Voss as his natural

master from the moment of meeting. He draws strength from Voss, who is more tangible and therefore more immediately satisfying than faith in an abstract concept. In the scene first introducing Harry, Patrick White writes:

Harry Robarts pursued the situation desperately with his eyes in search of something he could understand. He would have liked to touch his saviour's skin. Once or twice he had touched Voss, and it had gone unnoticed.¹

establishing at a time before the expedition has set out, Harry's view of Voss as his "saviour" and the boy's dependence on Voss. Later, Harry sees Voss with visionary force as a heavenly being:

As the lad stared at his leader, the sun's rays striking the surrounding rocks gave the impression that the German was at the point of splintering into light. There he sat, errant, immaculate, but ephemeral, if he had not been supernal.²

Patrick White maintains here a delicate balance between the impressionistic description of Voss set against the splintering rays of the sun and the knightly, romanticised aura in which Harry sees him. He is "supernal" to Harry, who "would have jumped from his horse, and torn his knees open on the rock".³

In his humble obeisance, loyalty and devotion, Harry

¹ p.41

² p.263

³ p.263

is frequently described as a dog. Thus, in his dreams, Harry "licked the hand, licked with the tongue of a dog, down to the last grain of consoling salt".¹ The dog-symbol is emphasised again in the last conversation between Harry and Voss:

"You are the dog", said the man.
 "Do you really think so?" sighed the drowsy boy.
 "And a mad one".
 "Licking the hands."
 "No. Tearing at one's thoughts".²

Laura, too, is presented in dog-like devotion and, in her sickness, she cries out, speaking of herself: "It is your dog. She is licking your hand".³ The dog-like love and loyalty which Laura and Harry have for Voss are underlined further by Patrick White in his comment on Voss's relationship with his dogs:

Of dogs, however, Voss showed every sign of approbation, and would suffer for them, when their pads split, when their sides were torn open in battle with kangaroos, or when, in the course of the journey, they simply died off. He would watch most jealously the attempts of other men to win the affection of his dogs. Until he could bear it no longer. Then he would walk away, and had been known to throw stones at a faithless animal. In general, however, the dogs ignored the advances of anyone else. They were devoted to this one man. They could have eaten him up. So it was very satisfactory. Voss was morbidly grateful for the attentions of their hot tongues, although he would not have allowed himself to be caught returning their affection.⁴

¹ p.207

² pp 406-7

³ p.381

⁴ p.283

His shooting of Gyp, his favourite dog, is a gesture symbolic of his desire to free himself of the burden of Laura's love, with its imposition on him to strive toward the attainment of humility, and his love for her, which he regards as a weakness. He is torn between the ego-satisfaction of receiving absolute devotion and the obligation of its acceptance. The love of the dog, his devoted followers, is a joy but also a torment, until he attains the humility which allows him to accept love and not to fear it as a weakness. In the end, he realises that he

... had always been most abominably frightened, even at the height of his divine power, a frail god upon a rickety throne, afraid of opening letters, of making decisions, afraid of the instinctive knowledge in the eyes of mules, of the innocent eyes of good men, of the elastic nature of the passions, even of the devotion he had received from some men, and one woman, and dogs.¹

and, in realising and accepting this, is made humble.

Laura's role is, of course, a much more complex one than that of "dog-eyed love". Absolute, dog-like devotion is but one facet of her love for Voss, whereas it is the whole of Harry's love. His simple being finds expression and fulfilment in the one gesture of giving himself, totally. By nature a giver, it is no

¹ p.415

problem to him, nor a hardship. Patrick White writes of him: "... the lad continued to give of himself, without shame, because it was in his nature to".¹ He is one of the unsophisticated good people, discussed in the chapter on The Living and the Dead: physically strong, he is mentally slow, but possessed of a faculty of intuitive knowledge and understanding. With the wisdom or foreknowledge which Patrick White often assigns to the simple or mad, he predicts the end:

"I will stick closer than anyone, in the end," said Harry, "I will sit under the platform. I will learn languages."

"That is mad talk," protested Judd.

Both were uneasy over what had been said, because either it could have been the truth, or only half of it, and which was worse it was difficult to tell.²

It is indeed Harry who remains with Voss, unquestioning, even in death.

Alone, Harry has no significance. He is of importance only in so far as he contributes toward the conceit, the trial and the redemption of Voss. This lack of self-sufficiency in character realisation applies not only to Harry but to almost all of the persons appearing in Voss. The closer they stand in their relationship to Voss, the more do they act as beams and supports in the super-structure built to enlarge him.

¹ p.102

² p.263

It is only those relatively minor characters, like Belle Bonner, who remain almost completely outside his orbit, who are allowed a separate, untrammelled existence of individual significance. Not only is the destiny of the others linked inexorably to Voss's, but their very personalities are realised only to the extent that they can act as foils to Voss and form a chrysalis to his scourge, which is the story of the book.

The depersonalising of character could be regarded as a serious fault in the novel, as indeed it is if one sees the novel as principally a vehicle for the development of character in interaction and the development of plot. It is clear that this was not the author's intention in Voss. The trials undergone by Voss are essentially spiritual and introspective; the principal actors are Voss and his two unseen opponents: God and the Devil, the God of love and redemption and the Devil pride. It is a Faustean conflict and, as in both Marlowe's Doctor Faustus and Goethe's Faust, the other characters assume a largely symbolic function or are but emanations from the one man's mind. Thus it is only within the context of Voss's struggle that the role played by each member of the expedition becomes meaningful. They have no real significance as separate entities. For an

interpretation of the novel, it is essential to accept this as a premise.

Of the three men chosen by Voss to accompany him on the expedition, Harry Robarts, Turner and Le Mesurier, the role played by Le Mesurier is of greatest interest in that he mirrors Voss; Le Mesurier's trials and his search for self-fulfilment are those of Voss, only played in a minor key. Voss is aware of this and recognises himself in Le Mesurier: "He knew this young man as he knew his own blacker thoughts"¹ and "warmed more than ever to the young man, knowing what it was to wrestle with his own daemon".² This sense of kinship remains throughout the journey, so that at a later stage Voss feels "that the young man was possessed of a gristly will, or daemon, not unlike his own"³ and Le Mesurier, in turn, feels "that he did share something of his leader's nature, which he must conceal".⁴

It is Le Mesurier who, together with Laura, most clearly recognises Voss and comprehends the spiritual objective of the journey. Like a chronicler of a great event, Le Mesurier is prepared to follow and record and to play his part in so far as it is necessary in the schema, finding at the same time his own

¹ p.38

² p.38

³ p.265

⁴ p.187

fulfilment. It is for this reason that he is anxious lest Voss should not maintain his purpose to its logical conclusion and asks: "Since I am invited to be present at the damnation of man, and to express faithfully all that I experience in my own mind, you will act out your part to the end?"¹ He sees Voss's destiny as predetermined and he pre-experiences Voss's death and redemption in his poem "Conclusion", where "Man is King" and is turned from "Man into God" only to find ultimately that he is "not God, but Man".² Thus the end does not really surprise Le Mesurier. As they sit waiting, facing almost certain death, he asks Voss what his plans are, and Voss replies: "I have no plan, ... but will trust to God".³ Le Mesurier's reaction to this is that he

... was blasted by their leader's admission, although he had known it, of course, always in his heart and dreams, and had confessed it even in those rather poor, but bleeding poems that he had torn out and put on paper.

Now he sat, looking in the direction of the man who was not God, ...⁴

In many instances, Le Mesurier acts as mouthpiece or interpreter for Voss. It is he who discovers and expresses truths. In his fever, he says:

The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming.⁵

¹ p.290

² pp 315-6

³ p.403

⁴ p.404

⁵ p.289

This sentence is possibly the key to the central problem of Voss; it echoes, of course, the dominant theme of Goethe's Faust expressed in similar terms: "Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, Den können wir erlösen".¹ Le Mesurier underlines further his belief in struggle through failure toward salvation by saying to Voss:

"Of course, we are both failures," he said, and it could have been a confession of love.²

Voss is forced to reply:

"You will not remember anything of what you have said. For that reason," he added, quite dryly, and wriggling his scraggy neck, "I will agree that it could be true."³
So that these two were united at last.

This exaltation in failure is a noteworthy progression from the despair and, at best, stoic acceptance of failure in Happy Valley.

Together with Harry, the dim-witted boy, the intellectual poet Le Mesurier seeks his fulfilment in Voss. Voss sees the two disciples as "an ill-assorted pair, alike only in their desperate need of him",⁴ and it is indeed a foregone conclusion, as predicted by the reprobate Turner, that they should be the ones to remain with Voss to the end. They become "as emanations of the one man, their leader",⁵ because, like Harry, Le Mesurier

¹ Goethe, Faust, part II, act 5, ll 11936-7 (He, whose endeavour is ceaseless striving, can be redeemed.)

² Voss, p.290 ³ ibid, p.290 ⁴ p.42 ⁵ p.382

can scarcely be said to have an independent existence. He seeks fulfilment, but this is made possible only in Voss's fulfilment; his search for self-knowledge, understanding and humility echo Voss's. He writes in his poem: "Now that I am nothing, I am, and love is the simplest of all tongues",¹ but it is Voss who is the "I", who finds his personal truth in humility and love when he is finally reduced to nothingness. It is thus in Voss's recognition of truth and in his redemption that Le Mesurier achieves his purpose, vicariously. Finally, there is nothing left for Le Mesurier to do and he scatters the leaves of the book containing the poems, which express his inmost thoughts, to the wind, and plunges the knife into his throat. He has achieved catharsis.

Thus the two loyal disciples, Harry and Le Mesurier, see Voss as man in God and God in man, the one in simple, anthropomorphic devotion, the other in an intellectual realisation that man's salvation lies in struggle and in the humility achieved by an acknowledgment of failure. The other members of the party, Palfreyman, Judd, Angus and Turner, reject Voss. The roles they play are very different ones.

¹ p.316

Of these others, Angus and Turner are of least consequence. The two loyal disciples, Harry and Le Mesurier, are especially chosen by Voss to accompany him on the expedition. Palfreyman, Judd and Angus are foisted on him against his will and inclination. Turner, however, is also Voss's choice and why he should have been selected is something of a mystery. The selection is done quite carelessly by Voss and, in consideration of the symbolic nature of the expedition, is dismissed rather too lightly by Patrick White in one short paragraph. Voss takes him

...because of a morbid interest in derelict souls, Voss suspected. Still there was in Turner sober a certain native cunning that put him on his mettle. ¹ A cunning man can be used if he does not first use.

