

**Between Athens, Jerusalem, and Stonehenge:
The Christian Imagination
in the Novels of Patrick White**

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I

In 1985 I wrote to Patrick White, on hearing he was ill, and offered him the pastoral care of the parish where I worshiped. After all, the Anglican Church remains, in spite of his celebrated lapse, White's Church through an indelible baptism and through an adult confirmation which he sought of his own free will. White's reply was very gracious:

Thank you for offering to bring us Communion to the house. If I refuse the offer it is because I cannot see myself as a true Christian. My faith is put together out of bits and pieces. *I am a believer*, but not the kind most "Christians" would accept. (Letter)

White may well be right in observing what most "Christians" would accept, for he knew a lot about the Church and for a long time tried to practice his faith within it. Still, the reply suggests that he regarded himself as a kind of Christian, and whatever he professed White did take to wearing a holding cross during the later years of his life.

For Anglo-Catholics this wooden and abstract cross is meant to take the place of a rosary. It should be held in the hand while one prays, as an aid to grounding or focusing prayer. White's cross was made by the Anglican sisters of the Community of St. Clare in Stroud, New South Wales, and he wore it conspicuously as later photographs reveal. Whether he prayed with it we do not know. But we do know that White admitted to believing in both God and prayer, for he has said that "I think there is a Divine Power, a Creator, who has an influence on human beings if they are willing to open up to him. Yes, I pray" (Brennan 19).

Beyond these observations we can say little about White's faith, or his relationship with Christianity, except to suggest that the way in which he moved in and out of the Anglican Church is no different from the vacillating and uncomfortable relationship many Anglicans experience with religion throughout their lives. Indeed, it has become somewhat predictable for the religious critic to tell us about White's experience of falling into the mud at Dogwoods and realizing there is a God (FG 144). At the same time it has become predictable for the secular or anti-Christian critic to tell us about White's experience of his local parish in Castle Hill and his ultimate lapse over a jar of jelly beans (FG 145). Yet these glib observations conceal a great deal and tell us little about the complexities of faith. So perhaps the truth of White's relationship with his Church lies somewhere in between falling in the mud and fleeing from the jelly beans; more importantly, perhaps his struggle with faith rings true to many who continue to wrestle with contemporary Christianity from within the Church.

One critic has gone so far as to claim, with great authority, that the Church failed White when he was struggling with his own inner experience of "archetypal reality," supposedly because the Church has no knowledge of the unconscious. We are told, "The Church does not believe in the many 'persons' of the psyche, and in its patriarchal monotheistic stand simply represses the many faces—especially feminine archetypal faces—which assert themselves in the unconscious" (Tacey 219). Critics such as this have given us glib glosses which do little service to the complexities of White's literary vision. Sometimes they have done so without considering all of the available sources, or by giving undue attention to their own "enlightened" belief in psychological "truth" and their obvious hostility to both Judaism and Christianity as revealed religions.

Surely it is a testament to the power of White's literary vision that it has been appropriated to validate a wide range of secular and religious obsessions that, on appearance, are contradictory. This is particularly a problem with Jungian critics of his work (Marr 452), one of whom has combined an archetypal analysis of selected texts with the suggestion that revealed religion is a manifestation of psychological immaturity and a barrier to psychological integration. White did not agree with this thesis, and he may have been pleased to know that there are a great many Christians—lay and ordained, male and female—who are also Jungian therapists.

In a recent broadcast on Australian radio White's biographer, David Marr, made some authoritative pronouncements about the author's spirituality, without an apparent awareness of the nuances of Anglicanism or indeed of religion in general. So we were told that

White was not a Christian but that until his death he was passionately concerned for the welfare of the Anglican Church. Evidently he always identified himself as tarred with the brush of the "low church," and this apparently prevented him from becoming Orthodox, adding fuel to his lifelong and tribal antipathy toward Roman Catholicism. However, we were also told a few minutes later that White had always maintained a devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, up to the point of acknowledging her intercessory power, and evidently he observed the Orthodox Calendar in his home until his death. Of course, these are things not normally associated with Evangelical piety, or the spiritual practices of a lapsed Christian, particularly a lapsed "low churchman" who understood himself to be tarred with its negative brush. Anyone listening to this interview with a knowledge of philosophy, theology, comparative religion, or Church history could be forgiven for thinking that White's biographer is out of his depth when confronting the question of White's spirituality or its historical and theological context. And a reading of the celebrated biography, a tome which neatly avoids whole aspects of the author's life (or a serious critical consideration of his work), has only confirmed this view in the minds of several readers and critics.

Still, the apparent contradictions within White's spirituality are not without some explanation which might set the biographical record a bit straighter than it is. We should realize that the Church from which White ultimately lapsed is the Anglican Church within the diocese of Sydney. According to popular legend and reductionist stereotype, it is a diocese that emphasizes an Evangelical and patriarchal theology. To this extent it does represent that "low church" of which White and his biographer both speak. However, such a legend does not take into account that the diocese began with a Tractarian vision and that some of its oldest parishes have always been Anglo-Catholic. Furthermore, from the autobiography (which is in several respects more illuminating than the biography) we hear that White's earliest and normative memories of Christianity are not of the "low church" but of the parish of St. James King Street and its influential rector of the day, Dr. Micklem.