Yet, at no time does Voss come into direct conflict with Turner and is therefore not put "on his mettle" by him. Possibly Turner is intended to represent the basest instincts in Voss which he must perforce bear with him until he is purified to a degree that he can discard them. If this is Turner's symbolic function, Patrick White has not made it clear. As it is, Turner seems superfluous, except that in his unwholesomeness he adds to the ghastliness of the expedition. Patrick White's descriptions of Turner, a suppurating mess of boils, are

¹ p.46

quite repulsive. Turner is depicted with unmitigated loathing; he is base both physically and spiritually, with cunning, as sensed by Voss, his most positive quality, if such it can be called.

Turner is the first to recognise, acknowledge and thereby further the split in the party. He describes the two elements rending the party as "oil and water"¹ and says to Ralph Angus:

... I think that Le Mesurier will in the end turn out to be in league with Voss. It is the oil, see? And that barmy boy, why, Harry would not harm a fly,² but oil, oil, see, he must go over, too.

Of Judd, he says: "He is ours, Ralph. He will lead us out. He is a man".³ However, the perception and foreknowledge displayed by these remarks go beyond low cunning and are evidence of a sensitivity which it is difficult to associate with the Turner depicted elsewhere in the book. Similarly, his assessment of Le Mesurier and Voss: "People of that kind will destroy what you and I know. It is a form of madness with them",⁴ strikes an incongruous note. It is quite acceptable that Turner should feel mistrust for those who are different from himself; it is incongruous that, ill-educated and coarse-grained as he is, he should formulate his feelings and

¹ p.272

² p.273

³ p.274

⁴ p.272

express them so articulately. Thus, both as a character portrayal and in his symbolic function, Turner is poorly conceived. He adds little to the story, except to its texture: he is the grinning gargoyle of a Gothic hell. Voss, on ministering to Le Mesurier, who has lost control over his bowels, thinks that the "green and brown, of mud, and slime, and uncontrolled faeces, and the bottomless stomach of nausea, are the true colours of hell".¹ This physical disgust is borne out by the portrayal of Turner. The effect of putrid and gangrenous decomposition achieved by Patrick White in his description of Turner's death is peculiarly horrible: "Then he lay, spread out, a thing of dried putrescence and the scars of boils. His skin was grinning".²

Whereas a certain fascination with the loathsome seems to have motivated the creation of Turner, the *raison d'être* for Angus would appear to lie in the opportunity he offers as a target for social satire. He is a representative of the polite society which Patrick White delights in satirising and it is apparently for this reason alone that the author could not resist including him in the expedition. The role played by Angus is completely negative; at best, he supports Turner and

¹ p.288

² p.453

there is a bitter irony in the forced friendship between the two men from opposite ends of the social scale, the one rich and carefully nurtured, the other bred in the gutter. They find each other in a shallowness of mind and poverty of spirit. Neither learns anything from the journey and their deaths are meaningless.

Unquestioning they maintain to the end the empty values of their upbringing. Thus "Ralph Angus was haunted by a fear that he might not know how to die, when it came to the moment, in a manner befitting a gentleman",¹ and, when he does die, he dies "as young ladies of his own class offered him tea out of Worcester cups".² Patrick White is so completely out of sympathy with both Turner and Angus, presenting the one as putrescent scum, the other as a well-bred ox, that their value in the book is questionable. They offer opportunities for Patrick White to vent on them disgust and satiric venom, but their presence contributes nothing to the story. If they are intended to represent the conventionally sane in contrast to the mad visionaries, they are ill-chosen and ill-matched, as both are so manifestly inferior in sensibility and intelligence.

A much more interesting contrast is provided by

¹ p.453

² p.453

Palfreyman and Judd, whose complexities of character and motive approach those of Voss. Both are a scourge to Voss and both resist him, maintaining to the end their integrity against his aggression and setting up against his twisted, daemonic design of destruction a wholeness and soundness of spirit.

Palfreyman is the essence of patience, goodness, humility and saintliness. Patrick White saves him from being a mealy-mouthed or unctuous saint by exposing him to a tormenting sense of personal failure. Despite this sense of failure and his apparent ineffectualness, Palfreyman is a man of considerable inner strength and Voss, wishing to despise him, fears him because he personifies the humility to which Voss, in his inmost being, knows he must aspire. The uneasy relationship between Voss and Palfreyman is established in their very first meeting in the Botanic Gardens: Palfreyman makes a reference to God's will, whereupon "Voss drew up his shoulder to protect himself from some unpleasantness";¹ when Palfreyman pays little attention to Voss's subsequent slightly derogatory comment but becomes absorbed in observing an insect, Voss is shaken in his sense of security and power:

¹ p.51

"Look," said Palfreyman, pointing at a species of diaphanous fly that had alighted on the rail of the bridge.

It appeared that he was fascinated by the insect, glittering in its life with all the colours of decomposition, and that he had barely attended to the words of Voss.

The latter was glad, but not glad enough. He would have liked to be quite certain, not from any weakness in his own armour, but from his apparent inability to undermine his companion's strength. Naturally it was unpleasant to realise this.¹

Patrick White shows here, as in many other instances, his exceptional psychological insight and expresses the often submerged or only half-realised impulses which condition attitudes and reactions. Voss's essentially aggressive desire "to undermine his companion's strength" is thwarted and, consequently, whereas he is glad that his misfired witticism has been ignored, he is "not glad enough". There is a confusion of feeling and Patrick White has a rare genius in suggesting the mixed, twisted and subconscious motives of man and the complexities of human relationships in action and interaction.

Voss's feelings for Palfreyman remain uneasy, whereas Palfreyman accepts Voss as his cross:

Voss, he began to know, is the ugly rock upon which truth must batter itself to survive. If I am to justify myself, he said, I must condemn the morality and love the man.²

Palfreyman knows his own weakness and knows that he must

¹ p.51

² p.105

expiate the guilt of having been unable to endure the misery of his hunchback sister, but strong in faith, love and humility, he remains inviolate to the assaults by Voss. Basically, he wins every conflict. It is so even before the outset of the expedition, in the home of the Sandersons, when Sanderson relates the story of the ex-convict Judd:

But Palfreyman was greatly moved.

"I will not easily forget," he said, "my first meeting with the man, and the almost Christlike humility with which he tended one responsible, in a sense, for all his sufferings."

Voss jerked his head.

"Your sentiments, Mr. Palfreyman, are sometimes stirred to sickliness. However great your sympathy for this individual, it is unreasonable to want to take upon yourself the guilt of a felon, which it must be admitted, he was, to greater or lesser degree."

Palfreyman looked at Voss.

"I cannot overcome my conviction, for you, or for anyone, Mr Voss."

Voss got up. His black boots were squeaking.

"I detest humility," he said. "Is man so ignoble that he must lie in the dust, like worms? If this is repentance, sin is less ugly!"

He appeared to be greatly agitated. His skin was a dark yellow in the candlelight. His darker lips were rather twisted.

Palfreyman did not answer. He had composed his hands into an inviolable ball.

It is Voss who is "agitated", whose head "jerks", whose lips are "twisted", whose very boots are "squeaking", whereas Palfreyman can remain silent and secure, "inviolable", in his faith.

Because Palfreyman is humility incarnate, he is a special thorn in Voss's side. Voss taunts Palfreyman, taunting in reality himself. Palfreyman humbly accepts all the most menial tasks, treating even the repulsive Turner's boils and bearing Voss's gibe: "Mr Palfreyman, in his capacity of Jesus Christ, lances the boils".¹ He tries to love Voss, even when Voss commits the - to Palfreyman - heinous act of wolfing the mustard and cress seedlings which Palfreyman had sown as nourishment for the sick men.

Palfreyman is not only humble but, in death, actually personifies the Christ-figure to which Voss must aspire. Palfreyman's death by spear is closely linked to Voss's death. Le Mesurier writes in his prophetic poem: "Then I am not God, but Man. I am God with a spear in his side",² and the spear image recurs in Voss's last agony when he sits alone in the twig hut, whilst the natives slaughter the horses and mules:

None of this was seen by Voss, but at one stage the spear seemed to enter his own hide, and he screamed through his thin throat with his little, leathery strip of remaining tongue. For all suffering he screamed.³

Finally, twenty years later, Judd confuses Palfreyman's death with that of Voss and speaks of Voss as having

¹ p.259

² p.316

³ p.417

been killed by a spear in his side. Palfreyman therefore symbolises Voss's agony and death and the concept of Christ in man. Despite or because of his idea of his own weakness and personal failure, he retains his humility and goodness. By remaining humble, good and impregnable in his integrity, and by personifying the Christ-image, he forms an important component in Voss's progress toward self-realisation and the humble acceptance of himself as man.

Judd's role is more enigmatic than Palfreyman's and he is an even greater thorn in Voss's side. He, too, symbolises Christ-like humility, but, unlike Palfreyman's humility, which Voss could delude himself into dismissing as an expression of human failure and weakness, Judd's humility is founded in courage despite adversity and in physical as well as spiritual strength. Judd has passed through and survived the scourge of earlier trials in his convict days: "The convict had been tempered in hell, and, as he had said, survived".¹ Because of this and because of his four-square sanity, his more limited imagination and aspiration, he gives the impression of being stronger than Voss. His strength presents an immediate challenge to Voss's leadership, yet, because

¹ p.146

Judd is humble, he does not grasp power until he is faced with a choice between a - to him - incomprehensible lunacy leading to certain death and the chance of survival and a return to sanity.

On first meeting, Voss "did not object to Judd as a convict, but already suspected him as a man".¹ His suspicion is reinforced by Judd's wife, who says of Judd: "Sir, there would be no man more suitable than him to lead this great expedition, not if they had thought a hundred years".² When Voss, having identified himself to the woman and seeing Judd approach, says ironically: "Here, I do believe, is the leader of the expedition",³ she quickly exonerates her husband from ambition, but advises Voss to let each man have his glory.

Judd has his moments of glory. At Christmas, which Voss would have liked to ignore, Judd takes command. When Voss is kicked in the stomach by a mule, "Judd took it upon himself to call a halt".⁴ When, crossing a river, they lose their supply of flour because of Voss's rash order, Judd later confesses to the foresight of having divided the flour and thereby saved some of it. Judd has considerable practical ability and undoubted qualities of leadership.

¹ p.143

² p.156

³ p.157

⁴ p.225

Voss senses the impending split in the party long before it occurs and even furthers it; he asks the hapless Palfreyman to whom he will give his allegiance; he obliquely accuses Judd, who has saved one compass from the lost instruments:

"One compass?" said Voss. "That will be an embarrassment if, for any reason, we are compelled to form ourselves into two parties."¹

and adds, when this one compass is stolen by natives and later found smashed: "This will obviate the necessity of deciding who will take the one compass".² The actual mutiny does not therefore come as a surprise to either Voss or Judd and is settled quite amicably.

Despite the emphasis on the struggle for leadership and the division of the expedition into two parties, one Voss's and the other Judd's, this is not the most significant aspect of the conflict between the two men. They are both strong men, with strong wills, and a clash is inevitable and predicted quite early in the book: "... for rock cannot know rock, stone cannot come together with stone, except in conflict".³ But they are very different. Judd, in contrast to Voss, who is haunted by visions of grandeur and tormented by his daemon pride, is a man of common sense, bound very firmly to this earth.

¹ p.311

² p.367

³ p.146

Patrick White refers to him frequently as "square", "big-boned", "thick", "massive", "indestructible", a "rock", and writes of him:

Afterwards, he would climb back upon his horse, and sit there looking indestructible. Seldom did the action of the sun reduce him to dreams of the future. Judd, it would sometimes appear, was himself an element.¹

A comparable passage referring to Voss sitting on his horse and quoted on p.142, underlines the difference between the two men: Voss is shown as a quixotic figure, "errant, immaculate, but ephemeral", on whom the action of the sun has the effect of making him appear "at the point of splintering into light", whereas the action of the sun does not affect Judd nor "reduce him to dreams of the future". The dreams of the future which the solid Judd does have are of readily comprehensible, comforting, tangible things:

He who was wedded to earthly things would often invoke them as he rode along, and so, on the day they began to climb those quartz hills, he was thinking of his wife, who smelled of bread and soap, and who had a mole beside her nose, with the three little hairs sprouting from it.²

or again:

Since his own fat paddocks, not the deserts of mysticism, nor the transfiguration of Christ, are the fate of common man, he was yearning for the big breasts of his wife, that would smell of fresh-baked bread even after she had taken off her shift.³

¹ p.260

² p.261

³ pp 367-8

Judd is invariably associated with earthy and earthly things, with bread and soap, with his wife's big breasts and the mole beside her nose. He is essentially the practical man.

Both Voss and Judd are strong, but each man draws his strength from a different source; Judd's lies in the self-assured knowledge of his practical resourcefulness and, more importantly, in the humble acceptance of his limitations. It is this acceptance and the humility which are of intense irritation to Voss and cause him to suffer anguish. When Judd prepares a special dish of liver for Voss, the latter refuses it, but suffers:

Left alone, Voss groaned. He would not, could not learn, nor accept humility, even though this was amongst the conditions she had made in the letter that was now living in him. For some time, he sat with his head in his hands. He did truly suffer.¹

Again, when Judd shows compassion in tending Voss after his accident with the mule, Voss is rent by doubts:

"... was Judd's power increased by compassion?"² This thought is followed by one of the climactic passages in the book:

But when the fellow had gone away, he continued to suspect him of exercising great power, though within human limits. For compassion, a feminine virtue, or even grace, of some sensual origin, was undoubtedly human, and did limit will.

¹ p.213

² p.226

So the German was despising what he most desired: to peel the whale-bone off the lily stem and bruise the mouth of flesh.

Ah, he cried, rubbing his face against the leather of the saddle-bag.

Then he lay more tranquilly ... He lay thinking of the wife from whose hands he would accept salvation, if he were intended to renounce the crown of fire for the ring of gentle gold. That was the perpetual question which grappled him as coldly as iron.¹

Here is stated Voss's central problem: the question of whether he is to be God or man, whether he should aspire to Godhead, "the crown of fire", and become unlimited "will" in the Schopenhauerean sense, or whether he should humbly accept his humanity, the love of his wife, Laura, represented by "the ring of gentle gold", and the "compassion", which he desires yet despises as a weakness. Judd, more than any other member of the expedition, releases this conflict in Voss which is resolved ultimately in his salvation. Harry, in his unquestioning devotion, feeds Voss's vanity and is, at the same time, a shining example of selfless love; Le Mesurier verbalises and interprets the significance of the journey and the nature of the conflict; Palfreyman is a Christ-image; but Judd acts as catalyst to the inner forces which propel Voss toward his destiny.

This destiny, which is to achieve salvation by learning

¹ p.227

humility, has, of course, been formulated by Laura.

Laura, although not actually a member of the expedition, is its most important one, because she is ever present in Voss's mind, hovering on the fringe of his consciousness throughout the journey and merging closely as the end approaches. It is, however, this merging, which becomes telepathic communion between Voss and Laura, which constitutes a weakness in the novel, as in its portrayal Patrick White exceeds the limits of the credence the reader should be asked to give.

Although the character portrait of Laura as a person is an interesting one and although she is second only to Voss in importance in the novel, her relationship to Voss is clouded in metaphysics. At one level, the rational one, she may be regarded as an intelligent, sensitive, introspective and spiritually susceptible young woman, who recognises in Voss a kindred soul. Knowing herself to be proud, and aware of what she feels to be the spiritual danger inherent in excessive pride, she perceives in Voss a pride far greater than her own. This arouses in her a confusion of emotions of love, pity and fear, and she responds by committing herself to Voss; she is prepared not only to devote her life to him but also to accept his struggles and trials as her own. "You are my desert!"¹

¹ p. 94

she says, and, with the sensibility and imagination of the rather exceptional young woman she is, she participates vicariously in Voss's anguish, or her visions thereof, and achieves thereby a cathartic relief.

At another level, the symbolic one, Laura ceases to be of importance as a separate being and becomes an emanation of Voss's mind. Like the Girl to the Young Man in "The Ham Funeral", like Holstius to Theodora in The Aunt's Story, and like Reha to Himmelfarb in Riders in the Chariot, she is his alter-ego, his conscience and the inner force propelling him toward salvation. It is interesting at this point to draw a comparison between Laura and Reha, Himmelfarb's wife. Both women are acutely aware of the roles which Voss and Himmelfarb must play and it is they who, in fact, define the roles and, given the necessary ingredients in each man's nature, even create them. Thus Laura is constantly reproving Voss for his pride and urging him toward humility so that he may become the Christ in Man and be saved; Reha, in turn, compels Himmelfarb toward the study of mystical revelations so that he may become the Messiah and find redemption. In her gentle, unassuming way, Reha causes Himmelfarb to go to the bookstore where he finds the old Hebrew manuscripts of Hasidic lore and then encourages him, by

silent approbation, in the study of the Numbers and Letters and Names. It is in the kabbalistic writings that he first comes across the concept of the Chariot of Redemption and it is Reha who urges him toward a seeking of truth in illumination. In the end, Reha appears to Himmelfarb in his deathdream and remains with him in an intimacy of spirit and in comforting understanding, just as Laura accompanies Voss in his deathride through the dream landscape, feeding him the lilies of love, so that at the moment of destiny "he felt that he was ready to meet the supreme emergency with strength and resignation".¹

The women themselves, Laura and Reha, are content, beside dispensing succour and loving-kindness, to accept the subservient role of conscience, guide and mentor to Voss and Himmelfarb. Neither ever tries to do more and, in this way, they are not separate beings at all but only separate manifestations of the one being. Thus Laura's conscience and integrity and her desperate desire for humility are Voss's own, rejected first in fear but accepted finally in beatific resignation; and Reha's faith and her belief in divine revelation and redemption are Himmelfarb's, but realised only after he has learnt to discard the conceit of intellectual knowledge for simple knowledge, for truth and understanding. Both Laura

¹ p.418

and Reha exemplify the final cry of the Chorus Mysticus in Goethe's Faust: "Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan".¹ Faust, the sinner, ascends to Heaven: he finds salvation in forgiveness, love and purity, personified by the Mother of God, the female - and romantically conceived, better - counterpart in his previously divided nature. Voss and Himmelfarb, in a similar duality of being, also find salvation and bliss in the union of their two selves.

Laura's symbolic function as Voss's alter-ego would be quite acceptable alongside the rational portrayal of her as a young woman who seeks spiritual catharsis through the man who has aroused her empathy and love, if Patrick White had contained the relationship within these bounds of credibility. This he has done in the earlier parts of the book. He has used a technique of thought and dream sequence in which Laura frequently appears and speaks to Voss, and has made this plausible in that it can be safely assumed that her presence is a wish-dream and figment in Voss's mind. Patrick White is extraordinarily skilful in his use of imagery to convey meaning in these passages of thought and fantasy. He writes often more as an artist paints and his visual images suggest hidden

¹ Goethe, Faust, part II, act 5, ll 12110-1 (Woman eternal, our redemption.)

and complex concepts. Thus he writes of Voss:

... Seated on his horse and intent on inner matters, he would stare imperiously over the heads of men, possessing the whole country with his eyes. In those eyes the hills and valleys lay still, but expectant, or responded in ripples of leaf and grass, dutifully, to their bridegroom the sun, till all vision overflowed with the liquid gold of complete union.

The demands Voss made on his freshly-formed relationship were frequent and consuming, but, although exhausted by an excess of sensuousness, it was a period of great happiness to him and, in consequence, of unexplained happiness to everyone else.¹

In the first of these two paragraphs, which follow the letter Voss has written to Laura proposing marriage to her, Patrick White has used the sexual image of the sun as "bridegroom" to "the hills and valleys", which lie still, dutiful, expectant and responsive like a virgin bride, to symbolise the consummation of Voss's marriage to Laura. The consummation is further underlined in the succeeding paragraph. The "bridegroom" is, of course, also the Christian symbol for Christ. In a multiple symbolism, Voss is therefore Laura's bridegroom, he is Christ, and he is the sun: in his elevation he can possess "the whole country with his eyes" and "stare imperiously over the heads of men".

The symbolic marriage is "a period of great happiness"

¹ Voss, p.165

for Voss. In the chapter immediately following the above passage, Laura is described as strangely happy. Patrick White repeats the very words when he says: "This was a period of great happiness for Laura Trevelyan".¹ In this way and by moving backwards and forwards between Voss in the desert and Laura in Sydney, depicting moods, thoughts and sensations, he creates an atmosphere conducive to an acceptance of spiritual communion between the two. His methods are ingenious and eminently successful. Yet, the mind boggles when the communion between Laura and Voss becomes actual communication and thought transference is presented as an objective fact.