St. James King Street is not an Evangelical parish, and for generations it has taught a Catholic and incarnational faith which upholds the archetypal feminine within the Christian imagination. Perhaps we should remember as well Jung's own acknowledgment of the importance of that same incarnational imagination, when he lauded the Vatican for elevating Mary's role in salvation history through the doctrines of the Assumption and the Immaculate Conception. We need to consider this if our reading of White's life and work is to reflect more of the truth than popular prejudices and stereotypes will allow, prejudices about Christianity in general and stereotypes about the diocese

of Sydney in particular.

It is this kind of background, hitherto hidden from the critical and biographical records, which can help us understand the paradoxes of White's spiritual position and the wider tradition from which it comes. It might also help us put a human face on that patriarchal Church which was prepared, in the person of Dr. Micklem, to descend with the young Patrick into the dark cave where the child kept his hidden secrets. It was a cave that some would see as a symbol of the unconscious realm, because of its imagery and because it comes to us from the autobiography through one of White's memories and reflections:

I decided to take Dr. Micklem to the cave I had never shown anybody, and where I kept a cardboard box full of secrets. . . . I led the way up the rickety ladder, the doctor wobbled perilously behind me. When I produced the cardboard box and shared my secrets he was graver than ever. He treated me, not as a child, but a conspirator. (FG 72)

This hardly sounds like the representative of a Church which "cannot deal with an immediate experience of the numinous" or which denies the many "persons" of the psyche.

In that cave the young Patrick fell in love with Dr. Micklem, but his childlike infatuation soon dissolved, and he left the cave feeling "hot, and finally disenchanted" (FG 72). He would continue this cycle of attraction and repulsion with Anglican Christianity for many decades before finally making a retreat "into his private faith" (FG 145), thereafter describing himself as a "lapsed Anglican egotist agnostic pantheist occultist existentialist would-be though failed Christian Australian" (FG 102). What emerges is a picture of complex wrestling with the Church which defies simplistic and reductionist explanation. For it is arguable that White was dominated as much by his own "flaws" as by the "flaws" of Christianity, and we should look to his fiction for an explanation of his lapse rather than project too much upon the notional inadequacies of what is, after all, an institution that is as human as it is divine.

II

White referred to himself as a writer in a secular world who has "lifted bits and pieces from various religions in trying to come to a better understanding." He said that his writing was an attempt to use religious themes and symbols in order to "lead people in the same direction in a different way." Of his own faith he said:

I myself am a blundering human being with a belief in God who made us and we got out of hand, a kind of Frankenstein monster. Everyone

can make mistakes, including God. I believe God does intervene. (Brennan 19)

This passage suggests that we cannot wish his symbolics away with a wand or confine them to our own critical obsessions or, even worse, propose that they poured forth from his unconscious against his will or design, from somewhere beyond the power of his comprehension.

Religious themes and symbols, embedded within the fiction in their cunning disguises, are consistent and methodical in a philosophical and theological way which suggests that fiction *can* be theology in the same way that some philosophy can be described as theology. In acknowledging this I believe that White's fiction is at the center of a great deal of contemporary philosophy and theology and literature. This recognition places White in a definite tradition of discourse which can be described as postmetaphysical, a tradition which "is not essentially different from that of the first generation of Hegel's disciples" (Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* 29).

It is demonstrable that within this tradition of discourse White produced a body of literature which reflects the kind of theology which has responded to Nietzschean concerns and influences. But here we need to be careful, for when Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed the "death of God" he was not necessarily making an atheistic pronouncement. Rather, he was advancing the question of God's nature and God's relationship with creation a few necessary steps forward, beyond the formalism of the Classical and the Romantic imagination. He explored what he saw was the "vacuum left in the modern world due to the decline of religious ideals" (Schroeder 207), and he described what he understood as the two great transitions in Western civilization: the transition from primitive religion to the universal religions, and the transition from the Protestant to the secular world. In approaching White's fiction as a distinctive theology with a consistently postmetaphysical world view, we see that it develops and critiques Nietzsche's "death of God" theology.

The God that White believed in, the God who creates but who can also make mistakes, is not an image of the metaphysical God of the gaps, or the Newtonian paradigm, or the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, or the Enlightenment deists. His God is not a picture of rational intelligence, a celestial clockmaker watching from a distance, as an unmoved mover or an unchanged changer who is transcendent but not immanent. Neither is this the God of the Classical imagination and its Orphic myths of time, passage, exiled soul, and eternal return.

This is not a God who can be adequately imagined by a metaphysical culture which has for centuries sought to reconcile an imaginary separation between signifier and signified, a culture which searches for

a "transcendental signified" independent of language, which would satisfy that "concept of totality which dominates Western philosophy" (Derrida 5). For White questioned any transcendental or spiritual signification which excluded the immanent material world, and his suspicion of all forms of duality is summed up in the two epigraphs he gave to *The Solid Mandala*: "There is another world, but it is in this one"; and "It is not outside, it is inside: wholly within."

In Christianity this takes the form of White's sustained critique of "Classical" Christianity, those forms of Christianity which have adopted an Orphic, Platonic (and unscriptural) dualism that stresses the ideal over the real, the spiritual over the material, the transcendent over the immanent. One example of such Classical *gnosis* which White repeatedly identified and criticized was the Christian Science tenet that "mind is the only reality" while "matter is an illusion" (Cross 276). Flirting with "the Science" becomes, throughout his novels, a way for a specific kind of socialite character to continue denying the dilemmas of her consciousness as it confronts the real world which she wants to ignore. The "Science" becomes another illusionary refuge, another solipsistic horizon, for one of the tenets of Christian Science that White would have disagreed with is its gnostic insistence upon the separation of matter and spirit.

As such Christian Science becomes part of the illusion of a Classical ideology which must be part of any critique of the metaphysical world view. So White observed in his last work: "Some may Christian Science their disgust if they see death as a handout, then if the act is delayed, remember the gouging they have suffered in the past" (*TUP* 11). Flirtation with Christian Science will never save White's socialites from the real material world, or from the problem of themselves. Thus they are consigned by White to the purgatory they share with other like-minded people.

It is in this kind of theological discourse that we can best locate White's excremental vision, for the products of his literary flatulences, viscosities, and voidings are all part of an interrogation of the nature of creation and its relationship with the Creator. Some of White's visionaries have a more authentic holistic vision; they can imagine reality from a different ideological perspective, a panentheistic perspective, which imagines a unity of matter and spirit. Such a vision is reflected in Theodora Goodman's ability to accept the grub in the rose: "She could not condemn her pale and touching grub. She could not subtract it from the sum total of the garden" (*AS* 22). So also some other characters have an excremental vision which is a normative part of their sustaining world view, such as Stan Parker's now celebrated vision of God in a gob of spittle, Arthur Brown's rejection of the chaotic

"diarrhoea" of Barranugli (*SM* 52) in favor of "cow-pats, neatly, freshly dropped" in sarsaparilla (*SM* 227), and Hurtle Duffield's vision, while sitting in a pepper tree, of "the morning stretched out blue as turquoise smelling of chaff and fowl shit" (*V* 52). These are a few examples which reflect the excremental vision of a world view which sees poetry and wonder and God in the viscosities and excrements of the real material world.

Classical Christianity, with its Apollonian vision, has not encouraged such a panentheistic imagination. Indeed, puritan distaste has actively discouraged it. But the excremental vision has always been a Dionysian subtext within the symbolic order of the Western eye, and contemporary scholarship is unearthing its presence in the Christian mystical tradition. So White's excremental images can be seen to share much with those of Mother Julian in her prayer of thanksgiving for the anus as part of humanity's *imago dei*:

A man walks upright, and the food in his body is shut in as if in a well-made purse. When the time of his necessity comes, the purse is opened and then shut again, in most seemly fashion. And it is God who does this, as it is shown when he says that he comes down to us in our humblest needs. For he does not despise what he has made, nor does he disdain to serve us in the simplest natural functions of our body, for love of the soul which he created in his likeness. For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the trunk, so are we, soul and body, clad and enclosed in the goodness of God. (qtd. Llewelyn 45)

These are visions which all acknowledge both matter and spirit as part of an integrated picture of Creator and created, and they help us to locate White's excremental vision in its proper theological context.

White had a sense of the puritan strain which he saw as "one of the great flaws in the Australian character" (Brennan 75), a flaw which is the source of much that has become distorted by the Western eye. This puritan character reflects that Western eye which has made the transition, according to Nietzsche, from primitive to universal and from Protestant to secular. According to postmetaphysical logic, such a character has bred a culture whose radical sense of distaste for the excremental vision gives it a sense of exile, disunity, and fragmentation.

III

Although White often protested against the label of intellectual and claimed to be an instinctive and untheoretical writer, the whole body of his works suggest otherwise, as each novel forcefully points to many

theoretical systems. As one scholar has noted,

White is not only very intellectual, he is shrewdly so, and his works reveal a familiarity with an extraordinary range of philosophic, mystic, literary and theological systems, schools and traditions. To be faithful to all that is alluded to in his writings and suggested either directly or obliquely in the various metaphysical or other propositions put forward is no less than to journey through the whole morass of [W]estern man's cultural history. (Singh 120)

White has alluded to this himself through the autobiographical character of Alex Gray:

I was sitting writing in what I am vain enough to call my study, though I have studied practically nothing beyond my own intuition—oh, and by fits and starts, the Bible, the Talmud, the Jewish mystics, the Bhagavad Gita, various Zen masters, and dear old Father Jung who, I am told, I misinterpret. (MMO 54)

Such speculations from the scholar and (perhaps tongue-in-cheek) allusions from the author suggest that, if we really want to understand the imaginative universes of discourse within White's novels, we need to explore those diverse imaginative systems of philosophy and theology which move within them.

In approaching these universes of discourse, we should note from the authorized biography that White wrote with modern enthusiasms and also that as a young writer he was profoundly affected by Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. This left him, throughout his long life, with a fundamental belief that Western civilization was dying, that "all we value—society, relationships, even fortunes—is sliding into decay." His sense of why this was occurring had to do with the modern idea that Western civilization failed to live in the present, being dominated by an ideological imagination which was locked in a solipsistic vision of a past which was "the refuge of so many Australians then and now" (Marr 151). Those who adopt such modern enthusiasms stress the negative effect that the Enlightenment has had upon the Western eye, and here White is united with the moderns and postmoderns who all share, as Jürgen Habermas tells us, the belief that "the opacity of the iron cage of reason" is really a "glittering brightness of a completely transparent crystal palace." In this postmetaphysical schema reason is a glassy facade which must be shattered (*Philosophical Discourse* 56).