Professor McAuley has sought justification for the telepathy or clairvoyance in the novel in the romanticism of its theme and in its "meta-novelistic" form,² but, however organically it may seem to emerge from the book's theme and texture, it remains a barrier to an intellectual appreciation of the novel. The intermingling of Voss's and Laura's lives in a weaving together of thought images, as occurs in the early stages of the book, is quite credible. It is reasonable to accept Laura's participation in the journey and her admonishments to

¹ ibid, p.175

² James McAuley, "The Gothic Splendours: Patrick White's Voss", Southerly, no.1, 1965, pp 40-1

Voss as an emanation from his mind. Her presence is his fantasy, as her aching fears for him in his undertaking are hers. Also, there is psychological justification in Laura's vicarious motherhood, even in its most physiological aspect. Patrick White writes: "Once she had felt the child kick inside her",¹ and, later, "Laura Trevelyan bit the inside of her cheek, as the child came away from her body",² so that the midwife exclaims: "Well, you are that drawn, dear, about the face, anyone would think it was you had just been delivered of the bonny thing".³ Her wish to give a shape and form to her mystical relationship to Voss is understandable and her consequent biological involvement is psychologically not implausible. The child is hers by sheer will and desire as much as it is later assumed to be hers by the sniggering innuendo of society. All this is perhaps unusual, but it is not miraculous. But where, toward the end of the book, Laura's communication with Voss becomes physically factual, it ceases to be rational and falls within the realm of telepathy and extra-sensory perception and thereby becomes intellectually suspect.

In the final scenes, Laura's mysterious illness is

¹ Voss, p.243

² ibid, p.246

³ p.246

made to run parallel to Voss's agony and death. She sits up and forward in her bed and is "struck in the face when the horse threw up his head".¹ In her pain, she cries:

You need not fear. I shall not fail you.
Even if there are times when you wish me
to, I shall not fail you.²

and her words are repeated in Voss's thoughts:

... So he rode on through hell, until he
felt her touch him.

"I shall not fail you," said Laura
Trevelyan. "Even if there are times when
you wish me to, I shall not fail you."³

The repetition of the actual words in this context is very different from the occurrence quoted earlier, where Voss and Laura are both described as living through "a period of great happiness". There, the repetition is clearly a device used by the author to establish a meaningful link between Laura and Voss and the words do not, as here, purport to be the transmittance of actual thought or speech.

In the end, Laura, without looking, claims that she has seen the Comet, which temporarily stays the natives in their sacrificial killing of Voss, and she predicts correctly:

¹ p.381

² p.381

³ p.387

"It is the Comet," said Laura, "It cannot save us. Except for a breathing space. That is the terrible part; nothing can be halted once it is started."¹

Voss, in his deathdream, sees that Laura's hair has been cut off, as indeed it has in the doctor's vain attempt to cure her of her sickness, and, at the moment of Voss's death, Laura cries: "It is over. It is over."² These and other instances of telepathy as the book moves toward its climax certainly allow for a dramatic realisation and resolution of the conflict but arouse misgivings in the reader. In this aspect, the novel would have been intellectually more satisfying if the treatment had remained less definitive and if Patrick White had continued to use oblique reference rather than bold assertions of actual communication.

Despite this criticism, Voss is a most remarkable achievement, both in the originality of its conception and in its execution. Concerned with the basic philosophy of man in conflict with himself, a conflict between pride and humility, evil and good, Patrick White has created in Voss a figure of such heroic proportions that he must rank amongst the great and outstanding characters in literature. The force of personality, the grandeur,

¹ p.399

² p.420

the idiosyncrasy of Voss make him unforgettable, whilst his arrogance, flamboyance, aggressiveness, even his maliciousness, leavened as these traits are with searing doubts and self-castigation, make him strangely likeable; he is never complacent. His aspirations, on the other hand, coupled with his very human limitations, allow him to represent universal man. His aspirations are, of course, magnified far beyond those of ordinary man, just as his spiritual crisis exceeds that which people normally experience or are capable of experiencing. But this does not affect the essential nature of the crisis; it merely reinforces the impact.

In Voss, Patrick White has followed the romantic tradition and has moved away from the ineffectual anti-hero of his earlier work and of much of this century's fiction. The immensity of the conflict he wished to portray could find expression only in a larger-than-life hero. In Happy Valley and The Living and the Dead, the heroes are ineffectual; they suffer, but their suffering is an undefined, amorphous, fin-de-siècle suffering. It has its roots in a despairing view of life and it leads them nowhere. At no time are they put to the test: they cannot falter and fail, because they have never aspired.

Their paralysing sense of ineptitude and failure is inherent in their inability to aspire and to raise themselves out of the morass of their depression. In The Tree of Man, the main characters are hemmed in by their inarticulateness. They cannot grapple with the basic problems of life because they are unable to formulate these problems, even to themselves.

The only character in the books preceding Voss who realises and attempts to meet the crisis of life is Theodora in The Aunt's Story, and it is she who bears closest resemblance to Voss. Not only is she physically like him, gaunt, ugly, a "stick", but she is like him also in her uncompromising search for the resolution of her spiritual conflict. To achieve this, she does not shrink from giving up, first, material security and comfort, then the warmth of love in human relationships and, finally, her link with the rational world. Like Voss, she goes on a journey; her fantastic experience of "Jardin Exotique" bears resemblance to Voss's hallucinatory experience of the desert; her purposeful destruction of her self is akin to his self-flagellation and deliberate courting of death.

There is, however, a divergence, or rather, a

progression in Patrick White's thought from Theodora's to Voss's final achievement: Theodora gains peace and a kind of understanding, but this is possible only in the void created by self-destruction, in nothingness. There is a certain vagueness in the resolution of her problem. Voss's movement toward salvation is more clearly defined: he aspires, suffers and fails and is brought thereby to a realisation of the limitations on man's power in the universe. Because he has aspired greatly, has failed abysmally and has learnt, finally, to accept his failure, he is accorded a greater claim to redemption than any of the characters in the preceding novels, who, from the beginning and without striving, expect and accept failure. In Voss, Patrick White endorses his belief in man's propensity to strive and in the positive quality of goodness contained in this very striving. Man's redeemability becomes an affirmation of faith.

This belief or affirmation is restated more simply and so emphatically as to leave no vestige of doubt, in Riders in the Chariot, where it again forms the major theme.

CHAPTER VI REVELATION AND REDEMPTION IN RIDERS
IN THE CHARIOT

There are few authors who become so obsessed with a theme that they feel compelled to state and restate it in successive works. In his novels, which are highly original and diverse in plot, setting and characterisation, Patrick White has shown an extraordinary preoccupation with the concept of suffering and redemption. The theme of man's redeemability through suffering lends a remarkable unity to his work and it is possible to trace its development from the Ghandian epigraph in the first novel, Happy Valley, to the climactic crucifixion of Himmelfarb in the last published novel, Riders in the Chariot. Basically, it remains unchanged, but the progression is in the form of a crescendo. In its final statement, the pitch is so high that one wonders how much further the author will be able to proceed. As suggested in chapter I, it will be interesting to see whether, in future novels, he will continue to sound the same theme or whether he will feel that he has, at last, exhausted its resonance.

In Voss, Patrick White has re-presented the central

concept of Goethe's Faust, which is that man's striving and his humble acceptance of human failure can ultimately lead him to salvation. In Riders in the Chariot, he has again stated this theme and has delineated it in clearer, almost stark outline. Where, in Voss, the Christian symbolism is blurred and the overall effect is that of a mystical, Blakean painting, open to a varied response and subjective interpretation, in Riders in the Chariot the symbolism is plain and unequivocal:

Himmelfarb is the Jewish Messiah and the Christian Christ. As Messiah he is expected by some, like Reha, his wife, and the crippled dyer from Holunderthal, and not acknowledged in time by one who should have expected him, the Jew Ha'im ben Ya'akov, or Harry Rosetree, who was chosen to be "amongst the first to receive our Saviour".¹ As Christ, Himmelfarb is recognised by Mrs Godbold and Alf Dubbo and is, literally, crucified; the crucifixion is re-enacted faithfully, even in its most physical aspects: the weight of the Jew's tortured body is shown to strain downward from the wrists, there is blood on his hands and brow, and the crowd reviles and defiles him. As Christ, he dies on Good Friday and is mourned by the two Marys (Mrs Godbold and Miss Hare). He is betrayed by Judas (Harry Rosetree), who afterwards hangs himself, and denied, by disassociation in inaction, by

1 Riders in the Chariot, p.498

his disciple Peter (Alf Dubbo), whilst "somewhere the clocks were chiming",¹ like the cock which crowed.

In presenting the Himmelfarb story in a framework of self-evident and unmistakable symbolism, one senses in the author a certain impatience with oblique statement and a fear of having his purpose misunderstood. However, by using this framework, he arouses an expectation which he does not fulfil. Himmelfarb, the Messiah-Christ, does not, in the end, emerge as the Saviour, either of the Jewish people or of mankind. Apart from his effect on the other three illuminati, particularly Alf Dubbo, whose inhibited creativity is released by the climactic experience of the crucifixion, and some vague reference to a miracle at Sarsaparilla at a society luncheon,² Himmelfarb saves, ultimately, only himself. Patrick White even underlines the inefficacy of Himmelfarb as Saviour when he concludes the episode of the crucifixion with the words: "Very quietly Himmelfarb left the factory in which it had not been accorded to him to expiate the sins of the world".³

There is thus a disturbing contradiction between Himmelfarb's actual achievement and the symbolic connotation. If this contradiction is intentional and

¹ ibid, p.461

² pp 542-3

³ p.469

the author has wished to convey primarily the futility and the inconsequence of the death of Christ, he has obscured his purpose by the tenor of hopefulness expressed in the last chapters of the book and by the alleged illumination attained by Mrs Godbold, her daughters, and by Alf Dubbo and Miss Hare. If, on the other hand, the story is, as the symbolism would lead one to expect, a re-enactment of the Christ-story in modern terms, the lack of correspondence in depth and significance is perplexing. If, again, the author wanted merely to portray the trials and suffering of individual man in his search for personal truth, awareness and understanding, the symbolism seems pretentious. The symbolic reference tends, therefore, to confuse rather than to enlighten us in our interpretation of the book. In its defence, however, it must be conceded that, because of the symbolic framework with its climax of the crucifixion, the story is highly dramatic and the forcefulness of its impact as a work of art exonerates to a large extent its intellectual uncertainty. If critical analysis raises certain doubts, the emotive power of the novel, which is immense, provides the compensation.