Those who write and think (perhaps even pray) within this postmetaphysical tradition tend to focus upon a critique of Western metaphysical culture and its ideology. It is a critique which can be understood as a modern and postmodern reaction to the nineteenth-

century tension between the Classical and the Romantic imagination. Like that of several other twentieth-century writers who can be described as working within a similar tradition, White's critique of the Western eye reflects similar and ongoing movements within literature, philosophy, and theology. I believe that such a critique is at the heart of all his novels from *Happy Valley* (1939) to *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986). Flowing from this critique are speculations about being, knowing, and language—speculations which reflect the three dominating themes which thread their way through the fabric of White's fiction, themes which the author himself has alerted us to: "the core of reality, the structure of reality, as opposed to the merely superficial" (Brennan 21); "the deep end of the unconscious" (FG 104); and "the relationship between the blundering human being and God" (Brennan 19).

These themes all relate to White's aesthetic sense of life and imagination, and to his awareness that throughout the history of Western civilization, the evolution of its language, and the varieties of its religious experience there have been many different cosmologies manufactured by the human imagination. Thus his concern with life and imagination falls within a particular literary, philosophical, and theological tradition which understands that the history of consciousness is bound up with myth and metaphor, and that both of these elements compete and coexist within an analogical imagination. As J. Soskice reminds us, in this largely imaginative universe "the intellectual world we inhabit is, to a great extent, of our own construction and . . . our medium of that construction is language" (75).

So it is possible to see the speculations of language-as-horizon at the heart of the author's narrative concerns, and once we acknowledge this we can see what White consistently attacks in all his fiction: that Classical metaphysics which has, according to postmetaphysical logic, distorted the Western eye with false conceptual language and exclusive philosophical categories. His study of Jewish and Christian mysticism gave him a sense of how the Classical and essentially linguistic presumptions of the so-called Enlightenment had undermined the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western imagination.

In constructing his critique of the Western eye, White gave each of his characters one of four imaginative (and essentially religious) horizons. Each horizon has its own distinctive myths, all of which still compete and coexist (and intersect and overlap) in the Western imagination. I would suggest that these are the same matrices of myths explored by Paul Ricoeur in *The Symbolism of Evil*, and perhaps these are the same myths that Jacques Derrida refers to when suggesting that the metaphors of our language are actually encoded with *mythologies blanches*: the myths which underpin Primitive religion, Classical reli-

gion, Judaism, and that heterogeneous amalgam of all these, Christianity.

White gave one of these distinctive imaginative horizons to each character, sometimes explicitly so, at other times by way of allusion or background, and it is the involutions and interactions of these horizons which form the essentially postmetaphysical discourse within each narrative.¹ Like others who write in a similar literary tradition, White was concerned with the imaginative boundaries that these horizons represent. He once said, "Characters interest me more than situations. I don't think any of my books have what you call plots" (Brennan 21), and this should be taken to mean that his central literary focus was the imaginative horizon of each character rather than the background against which the events of their lives unfold. Thus it can be argued that the universes of discourse within each novel contain some (and often all) of the mythical systems of the Primitive, the Classical, the Jewish, and the Christian imagination as the author interrogated the outer horizon of each system in his postmetaphysical way.

In the following passage from *The Solid Mandala* we can see a characteristic example of how the author worked with this quaternity of mythical horizons, and we can speculate as to how they might connect with his postmetaphysical discourse:

Once Arthur dreamed the dream in which a tree was growing out of his thighs. It was the face of Dulcie Feinstein lost among the leaves of the higher branches. But Mrs. Poulter came and sat on the ground beside him, and he put out his hand to touch what he thought would be her smooth skin, and encountered rough, almost prickly bark. He would have liked to wake Waldo to tell him. In the morning of course he could barely remember. (260)

In this passage we can see the scaffolding of White's discourse, and I believe that the questions which it begs are crucial to any comprehensive understanding of his writing.

Why is it *the* dream rather than *a* dream? Who is part of the dream, and who is excluded? Why is the Jewish character lost in the higher branches of the tree? Why is the Christian character on the ground and within reach of the Primitive (Dionysian) character? Why did the Primitive character think his encounter with Christianity would be smooth when in fact it was "rough, almost prickly bark" at the base of the tree? Why does the Primitive character dream the dream, and why does the tree grow from his loins like an erect phallus? Why are the Primitive, Jewish, and Christian characters all part of the dream, while the Classical (Apollonian) character is excluded from the dream, even though he is the twin brother of the Primitive character who dreams the dream?

These questions come to us from the heart of White's literary purpose where he addresses the question of language-as-horizon by interrogating the myths and metaphors of the Western eye.

IV

In approaching this kind of literary, philosophical, and theological interrogation, consider how these *mythologies blanches* of the Western eye are arranged around the tree in Arthur's dream; and consider why the Christian Mrs. Poulter is sitting on the ground beside the tree, what her mythology might represent, and what this tells us about the author's hierarchy of mythical truths.

We should acknowledge that Christianity forms an integral part of the structural schema of much of White's *oeuvre*. However, while some have suggested that White mounts an attack upon Christianity in particular, this is demonstrably not true; in fact, such a proposition obscures the real focus of his literary exploration. I would argue that his major critique is not focused upon Christianity but upon what Ricoeur has identified as the symbolic horizons of all those *mythologies blanches* which are thought to compete and coexist within the Western imagination. The Christian revelation of God in Christ was born into a preexisting mythical matrix that was essentially Primitive, Semitic, and Hellenic, and it is within this matrix of mythical hermeneutics that White focuses his postmetaphysical interrogation. As Ricoeur reminds us, Christianity has a heterogeneous imagination with no specific mythical nucleus of beginning and end, or of sin and salvation, unique to itself.

In placing Christianity in and around these *mythologies blanches*, we should note the advice of Harold Bloom: "Western conceptualization is Greek, and yet Western religion, however conceptualized, is not" (146). Thus there is a tension, and arguably more of a tension in Christianity than other Western religions, between the Church's intellectual self-understanding, and its lived experience of being. It has become fashionable to speak of this tension as one between Athens and Jerusalem, but White rightly includes Stonehenge in this formulary, and this wider vision is the focus of his postmetaphysical discourse.

So the complex ambiguities and contradictions in the Western Christian consciousness find themselves confronted with a mythical imagination that is essentially a mingling of the Primitive, the Semitic, and the Hellenic. Ricoeur suggests that as a religion Christianity's self-understanding, and especially its language of incarnation, has its closest affinity with the Semitic matrix, especially the Adamic myth. For "the bond that unites the Adamic myth to the 'Christological' nucleus of the faith is a bond of suitability; the symbolic description of man, in

the doctrine of sin, suits the announcement of salvation, in the doctrine of justification and regeneration" (307). However, the human imagination is not a static thing, and Ricoeur points out that different myths struggle with each other given their dynamic character.

Thus the essentially humanistic quality of the Adamic myth must coexist with the essentially mechanistic quality of the Hellenic myth of the Exiled Soul and with the radically open, chaotic, and inchoate quality of the Primitive theogonic myths of Creation and Chaos. As a religion Christianity may well be essentially Hebraic, yet the imagination of its adherents may not be so uniform. Indeed, the average Christian may well be imaginatively closer to the Greek horizon or even to the Pagan horizon, as is true of Gertrude Docker in *A Cheery Soul*, a character whose Christian veneer masks a chaotic, irrational, and destructive temperament.

As such the Christian revelation has been presented and represented in many different imaginative forms, from the supposedly "embodied" Semitic character of Scripture to the supposedly "disembodied" Hellenic character of philosophy and theology to the inchoate character of the Primitive imagination. There is a strong sense of this in White's characterizations, as each "Christian" character displays an imaginative understanding of reality which, in various permutations, is gleaned from the mythical nuclei of other horizons. It is within these ambiguities and contradictions of the Christian imagination that White depicts his holiest saints and his most deluded sinners, as his Christian characters cover the whole spectrum from great faith to great evil.

Why is it important, therefore, to distinguish the Christian horizon within a larger mythical schema in which Ricoeur tells us there are no specifically Christian myths, at least in the sense that philosophers of language use that term? Why not divide these characters among the other three mythical categories of Primitive, Hellenic, and Semitic, where they arguably might all neatly fit? Or why not place them all into Apollonian or Dionysian categories and compare them that way?

The answer lies in White's hermeneutic of suspicion which tries to identify as many false horizons of language as it can. He had a strong sense of the complexities within the Christian horizon and of the special situation of Christianity within the Western eye. These were, after all, the contradictions and ambiguities which were part of his personal experience, as a baptised and confirmed Christian who wanted to believe in the Church, who struggled with its faith and practice, and who did lapse but finally took to wearing a holding cross at the end of his life.

V

Much of White's fiction contains characters who are given a Christ-

ian horizon. If they do not have an explicitly Christian horizon, they are often placed among Christian symbols or against Christian backgrounds which make that horizon part of their individual story. Sometimes this can be quite a subtle process. For example, in *Happy Valley* there would appear to be no Christian character who is central to the action of the novel. Yet each character does have a different and distinctive myth which affects his or her understanding of self and world, and the character's ultimate survival within the novel depends upon an imaginative horizon, its underlying myth, and the personal morality which issues from it.

In *Happy Valley* the narrative fulfills itself according to the logic of each character's myth. The Hallidays leave town; Vic Moriarty is murdered by her husband; her lover, Clem Hagan, is blackmailed into what promises to be a hellish marriage to the strong-willed Sidney Furlow; Alys Browne is abandoned by her lover, Oliver Halliday, to lead a lonely, isolated, and poor life. Yet through all this turmoil Amy Quong survives, living in "a kind of mystical attachment to her things" in her room—her picture of the Virgin Mary, her crucifix, and her incense. Sundays do not find her attending church but rather lying on her bed, burning incense and being enveloped in "a strange, beautiful atmosphere that she could not explain, only that it was bound up with the Virgin Mary and her things." Succumbing to this atmosphere, the "threads of Amy Quong's passion became tangled in a complex knot that she did not know how to untie. She did not want to, only to close her eyes" (33). We cannot propose that Amy is a practicing Christian, but we can say that she has been associated with a Christian horizon in an allusive and highly general way and that this has something to do with the logic of her underlying myth. Amy is one of the few characters in the novel who are not damned, and perhaps her salvation lies in her surrender and abandonment, in her not wanting to know how to untie the "complex knot" of her passions.