Whatever Patrick White's intention in the Christ-Messiah symbolism, the Himmelfarb story forms a

continuum to the Theodora-Voss motif. Like Theodora's movement toward insanity and Voss's journey to the ritual beheading, Himmelfarb's progress to the cross is one of pain and suffering, leading ultimately to humility and personal redemption. Again like Voss, Himmelfarb will not, at first, accept his destiny, which is that he is one of the elect, a "zaddik", the "lamed-waf" of Jewish legend, chosen to bear the burden of his people. It is interesting in this connection to relate the Himmelfarb story to Le Dernier des Justes by André Schwarz-Bart,¹ first published in 1959 and first published in English in 1961, the year of the publication of Riders in the Chariot. In its interweaving of messianic faith with the life of Ernie Levy, a lamed-waf, whose trials end finally during the Nazi regime in Germany in a concentration camp, where he is granted revelatory redemption, as well as in its imaginative, visionary power, its poetry and irony, Le Dernier des Justes has much in common with Riders in the Chariot. Unlike André Schwarz-Bart, Patrick White is not Jewish, or, at least, assumed not to be, but shows an unusual interest in Jews, who appear in several of his novels. In The Living and the Dead, Elyot is repelled by the

¹ André Schwarz-Bart, Le Dernier des Justes (The Last of the Just), trans. S. Becker, London, 1961

antisemitism of Hildegard Fiesel and her unfounded antagonism to her harmless, foolish but kindly Jewish employer. Elyot is later physically attracted by the Jewess Muriel Raphael. The boy Mo, who works with Joe Barnett in the carpenter's shop, is a Jew. The book begins and ends with a reference to a Jewish couple's farewell on a railway station. In The Aunt's Story, the Bloch sisters in "Jardin Exotique" are the subjects of Patrick White's more gentle irony. His irony in the treatment of the Rosetrees in Riders in the Chariot is less gentle, although he shows some compassion for the confusion of Harry Rosetree. His most brilliant achievement in Riders in the Chariot, and perhaps in all his work, is the creation of character and atmosphere in the narrative of the early life of the Jew Himmelfarb, his parents, relations, friends and acquaintances and their setting in Germany in the years preceding and during the Nazi holocaust. The fascination which Jews have for Patrick White is in further evidence in his latest, yet unpublished novel, The Solid Mandala, of which an extract appeared recently in Meanjin,¹ and wherein the Jews Feinstein appear to play a prominent role. The imaginative insight shown by him in his

¹ "A Social Occasion", Meanjin Quarterly, vol. xxiv, no.1, 1965, pp 18-24

portrayal of Jews is quite exceptional in a non-Jewish writer.

Patrick White's interest in Jews is undoubtedly based on his general interest in the "outsider", the rootless alien. As defined by Colin Wilson,¹ the outsider is the man who, by virtue of his difference in his conception of the world and his inability to accept its values, stands alone and is regarded as an outcast by society. In the Jew, as in the Aborigine, Patrick White has a natural-made outcast. In Riders in the Chariot, Mrs Godbold is an outcast because of her lowly profession and because she lives in a shed; Miss Hare is one because she is mad; Himmelfarb and Dubbo, however, are born outcasts: they are despised and reviled by society irrespective of their social, economic or intellectual achievement. As Jew and Aborigine, their suffering is preordained; their alienation from society forms the basis to the suffering which, in terms of Patrick White's philosophy, can lead to salvation.

The interweaving of the lives of the four main characters in Riders in the Chariot, who, despite their differences, are all outsiders, and the effect each has on the other in their progress toward the climax of the

¹ Colin Wilson, The Outsider, loc. cit.

crucifixion, are treated with extraordinary skill. At various points in the story the four characters meet. Recognising each other as outsiders, they seek and find the understanding and support which only they, in their own way, can give to and receive from one another. They explore each other's mystery and each of them, secretive as they have become in their role as outsiders, reveals something of himself to each of the others and, in so doing, is revealed to himself. Patrick White shows supreme mastery in this book in the technique of flash-back, incorporating the past circumstances in the lives of his protagonists into the narrative of the present and projecting from past and present into the future, building all the time toward a climax of great dramatic power.

Of the four, Himmelfarb, because of his superior intellect and training, is most able to formulate his role and to observe the unfolding of his destiny with a certain detachment, although he does not immediately accept the part he is to play. As already mentioned, he is like Voss in that he shrinks from his destiny. Voss, arrogant, supremely confident of his power over himself and other men, determined to pit his strength and

endurance against insuperable odds, is brought only near the end to an acceptance of the fact that he is not God, but man. Himmelfarb has the same problem, only in reverse, and is, at first, a most unwilling and reluctant Messiah. A less forceful, more dryly academic person than Voss, he does not try to evade his fate, as Voss does in the beginning, by shouting defiance, taunting and bragging, but does so by hiding under the gentle fustiness of scholarship in a provincial university town, by submerging himself in the undemanding comforts provided by his wife and home and by dabbling, tentatively, in the mysteries of Kabbalistic and Hasidic writings.

The two men, Voss and Himmelfarb, have much in common. It is perhaps not coincidental that both are German; whereas Himmelfarb is primarily a Jew, his background is German and he, like Voss, has grown up in the Gothic gloom of German culture, the romanticism of its literature and the endemic pessimism of its philosophy. Both come to Australia, a young and unsophisticated country, where they are inevitably strangers, although their very oddity would make them spiritual strangers in any land. Both are physically ungainly, ugly even. Like Theodora Goodman and Miss Hare, the mad and ugly spinsters, they are "sticks".

They both have a keen intelligence and a somewhat sardonic outlook, which Himmelfarb attempts to control and which Voss loses in his final humbling and in his acceptance of powers greater than he. Both are driven to the destruction of their physical selves for the sake of spiritual redemption and are encouraged in this by the two women, Laura and Reha. The comparable function of the two women as representative of a duality in Voss's and Himmelfarb's natures was discussed in the chapter on Voss.

Himmelfarb is brought to an acceptance of his destiny by the cataclysmic events of Jewish persecution in Nazi Germany. Living through this nightmare period, which is the more agonising for his sense of personal failure in having fled to such comforts as his acquaintances, the Stauffers, were able to offer at the moment of his wife's greatest need of him, he returns to the consoling faith of his forefathers. Furthermore, he accepts the messianic mission for which he now believes himself to be ordained, although he is still afraid of its implications. He says to Miss Hare:

I still reject what I do not always have the strength to suffer. When all of them had put their trust in me. It was I, you know, on whom they were depending to redeem their sins.¹

¹ Riders in the Chariot, p.172

Much earlier in his life his wife, Reha, had hinted that he was elect:

But we - some of us - although we have not spoken
- know that you will bring us honour.¹

Here the reference is not to academic or social success but to the mystic role she would have had him play. What Reha tried to express obliquely is later put bluntly by her brother, Ari, in Palestine, who says to Himmelfarb:

You, I seem to remember, Reha had decided,
were to play the part of a Messiah.²

The crippled dyer also pursued Himmelfarb in his early life with prophecies that he would justify their expectations and even the Nazi guard in the concentration camp vaguely sensed Himmelfarb's special role when he selected him to remain outside the gas chamber.

Describing the arrival in Sydney, Patrick White writes:

The party of immigrant Jews looked anxiously for those who must be waiting to receive them. Only the rather peculiar, not exactly difficult, but different passenger, Mr Himmelfarb, in his dark sweaty, unsuitable clothes, stood, and continued standing, apart. He had, in fact, already been received. As the heat smote the tarmac, there appeared to rise up before him a very definite pillar of fire.³

With an apocalyptic vision of a "pillar of fire", the Jew

¹ ibid, p.140

² p.214

³ p.216

Mordecai Himmelfarb feels himself dedicated. He has been "received", not, like the other Jews on board ship, by relatives and friends, but in an ecstatic feeling of oneness with God, in "unio mystica". He accepts without further doubt that he is elect and prepares himself for anticipated trials by cultivating humility. He begins to perform menial tasks and says, in explanation: "The intellect has failed us".¹ In messianic desire, he courts suffering and destruction. He rejects Miss Hare's offer to save him by hiding in her crumbling house Xanadu, as he rejects also Rosetree's plea that he go home before the latter's half-realised and dreaded premonitions come true. "When the time comes for my destruction, ... it will not be decided by men",² he says prophetically to Miss Hare and reassures the distracted Rosetree with the words: "You will not be blamed".³ He does not resist his tormentors when they crucify him and, with an expression of contentment, confounds and infuriates the mob by neither speaking nor protesting as he hangs nailed to the jacaranda tree cross. His is a wished-for calvary.

There is a certain pride in this wish and, although he acquires a modicum of humility by discarding worldly

¹ p.221

² p.342

³ p.455

ambition and pretension, he is like Voss and can achieve redemption only after his belief in his messianic role has been destroyed and he has been brought to a realisation and an acceptance of failure. This is indeed what happens. As he lies dying, he is joined in failure to the deluded and pathetic figure of his father: "Always separate during the illusory life of men, now they touched, it seemed, at the point of failure",¹ and to his wife, whose natural humility is a revelation to him:

It seemed to him as though the mystery of failure might be pierced only by those of extreme simplicity of soul, or else by one who was about to doff the outgrown garment of the body. He was weak enough, certainly, by now, to make the attempt which demands the ultimate in strength.²

It is at this point that the symbolism becomes confusing and contradictory. Throughout his life and particularly in his death by crucifixion, Himmelfarb has represented the Messiah-Christ. In the end, like Voss, who finds salvation in the realisation that he is not God but man and that he has failed in his presumptuous aspirations, Himmelfarb attains peace, lucidity and understanding in an acknowledgment of failure. His realisation of failure is akin to the despairing cry

¹ p.479

² p.480

"Eli,^{Eli,} Lama Sabachthani?" of Christ on the cross. Yet, despite this realisation and his humble acceptance of failure, Himmelfarb continues to seek confirmation of himself as the Christ or Messiah-designate. In his death-dream he pursues a messianic vision, in which "the thousands waited for him along the banks of the interminable river".¹ At the same time, he "could not stop now for souls, whatever the will, whatever the love. His own soul was carrying him forward. The mountains of darkness must be crossed".² It is implied that Himmelfarb, the would-be Messiah, cannot save "the thousands", but only himself.