In *The Tree of Man* (1955) Stan Parker's salvation also lies in surrender and abandonment. His life is a journey, a pilgrimage from his prelapsarian innocence through those experiences of life which will confront his innocence and ultimately contribute to his own distinctive panentheistic vision of God in a gob of spittle. Throughout his long life, from his apparently invincible youth to his awareness of his frailty and vulnerability, Stan always felt uncomfortable with the language of philosophy or theology. So at his daughter's baptism, in a church which "had the smell of a closed wooden box, and of birds' droppings" (124), Stan loses the inchoate sense of possession and ownership which he felt outside. He "felt the strain" and inwardly "edged a little farther away from the christening group," mentally and emo-

tionally absent from the baptism where the "flow of words, the flesh of relationships, were becoming secondary to a light of knowledge. He held up his face to receive he did not know what gift" (125). Here we see Stan with an inchoate, primitive, and perhaps "natural" horizon.

Soon afterwards the invincible Stan begins to be subjected to the exigencies of life in which the once willful young man "no longer believed anything can be effected by human intervention" (210). Through the Great War his acquaintance with destruction, death, and mutilated bodies, as well as a wartime sexual liaison, left him with an "increased longing of a God that reached down, supposedly, and lifted up." But "he could not pray now. His stock of prayers, even his chunks of improvisation, no longer fitted circumstance" (199). Stock prayers, perhaps associated with the "closed wooden box" of the church at home, no longer suit Stan, if indeed they ever did suit him. He feels more comfortable now in a bombed-out church, reminiscent of the (perhaps existential) church described in the Dostoevsky epigraph to *The Solid Mandala*: "It was an old and rather poor church, many of the icons were without settings, but such churches are best for praying in."

Because he cannot replace the unconvincing myths and metaphors of the Church with any other, the older Stan continues to go to church and sing "in praise of that God which obviously did exist. Stan Parker had been told for so long that he believed, of course he did believe" (295). This is part of his evolving response to a continued search, a frustrating and inchoate search: "I have never known what to do," he said wincing. "I am to blame. I try to find answers, but I have not succeeded yet. I do not understand myself or other people. That is all" (311). It is a search which will lead him to the city where, on a drinking binge, he experiences a "dark night of the soul" and

spat at the absent God then, mumbling till it ran down his chin. He spat and farted, because he was full to bursting; he pissed in the street until he was empty. The paper sky was tearing, he saw. He was tearing the last sacredness, before he fell down amongst some empty crates, mercifully reduced to his body for a time. (324)

For so long Stan had been uncomfortable with the language of Christian theology, because it never expressed his real faith or his experience of God in creation. Now drunk and in the city, in an altered state and far from his own paradisaical garden, Stan feels this as a real absence and spits it out: "Stan Parker, who was more or less resigned to that state of godlessness he had chosen when he vomited God out of his system and choked off any regurgitative craving for forgiveness, did experience a freedom. He looked at the time" (346). Having spat out the God of metaphysical philosophy and theology, Stan believes he has achieved a

kind of freedom which some equate with godlessness. But it proves to be a false freedom which cannot deliver him from a "regurgitative craving for forgiveness" or from a preoccupation with time and the frailty of the human condition.

From this point Stan can be seen to withdraw. He loses his strength and becomes ill, the will which once drove him now spent. Upon his recovery he decides to return to the sacramental life of the Church, but on attending a service of Holy Communion he no longer feels able to pray. He did not try, "as he knew the hopelessness of it. So he stood, or knelt, a prisoner in his own ribs" (413). But his silence is a prayer which asks the simple question, "Why have I come here . . . Lord?" (415), and as he receives the cup of salvation "the old man extended his lips tentatively to drink, advancing his chin, down which the vomit had run, it was still there, and bile mingling in his mouth with hot wine. He swallowed it, though. Then he hoped for God." In the absence of any epiphanic experience of salvation there is still a sense of peace which "he accepted . . . with humility and gratitude" (416). Thus his failure to experience an imminent and apocalyptic salvation is replaced by a more immanent sense of wholeness. It is a peace based upon his equanimity, his acceptance of the truth that the immanent God is present among the vomit and bile of his human self and that the sacrament, as a sign of God's salvific presence, can happily coexist with a man who can vomit out the God of myth and metaphor.

This equanimity sustains him when a young Pentecostalist approaches the aged Stan and offers him a false salvation. Stan answers him, "I'm not sure whether I am intended to be saved" (475), and because he has long since rejected any linguistic salvation, he spits out his panentheistic vision of God and makes his celebrated assertion that God is a gob of spittle (476). Now he is completely free, having accepted God in what he once spat out as a rejection of God. This is certainly not a rejection of the Judeo-Christian God, as many critics have suggested. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that the relationship between matter and spirit, or between God and creation, cannot be adequately expressed through the language of metaphysical speculation.

VI

I would like now to demonstrate that some of the novels of White's middle period—*Riders in the Chariot* (1961), *The Solid Mandala* (1966), and *The Eye of the Storm* (1973)—are quite dense in their metahistorical design, in their postmetaphysical discourse, and in the way they represent the *mythologies blanches* and the varieties of Western religious

experience.

The structure of *Riders in the Chariot* posits different mythologies *blanches* of the Western imagination against each other, and in a chronological and metahistorical way. Each of the four protagonists is given a distinctive horizon against which the reader is encouraged to understand her or him, beginning with the Primitive Mary Hare and followed by the Jewish Mordecai Himmelfarb and then by the Christian Ruth Godbold. Alf Dubbo is the fourth protagonist to be integrated into the novel's densely chronological canvas, for his horizon is a heterogeneous amalgam of the Primitive and Christian imagination. In such a metahistorical chronology the Christian imagination comes after the Primitive and the Jewish imagination. Thus Ruth Godbold's horizon is woven into the narrative after the author establishes the horizons of Mary Hare and Mordecai Himmelfarb with their relative affinities.

Ruth Godbold is associated with Protestant Christianity ("Her folk were chapel" [234]) and with the distinctive language of Pauline eschatology and soteriology. This is evident in the lyrics of those hymns she sang at home, which became the way she "preferred to treat of death, and judgement, and the future life" (229). She suffers physically, more so than any other Whitean protagonist, and this projects her into the contradictory mystery of Christian eschatology and soteriology, with its tension between the now and the not yet, the realized and the unrealized, and its consequent dilemmas of freedom and necessity. Her life is a movement of an abused wife and mother, from the floor where she has been thrown, to a chair where she "dared to sit a moment, though only close to the edge," then onto her feet again. It is a movement which projects, or throws, her into the future by faith alone.

Ruth's time in the service of Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson "remained within her memory as the most significant phase of her independent life," for her mistress was "the flimsiest of women." Ruth "had never met anyone quite so dazzling, or so fragmentary" (241) before, and she saw in her mistress someone who "would never emerge from her own distraction" (245) to live out the kind of existential faith which authentic loving requires. Ruth's vocation to serve is confronted by the strength of her mistress's distracted character as a selfish socialite who disguises her distraction in the pursuit of Christian Science, as she desperately "read and studied, to transform 'hard, unloving thoughts,' and become a 'new creature'" (260).

Ruth lives out her faith and vocation, and she does experience a sense of wholeness which her mistress never achieves. This gives her the grace to move forward in a cycle of birth and rebirth, physically and spiritually. So at the end of the novel Mrs. Godbold "continued along a road which progress had left rather neglected" (488). As one of the

four riders of the chariot, she accepts the hermeneutic axiom that "everybody saw things different" (489); thus, she accepts the difference of Mary Hare, Mordecai Himmelfarb, and Alf Dubbo without compromising the uniqueness of her own experience of salvation within the Christian journey and quest. Ultimately "she was content to leave then, since all converged finally upon the Risen Christ, and her own eyes had confirmed that the wounds were healed" (491).

Conversely, Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson remains locked within her solipsistic horizon, a horizon which drives an imaginative wedge between matter and spirit, between mind and body, through her struggle with Christian Science and its failure to bring her a personal transformation that will not damage the ideology of her aesthetic. So she remains forever locked within herself, her idealistic search for wisdom and *gnosis* and enlightenment having failed. Once she imagined herself as the domestic goddess of wisdom, as "a Minerva in a beige cloche" (244) who is forever consigned to "the depths of the obscure purgatory" (486) in which she must always sit. In this purgatory Mrs. Chalmers-Robinson remains desperate for another glimpse of her former servant, in the hope that she might obtain some of that esoteric knowledge she still presumes Ruth must have, a *gnosis* she still believes to be a substitute for incarnational faith.

The design of *The Solid Mandala* opens and closes with the character of Mrs. Poulter, so in a sense the novel's vision begins and ends with hers as the imaginative and real history of her suburban universe unfolds, largely through flashback, between her bus trip to Barranugli, her confrontation with the human Christ in the deranged Arthur, and her "re-entering her actual sphere of life" (315) at the novel's conclusion. She is an important and central character, kindly portrayed, and along with Dulcie Feinstein is a linchpin in the tropological design of the novel. For Dulcie and Mrs. Poulter are the distinctive representatives of their horizons: they are part of Arthur's dream; they both receive his mandalas; and, perhaps most importantly, they are each part of that world of "blood myth" which the idealistic and Apollonian George and Waldo Brown so desperately want to deny and ignore.

In chronological and metahistorical terms, Mrs. Poulter arrived in Sarsaparilla around the time of the Feinsteins' departure. This follows the same chronology in *Riders in the Chariot*, where the Christian myth is integrated into the novel's canvas after the Jewish myth has been established. Mrs. Poulter has the same kind of simple faith as Ruth Godbold, but *The Solid Mandala* uses none of the heavily Pauline language, laden as it is with distinctive theological imagery, which is used to describe Ruth in *Riders in the Chariot*.

Mrs. Poulter's character is arguably closer to the lived experience of

most "ordinary" Christians, whose common sense and intuition take them beyond the false horizons of philosophical and theological language. She is sensual and sexual and material in an innocent, perhaps prelapsarian and prelinguistic, sense; her creed is more scriptural than theological in its focus on accepting all dimensions of human love, from *agape* to *eros*. Of her erotic love for her husband she says: "What of it, if you loved a person? That was what the Bible told you. It was only with the ministers that sin came in, but they didn't always understand" (297). Her faith focuses upon the humanity of Jesus, and this in itself has a panentheistic sense that is at odds with the Classical, Platonic, and Deist sensibility which imagines a transcendent and ideal realm separated from the real material world:

At least she had her faith, which Bill didn't altogether approve of, but it was what she was brought up to, if she didn't always understand, but hoped to in time, not through the ministers, she would never have dared ask, but somehow. She had her Lord Jesus. Who was a man. By that she meant nothing blasphemous. Human-kind. (298)

Yet in her earlier life she had very little understanding of what a fully human God means.