In this, as in Patrick White's total conception of Himmelfarb, there is an element of uncertainty of purpose and direction. In his early life, Himmelfarb is shown to have failed because he would not accept the role of Saviour; in the end, it seems he has failed because he has accepted the role. His redemption, however, lies in his realisation of failure; yet, at the same time, in his stream of thought, he continues to be the Messiah-Christ. One feels a certain reluctance in Patrick White to commit himself wholly to some of the concepts and beliefs inherent in his symbolism. His intentions seem

¹ p.491

² p.491

to waver and it is difficult to analyse or interpret the meaningfulness of Himmelfarb's death. By adhering closely to the Christian ethos in the crucifixion, Patrick White has imposed restrictions on the story which he then, partly, disregards. The reader has been seduced into expectations within an accepted context based on orthodox religion, but these expectations are diverted into another context, that of a philosophy of failure. There is no clear statement; the author's conceptions have become blurred and entangled in mystical uncertainty.

Whereas this reluctance to face the implications of the symbolic vehicle set in motion in Riders in the Chariot is a decided weakness, the psychological perception shown in the separate reactions to the crucifixion by the four illuminati, and others, is unexceptionable. The Jews, Himmelfarb and Rosetree, interpret it in messianic, the Christian Mrs Godbold and Dubbo in Christian terms, whilst the animal-like Miss Hare is released in a pantheistic revelation. To each it is the turning-point in his life.

As mentioned earlier, the one who is helped and affected most poignantly by Himmelfarb's calvary is Alf Dubbo who, throughout his life of utter misery and dejection, has searched for an understanding of the haunting

mystery of the white man's Christ. Caught between two worlds and belonging to neither, Dubbo, the Aborigine, is even lower on the rungs of social acceptance and esteem than Himmelfarb, the Jew. His life is shown as one wearying battle against the contempt of his fellow-men, the frustration of his burning desire for self-expression and the sickness of his body. Reared in the genteel atmosphere of a parsonage, he learns the outward trappings of social etiquette and Christian belief. Thrown as an adolescent boy on to the scrapheap of the white man's civilisation - literally, on to a rubbish dump - he progresses through syphilis and tuberculosis, past prostitutes and sexual perverts who cheat and defraud him, to the lowliest job in a low-class factory, where he is regarded by his fellow-workers as less than human. Yet, despite the vicissitudes which assail him, he retains in the recesses of his mind intimations of a glory yet to be beheld and realised. He retains also his integrity as an artist. He develops outer skins of immunity against the attacks and neglect of the world and retreats more and more into his secret self and his imagination, which he feeds on the mystical pronouncements of the Prophets. He is intoxicated by the words of Ezekiel and by his vision of a heavenly chariot, symbolising God and Christian love and understanding. But it is only in his

inarticulate if intense experience of the crucifixion that Dubbo is brought to a realisation of the significance, to him, of the Christ-story; it is only then that he learns to love his fellow-men, to accept suffering and to forgive. Liberated from his previously inhibiting doubts, resentment and lack of awareness, he can paint the agony of Christ on the cross. Finally, he can paint also his vision of the Chariot of Redemption with the Four Living Creatures of whom he, a figure "of bleeding twigs and spattered leaves",¹ is one. If he is not accepted by society at large, he has, at least, entered a smaller community of elect, the creatures of God, and is thus reinstated as a human being. As such, he can project himself into Christ's suffering and can participate in the Christian ethos, which illuminates his understanding of the meaningfulness of life. By painting the Himmelfarb-Christ "darker than convention would have approved",² Dubbo identifies himself with Christ and the crucifixion and achieves thereby a catharsis. In his newly acquired ability to realise his vision of the Chariot, he gives creative expression to his own redemption. He is fulfilled and his spiritual salvation far outweighs in significance his physical

¹ p.515

² p.511

death.

Despite shades of the romanticised and stereotypical attributes of the unrecognised and misunderstood artist, Dubbo's portrait is a very complete and fully rounded one. Not as impressive in conception as Himmelfarb, Dubbo nonetheless arouses our intense sympathy and interest. His story is less complex than Himmelfarb's and, in the attainment of revelatory redemption, less fraught with ambiguities. It is thus more successful in achieving its implied purpose.

The other two illuminati are, of course, Miss Hare and Mrs Godbold. Miss Hare is a unique figure, an astonishing creation even amongst the many strange, mad characters who roam through Patrick White's books. In introducing her first and in lavishing great care, as well as sympathy, on her background and the emergence of her personality, Patrick White has shown a special fondness for Miss Hare, "the fussy woman", who is so close to the animal and plant kingdom that she is often not quite human. In descriptions of her appearance, her skin is either "furry" or "scaly", like a rodent's or reptile's, and, like a small animal, she is constantly "tunnelling" her way through the undergrowth to Xanadu;

she is always "rootling" and "scuttling". Her face is "moist and crumbly" or "dry and stale"¹ like bread; her general appearance in her old wicker hat is that of a sunflower or of "just an old basket coming to pieces".² Together with the mad boy, Harry Robarts, in Voss, she shares a dog-image, and is frequently referred to as a dog. As a child, she disgusts her father by hollowing out a nest in the grass and saying: "Now I know what it feels like to be a dog".³ Later, as a young girl, her timid love for the English cousin, Eustace Cleugh, finds expression in terms of the love of a dog for its master and is accepted as such:

Then she touched the back of his hand, and he did not withdraw. Of course her skin told her immediately that she could have been a dog, but she was grateful to be accepted if only in that form. In fact, she would not have thought of expecting more, and mercifully it had never yet occurred to her to think of herself as a woman.⁴

In the development of her senses in a non-human way, it is "her skin" which conveys messages to her; here it confirms her conception of herself as a dog. Years later, referring to past events in the great house Xanadu, she again speaks of herself as of a dog: "For many years, when there were people here, I sat under the table amongst the legs and saw an awful lot happen".⁵

¹ p.11

² p.9

³ p.24

⁴ p.35

⁵ p.89

In relation to Himmelfarb, Miss Hare is "shaggy love itself",¹ comparable to the shaggy, dog-eyed love which Harry Roberts, and also Laura Trevelyan, have for Voss. Himmelfarb, however, is the only one who, in a fleeting moment, releases the woman in Miss Hare,² which Eustace Cleugh had failed to do. He is not repelled by her animal-like nature but accepts the animal manifestation of her being as an expression of her mystical striving. He relates her, by virtue of her name, to the hare, the sacrificial animal.³ Dubbo, too, sees her in animal form, but is able to integrate his conception of her in his revelatory experience. In the crucifixion scene, he paints her "curled, like a ring-tail possum",⁴ with hands "like the curled, hairy crooks of ferns",⁵ and, in the Chariot painting, presents her in a "fox-coloured coat" with a flattened "pig's snout".⁶

Her animal or plant nature is given increasing emphasis in the book. In an early conversation with Himmelfarb, Miss Hare speaks of herself as sinking into the earth when the time comes for her death, "and the grass will grow out of me".⁷ In the end, after Himmelfarb's death, it is implied that she ceases to

¹ p.474

² pp 340-1

³ p.104

⁴ pp 510-1

⁵ p.510

⁶ p.514

⁷ p.172

exist but is diffused and becomes one with nature and the elements. Thus she is described as emerging from Mrs Godbold's shed:

... In the friable white light, she too was crumbling, it seemed, shambling as always, but no longer held in check by the many purposes which direct animal, or human life. She might have reasoned that she had fulfilled her purpose, if she had not always mistrusted reason. Her instinct suggested, rather, that she was being dispersed, but that in so experiencing, she was entering the final ecstasy. Walking and walking through the unresistant thorns and twigs. Ploughing through the soft, opalescent remnants of night. Never actually arriving, but that was to be expected, since she had become all-pervasive: scent, sound, the steely dew, the blue glare of white lights off rocks. She was all but identified.

So Miss Hare ~~stumbled~~ through the night. If she did not choose the obvious direction, it was because direction had at last chosen her.¹

In this quite pantheistic representation, she is "dispersed" and has become "all-pervasive". She is absorbed into natural phenomena: she is "scent", "sound", "dew" and the "glare of ... lights"; she is "all but identified" and "direction had at last chosen her"; she is at one with nature, or God.

Miss Hare is never seen again at Sarsaparilla and only the Godbolds sense the continued presence of her spirit.² That she shared in the pain and sorrow of the

¹ p.493

² p.520

crucifixion, was a concession to her human intelligence; it is also an expression of the animistic concept of universal participation in the salvation of a soul. By suffering in sympathy, Miss Hare is finally released from her human bonds, her ugly human frame and precarious sanity, which have caused her to be rejected by society, and can undergo metamorphosis.

That Patrick White should have chosen this animal-woman as one of the illuminati is indicative of his strong predilection, mentioned already in the chapters on The Aunt's Story and The Tree of Man, for the "natural" as against the artificial and synthetic, the instinctive and intuitive as against the rational, the simple as against the sophisticated, the mad as against the conventionally sane. One of his themes in The Tree of Man expresses the destructiveness inherent in the pressures of urban living, where people become divorced from the peace, goodness and profundity which, some believe, can be found in nature and the "simple" life. There is a certain woolliness in thinking in the "back to nature" theory; furthermore, even if one regards it with sympathy, it is disturbing that it should be coupled with degeneracy as it is in the madness of Miss Hare. However appealing she may be in some of her actions and beliefs, she

remains a demented creature. Patrick White writes of her: "She was quite mad, quite contemptible, of course, by standards of human reason, but what have those proved to be?"¹ She forms an important link with Theodora Goodman in The Aunt's Story; both women are stanchions in the framework of Patrick White's philosophy which is one where truth is revelatory rather than rational and where madness comes closest to an understanding of the ultimate meaning of life. It is a redoubtable philosophy.

In her closeness to nature, Miss Hare stands in sharpest contrast to the "plastic" ladies, the "blue-haired grannies" of Rosetree's factory and the evil Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack. At one stage, Miss Hare cries: "Plastic is bad, bad!"² Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack are invariably associated with nylon, plastic, pink icing and other synthetic stuffs, as well as with deplorable taste in furniture and an absorbing interest in material things. Something has been said in earlier chapters about the quality of positive evil attributed by Patrick White to those who are obsessed with material possessions. The brittle heartlessness of the rich Furlows and Belpers in Happy Valley and the metallic barrenness of the acquisitive

¹ p.40

² p.90

Muriel Raphael in The Living and the Dead, develop into a more definitive quality of evil in the persons of Mrs Goodman and Una Russell in The Aunt's Story, where these ladies, with their heavily bejewelled hands, seem ever ready to twist the knife in those who are weaker than they and therefore vulnerable. Their lives are bound by material things and their pleasure and purpose are to wound. This predatory streak appears again in the character of Una Pringle in Voss and in several characters in the short stories. It culminates, however, in Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack in Riders in the Chariot. It is interesting to note, if not significant to this discussion, that all the most evil or potentially evil people in Patrick White's books are women.

Mrs Flack and Mrs Jolley are depicted as active forces of evil. The evil emanating from them is sensed by the animal-creature, Miss Hare, who says of Mrs Jolley:

"There is one of the evil ones!" Miss Hare decided to reveal just so much, and to point with a finger. "How evil, I am not yet sure. But she has entered into a conspiracy with another devil, and will bring suffering to many before it destroys them both." ¹

Apart from this prophetic pronouncement, Miss Hare frequently refers to the two women as "agents of evil" and "devils", and accuses them to their faces at the site

¹ p.174

of Himmelfarb's burning house: "'You,' she cried, 'are the devils!'"¹ Miss Hare is acutely conscious of evil as a force in the world, straining to destroy good. Patrick White writes of her:

... she tried to reconstruct in physical detail the expression of loving-kindness, to recall its even subtler abstract terms. That alone might save, if it were not obliterated first by conspiracy of evil minds.²

and she sees evil and good as two chains matched against each other in a trial of strength.³

That Miss Hare should have a conception of Mrs Flack and Mrs Jolley as representatives of evil is understandable in that they are the very antithesis to her and their values are diametrically opposed to hers. However, Patrick White is decisively on the side of Miss Hare and the two plastic women, particularly Mrs Flack, are presented objectively as diabolical. It is Mrs Flack who actively precipitates the death of Himmelfarb by inciting the stupid but brutal Blue to crucify the Jew.

As discussed already, Patrick White feels most strongly about the dehumanising effect of urban living, particularly in its suburban manifestation, with its frequent testimony of mass produced ugliness. It is evident from his writings that he deplores what he regards as the shallowness of mind and spirit, the

¹ p.476

² p.335

³ p.343

callousness and the inhumanity, disguised by saccharine sentiments and social niceties, of people confined within a restrictive suburban atmosphere. However, despite an acknowledgment of and perhaps sympathy with his attitude, one cannot help but feel that there is yet a wide chasm which separates the prototype of the conformist, small-minded, unimaginative suburban housewife from the vindictive Mrs Flack in her premeditative and murderous intent. Mrs Flack's telephone conversation with Blue in which she inspires him to crucify Himmelfarb¹ and her subsequent comment on the deliberate burning of his house² reach beyond the capacity of the normal woman, who may be acquiescent but would rarely perpetrate murder or arson, particularly if there is no personal motive. The evil of Mrs Flack assumes therefore a strangely unreal quality; as it does not arise from her relationship with Himmelfarb, it is a weakness in plot; as its psychological justification, based on her own youthful transgressions, is tenuous, it is undoubtedly a weakness in characterisation; the militancy of her antisemitism seems out of place and out of proportion in her vacuous suburban setting.

These weaknesses are offset by the dramatic force Mrs Flack lends to the action of the story and the

¹ p.446

² p.471

dramatic effect achieved in a stark and uncompromising representation of the conflict between good and evil. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Patrick White has moved in Riders in the Chariot from an obliquely symbolic treatment of his theme of redemption to a starker, black and white delineation. The symbolic structure, in its dual framework of messianic belief and Christianity, has become unequivocal; similarly, the conflict between the forces of good and evil is now clearly defined. Whereas in Voss, the conflict between God and the Devil takes place within Voss and is given symbolic treatment only in so far as the various members of the expedition represent opposing facets of his being, in Riders in the Chariot, the conflict is externalised. The book assumes, therefore, some of the characteristics of a miracle or morality play or a folk-tale. Mrs Flack is the stepmother-cum-witch of a story by the brothers Grimm, Mrs Godbold the fairy-godmother. The folk-tale or miracle-morality play quality of Riders in the Chariot is reflected even in the choice of names. The obviousness of the names Godbold and Himmelfarb has been derided by several critics, but it forms a direct link with the self-evident names of the allegorical figures who appear in Everyman or the even earlier German Advent play, Ludus de Antichristo. In these and other plays of the middle

ages, characters bearing the name of their virtue or vice externalise a conflict of passions and ideas. In his desire to achieve a dramatically effective representation of the conflict with which he is concerned, Patrick White has adopted this simplified device of didactic allegory. He has made it palatable to the modern reader by probing into and revealing the complexities and subtleties of the motives, actions and inter-relationships of his characters, who remain, nonetheless, bound by the inherent goodness or evil of their natures.

The division of Patrick White's characters into two classes, the good and the bad, has been analysed most clearly by James McAuley in a review of Riders in the Chariot in Quadrant.¹ He emphasises there that the division appears quite arbitrary and concludes his criticism of this aspect in the work of Patrick White by writing:

Between the divisions of mankind there seems to be no prospect of any crossing of the lines. All are what they are, and act from their natures. There is no doctrine of redemption advanced or implied.²

In an allocation of preconceived and permanently fixed roles, the good are saved and the bad remain bad and perpetuate their evil. In this respect, there is indeed

¹ James McAuley, "Patrick White: Riders in the Chariot", Quadrant, vol. vi, no.2, 1962, pp 79-81

² ibid, p.81

no doctrine of redemption. A different aspect of the redemptive theme is, however, expressed within the characterisation of the good. Although they are the elect and are, in varying degrees, conscious of this, redemption does not come easily to them. It requires a strength of character and a dedication to goodness of ° which not all are capable. Norbert Hare has a vision of the Chariot but is not redeemed. Harry Rosetree has been chosen to receive the Messiah but fails in courage and integrity. The redemption accorded to the four illuminati is, despite the fact that they are good by nature, a triumph over selfhood and a personal achievement. Within the limits of their natural goodness, they are given considerable scope.

The wide gamut of emotion, desire, compulsion, thought and reflection expressed by the protagonists in Riders in the Chariot and the originality of their conception compensate for the limits on character realisation and development imposed by the arbitrary division into the good and the bad. So skilfully has Patrick White wrought an acceptance of his archetypes of good and evil that Mrs Godbold, who does not quite fit the mould, strikes a discordant note.

J.F. Burrows has criticised the change in Patrick

White's attitude to Mrs Godbold which he says moves from irony in the narrative preceding the brothel episode to canonisation in the subsequent parts of the book.¹

However, there is not so much a change in the author's attitude to Mrs Godbold as a basic contradiction in the conception and execution of her character. The desire to imbue a person like Mrs Godbold (a natural successor to Julia Fallon, Mr. Lusty, Rose Portion and, particularly, Stan Parker) with an inherent goodness, simplicity and humility, founded, so it seems, in her lowly social status, is rendered ineffective by Patrick White's own scepticism. His idealised image of goodness cannot withstand the sharpness of his observation.

The comparison drawn by Burrows between Mrs Godbold and Miss Docker of "A Cheery Soul" is most apt.² In both portrayals, the insensitivity of their overwhelming desire to "mother" and to dispense unsolicited loving-kindness is treated with controlled but unmistakable irony. The irony in Riders in the Chariot is not, however, confined to the pre-brothel episodes, as claimed by Burrows, but continues throughout the book without marked change. As a young girl, Ruth Joyner fails to show understanding or true compassion for her father, her

¹ J.F. Burrows, "Archetypes and Stereotypes: Riders in the Chariot", Southerly, no.1, 1965, pp 64-7

² ibid, p.65

stepmother or her employer, the unstable and desperately lonely Mrs Chalmers-Robinson, yet she is said to be "good". Her gross insensitivity and inability to project herself into the needs of others is shown most clearly in the uncomprehending compulsion she exerts over Tom Godbold during their courtship. In a scene where she has resisted Tom's physical advances unless he promises first to marry her, she says:

"But what is it Tom? It is not as if I did not love you."

By now, he realised, he was really very tired. He lay heavy on her. He rested his head against her neck. He was too exhausted, it seemed, for further bitterness.

It was¹ only then that she allowed him to make love, ...

Having worn down his assertiveness and whittled away his defences, she can ask innocently: "But what is it, Tom?" and rest on her virtue, blissfully unaware of her incipient destructiveness, her assault on Tom's personality and the undermining of his will. This scene is echoed toward the end of the book where the mature Mrs Godbold informs Rosetree with cheerful cruelty that Himmelfarb has been buried "like any Christian".² Then, having offered him bread and jam, she asks: "You have not taken offence? ... At what I did? To bury the gentleman on Christian ground?"³ Again it is a seemingly innocent

¹ Riders in the Chariot, p.294

² p.500

³ p.502

question and she remains totally unaware that she is talking to the mere husk of a man and that, whilst expressing pious thoughts, she has delivered the last blow to his shattered personality.

The final irony is found, surely, at the close of the book when Mrs Godbold, the sole survivor of the four illuminati, visits the site of Xanadu, which has been converted into a settlement of fibro homes, where:

The rotary clothes-lines had risen, together with the Iceland poppies, and after them the glads. The privies were never so private that it was not possible to listen to the drone of someone else's blowflies. The wafer-walls of the new homes would rub together at night, and sleepers might have been encouraged to enter into one another's dreams, if these had not been similar. Sometimes the rats of anxiety could be heard gnawing already at bakelite, or plastic, or recalcitrant maidenhead. So that, in the circumstances, it was not unusual for people to run outside and jump into their cars. ... They would drive and look for something to look at. Until motion became an expression of truth, ... So the owners of the homes drove. They drove around.¹

In Patrick White's terms of reference, this soul-destroying plastic nightmare has ousted whatever vision of truth was possible before only the desolate, empty people were compelled by the desolation and emptiness of their lives to seek truth by driving around and around in cars. Ironically, the indomitable Mrs Godbold condones

¹ p.546

and accepts the sterility of this new, synthetic world.

In an attempt to establish continuity, similar to that expressed in the concluding pages of The Tree of Man, Mrs Godbold sees herself perpetuated in her daughters, the six arrows she has shot into the void, "at the face of darkness",¹ and which, in turn, will breed other arrows. Yet the daughters, despite a vague memory of the momentous night of the crucifixion, have become submerged in the fibro settlement; their children, despite young Bob Tanner's cry to his grandmother: "Come on in! There's cornflour cakes!"² implying a vestigial return to those things which are intended to convey simplicity and goodness, are a part of the blank-eyed plastic world to which the world of vision and truth has succumbed.

Patrick White is obviously undecided in his attitude toward Mrs Godbold. The irony runs like a thread not only through the early chapters but through the whole book. At the same time, Patrick White endorses Mrs Godbold as a saint. She is not only the rock on which the others lean, so that Miss Hare says of her: "I might have known. Mrs Godbold would never

¹ p.549

² p.547

allow anything to happen. I mean, anything that might be averted";¹ she also dispenses the milk of loving-kindness: when Dubbo paints her "the breasts of the immemorial woman were running with a milk that had never, in fact, dried";² in addition, it is perceived by some "that she also wore the crown".³

In the wavering conception of Mrs Godbold, as elsewhere in Patrick White's writing, there emerges a suggestion of a frustrated idealism; he seems to be searching for a religious truth and struggling to maintain a concept of goodness, which his natural scepticism and supremely ironic, if not sardonic, view of the world will not permit him to accept. His repeated failure to synchronise the two conflicting aims in his writing is most conspicuous in his idealised portrayals of the good, simple people, notably Stan Parker and Ruth Godbold, who, having been imbued with a goodness which is unsubstantiated and consequently quite unreal, are least convincing in their role as saints. It is not enough that they are invariably associated with the "simple" things, with farm products like milk and cheese, with trees and shrubs and water and animals. The fact that they occupy lowly positions, mostly as servants, are

¹ p.478

² p.509

³ p.551

uneducated and often inarticulate, is also not sufficient justification for their goodness. Mrs Godbold, who amongst the "simple" and "good", is accorded the highest place in saintliness, is the least convincing, least consistent, least satisfying of all his characters.

The failure in the realisation of both the person and the role of Mrs Godbold is a disturbing element within the closed circle of the four main characters in the book. The other three do not suffer from the same ambiguity or uncertainty in attitude and treatment by the author. Himmelfarb, Miss Hare and Alf Dubbo are each presented with exceptional insight. Their characters emerge idiosyncratic but coherent. They are perceived with sympathy but without adulation.

The search for truth and understanding by the four illuminati has been externalised by Patrick White in the concept of the Chariot. They are joined in their separate visions in that each recognises the other as a visionary or fellow charioteer; at the same time, their visions remain different and essentially private. Again, it is noteworthy that Mrs Godbold's claim to a vision of the Chariot is most tenuous and, but for her inclusion in the Chariot by the others, particularly by Dubbo, it is doubtful whether she can be regarded as a charioteer

at all. Thus it is really with the exclusion of Mrs Godbold, whose redemption in revelation is implied but given little substance, that the illuminati find in the Chariot the external symbol of their search for truth and salvation, their apotheosis.

The weakness in the conception of Mrs Godbold is a fundamental weakness in the book. In Riders in the Chariot, Patrick White has tried to make meaningful in bold, allegorical form, a highly abstruse concept, bordering on mysticism; the four illuminati seem to represent the "quaternity" of God of Jung's philosophy, a concept related to the concentric four-pointed mandala of Eastern mystic thought. By reducing one member of the quaternity, Mrs Godbold, to the level of the two devils, Mrs Flack and Mrs Jolley, Patrick White has impaired the efficacy of his symbolism.

In the tradition of the morality play, it is implied in the book that goodness prevails. After much suffering and pain, in some cases leading even to physical death, the good achieve salvation, whereas evil, although not destroyed, is at least turned against itself. Thus Mrs Flack and Mrs Jolley are condemned to live in a continuing hell, where they are shackled to each other

in the awful knowledge of each other's shameful secret. The book's last account of these two ladies, after the bastardy of Blue has been revealed to Mrs Jolley and Mrs Jolley's daughter's cruel rejection and veiled accusations to Mrs Flack, is quite diabolical:

Night thoughts were cruellest, and often the two women, in their long, soft, trailing gowns, would bump against each other in the passages, or fingers encounter fingers, and they would lead each other gently back to the origins of darkness. They were desperately necessary to each other in threading the labyrinth. Without proper ¹ guidance, a soul in hell might lose itself.

The description of the two women guiding each other in an ebb and flow movement through dark and labyrinthine passages creates the impression of a veritable hell on earth. But the hell which has been created and perpetuated by Mrs Flack and Mrs Jolley, the plastic ladies, is accepted as a kind of paradise by the indestructible Mrs Godbold.

Because of his indeterminate attitude toward Mrs Godbold and because of the contradictory elements which appear in the symbolic framework associated with Himmelfarb's role, Patrick White has failed in this book to present his central philosophic idea with conviction and consistency. In this respect, Voss is the more

¹ p.535

successful work. Undoubtedly, there is, in Riders in the Chariot, a clear reiteration of the theme that man is redeemable and that, in a world which places value mainly on material possessions, on social status, on uninspired rationality, the man of integrity, sensitivity and vision is forced to seek within himself the truth and understanding which alone can make life bearable. This truth he finds in mystic revelation after he has suffered, denied his selfhood, accepted failure and thereby learnt humility. But, whereas, in this book, Patrick White has attempted to state his belief clearly and unequivocally, he has failed in a consistent exposition of this belief. To some extent, he himself remains uncommitted and therefore leaves the reader in confusion as to the direction and meaningfulness of the ideas he proposes.

Riders in the Chariot is memorable for its creative and artistic originality, the magnitude of its design, the masterly control of language and technique and the imaginative perception of character and situation, but not for the rationale of the philosophy it propounds. It is, however, a work of exceptional psychological insight and of tremendous emotional and dramatic force.

CHAPTER VII CONCLUSION

Certainly the state of simplicity and humility is the only desirable one for artist or for man. While to reach it may be impossible, to attempt to do so is imperative.¹

This statement by Patrick White throws significant light on his philosophy of life and on his artistic aims.

Throughout his work, he proposes the thesis that simplicity and humility are essential if man is to reach an understanding of himself and his place in the universe; without such understanding, life becomes meaningless.

Patrick White's approach to humility has been twofold. On the one hand, he has presented the naturally simple people: they are uneducated, unassuming, inarticulate; in their untainted simplicity, they live in Blakean innocence; they accept unquestioningly the hardships of life and, in their humility and goodness, achieve perfect understanding and peace. They exemplify the Christian ideal:

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs
is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit
the earth.

¹ "The Prodigal Son", Australian Letters, vol.1, no.3, 1958, p.39

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.¹

Patrick White is perhaps least successful in his portrayal of these good, humble people. He has created them in idealised form without investigating the nature of their goodness or of the understanding granted to them. The uncorroborated perfection in goodness and humility of Stan Parker, Will Lusty, Harry Roberts, Rose Portion and the others tends to stultify rather than inspire. In the most extreme case, in the sanctification of Mrs Godbold, Patrick White himself has baulked; unwittingly she emerges as insensitive and acquiescent in destructiveness.

The author's other approach to humility is more complex and artistically and intellectually more acceptable: it is the striving for humility by people who are by nature anything but humble and the understanding accorded to them, however fleeting and fragmentary this may be. These people are the main protagonists. They are intelligent, sensitive, proud, and their uncompromising integrity drives them to seek understanding and fulfilment in self-realisation and in the humble acceptance of failure. Inevitably they suffer and suffering is the underlying theme in all the novels of Patrick White.

¹ St. Matthew, Chap.5, verses 3, 5 and 8.

The main protagonists are the "outsiders" of existentialist philosophy and much of twentieth century fiction; they are lonely and unable to communicate; they are haunted by a sense of unreality and are conscious of a terrible emptiness in their lives; above all, they realise that they are failures, not only in the eyes of the world but also according to their own standards and in their deepest aspirations. Their greatest suffering lies in the acceptance of their failure and it is thereby that they learn humility and find redemption. This is the basic pattern followed in each of the books: the loneliness, frustration and inarticulateness of Oliver Halliday, Elyot Standish, the Parkers; the sense of living in a void and the consequent loss of contact with reality experienced by Catherine Standish and Amy Parker; the realisation of failure - in stoic acceptance by the characters in Happy Valley and The Living and the Dead and in humility by Theodora, Voss and Himmelfarb; these are the motifs to the theme of suffering and redemption.

Part of the theme of suffering is the theme of self-destruction. In Happy Valley and The Living and the Dead, the characters seem to be under a compulsion to destroy themselves: they are without volition. In the later novels, the self-destruction becomes deliberate

and purposeful. Theodora's almost methodical annihilation of her self to the point of disintegration of personality and madness, Voss's pitting himself against odds he knows to be insuperable, Himmelfarb's self-sought calvary, belong to the same pattern. It is expository of a quasi-religious belief that salvation is accorded only when the self has been destroyed.

In addition to the preoccupation with the denial of selfhood and with suffering, there is a mystic element in Patrick White's writing. Something has been said of his pantheism, of the animism which appears in his books and of the symbolic treatment of character and situation, as well as of his treatment of a conflict between good and evil. There is also the revelatory aspect. Patrick White's protagonists are visionaries: Theodora is granted spiritual enlightenment in an imaginary confrontation with Holstius, her alter-ego; Stan Parker sees God in a gob of spittle; Voss's journey into the desert, his union with Laura and their joint illumination are hallucinatory; the Chariot is an ecstatic vision leading to apotheosis.

Suffering, an acceptance of failure, humility, the abnegation of the self: these form the path to redemption. Illumination follows revelation. The

redemptive and revelatory concepts in the writing of Patrick White are essentially religious. From the nihilism of the existentialists, the pessimism and despair in evidence in his first two books, Patrick White has progressed to an avowal of positive faith. The satire, which forms an integral part of his work, is directed to denigrate certain elements in society and to set the stage for the supremacy of good. His books are a statement of belief that good can and does prevail.

The fact that this statement is not always confirmed from within the novels has been responsible, no doubt, for his wrestling again and again with the problem in an attempt to resolve what is basically a conflict between faith and intellect. Whether he can succeed is doubtful, but, for the reader, immaterial. The passionate conviction and integrity with which he presents his beliefs, the breadth of his vision, the originality of conception and the psychological insight shown by him make his work a most rewarding and exciting study. In thinking of comparable literary experiences, the names of writers like Zola, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, Pasternak, spring to mind. In the observation of the foibles and weaknesses of man and in criticism of society, the pungency of his satire is reminiscent of Swift or, in

a more modern setting, of Angus Wilson, although the latter lacks the essential seriousness of Swift or White and his books have not the intensity of vision or magnitude of design. Patrick White's use of language, often criticised for a twisted ugliness, is consciously matched to his themes and to his twisted, ugly people and their tortured lives. By oblique reference and subtle imagery he is capable of a most remarkable compression of meaning in his writing and he achieves, at times, a rare quality of poetry. Above all, in his concern with the fundamental and universal problems of life, the questions of good and evil, of self-realisation and fulfilment, and in his imaginative treatment of these problems, he ranks undoubtedly amongst the foremost novelists, not only in Australia but in our time.

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