Mrs. Poulter will finally reconcile this dilemma by accepting the full (and perhaps Hebraic) meaning of the Incarnation in the person of the primitive Arthur, thus signalling the shattering of her aesthetic image of the crucified Christ now falling in "a thwack of canvas, a cloud of dust" (303). So the Incarnation becomes a living reality in the deranged Arthur, now given to her as a man-child, "as token of everlasting life" (312). She tells Sergeant Foyle that Arthur would be her saint "if we could still believe in saints," but because "nowadays we've only men to believe in. I believe in this man" (314). In embracing this revelation, she is not rejecting any scriptural revelation. Rather, she is making it real, fulfilling the logic of what she always professed to believe, and has now finally experienced: Jesus the human being revealed in and through Arthur.

Of course, there are those who would argue against this view, especially those who are committed to an interpretation of the novel as the author's literary *Götterdämmerung*. But such a countervailing outlook ignores the full implication of Arthur's dream of the tree growing from his loins, the Jewish and Christian characters arranged around it, and the different degrees of affinity which they all share. In considering the theological implications, we should notice that at the end of the novel, when Arthur feels he cannot scale the medieval fortress of Dulcie's home in exclusive Centennial Park, he goes "to Mrs. Poulter, naturally. Whose need was as great as his. Who had sat with him on the grass,

under the great orange disc of the sun, and burned with him in a fit of understanding or charity" (309).

Christianity is equally woven into the fabric of *The Eye of the Storm*. Here there are four "acolytes" who care for Elizabeth Hunter, and each is subtly associated with a different horizon which remains embedded within the Western eye: Lotte Lippmann with a Jewish horizon, Flora Manhood with a Primitive horizon, Jessie Badgery with a Protestant horizon, and Mary de Santis with a Catholic and Orthodox horizon. The action of the novel takes place within a decaying mansion, a metaphor for a dying Western Classical and Romantic vision, and while Elizabeth Hunter is at the heart of this dying vision—herself dying—the different horizons of the acolytes compete and coexist in subtle ways.

The three "sisters" combine with the housekeeper to represent the varieties of Western religious experience in an ostensibly secular setting. If one considers the Hunter mansion as a mixed Classical and Romantic metaphor which represents a decaying Western culture, and further if one considers the Hunter family as the primary symbol and symptom of that decay, then the different dynamics of how the acolytes relate (or fail to relate) with the family and with each other is of great importance to our understanding of the design and structure of the novel. Like the riders in the chariot, like those who are given mandalas, the acolytes are an integral part of that postmetaphysical discourse which associates the decline of Western civilization with the predominance of reason and enlightenment, the abandonment of any sense of wonder or the numinous, and the subjection of the I-Thou to the I-It.

One of the acolytes is Sister Jessie Badgery. Associated with the day shift, enlightenment, and consciousness, Jessie Badgery is very much influenced by her Protestant background. Elizabeth Hunter likes Jessie Badgery least of her nurses, and Sister Badgery does represent the dominant horizon of "dun coloured journalistic realism" which is the object of White's satire—hence her hair is a "neutral or sludge colour" (293). Because her world view is so bland as to admit of no contrasts of passion, there is no dark or deep aspect to her character. Just as she is a creature of the day shift, so her even temper, her reasonable world view, and her puritanical fear of mystery and the irrational separate her from the other acolytes. Flora Manhood, Lotte Lippmann, and Mary de Santis all participate in the "blood-myth" of the Primitive, Jewish, and Catholic/Orthodox Christian experience in a way that the reformed and enlightened Badgery does not and perhaps cannot by the logic of her background.

The novel opens and closes with the character of Sister Mary de Santis, Mary of the Saints. Associated with the night shift, darkness,

unconsciousness, and mystery, Mary de Santis is a central character, and a great deal of the novel is devoted to exploring how her horizon reflects her Orthodox and Catholic background. She is the daughter of an observant Greek Orthodox mother and a lapsed Italian Catholic father. While her faith is not ostensibly "Christian," she is described as "probably something of a ritualist" (9), language which is identifiably Christian when compared with that White uses to describe the other acolytes.

Sister de Santis is a creature of the night, perhaps an angel with a transparent veil under which "the wings of her hair, escaping from beneath the lawn, could not have looked a more solid black" (9). Thus Mary of the Angels is associated with an otherworldly vision but remains solidly grounded in this world; as such she is linked with White's concern to explore the unity of matter and spirit, and the immanence of other worlds within our own world. Her veil is made of lawn, a fine woven linen or cotton used for bishops' sleeves, and this detail adds weight to her description as head of the religious hierarchy of the house, as archpriestess to whom the other acolytes defer, perhaps as the confessor or mitred abbess of their ostensibly secular convent.

More than the other acolytes, Mary embodies the tension of Christian mysticism between experiencing herself as a spiritual being and experiencing herself as a material being. Her life becomes a tension of unrealized eschatology between her experience of another spiritual world and her confinement within a material world. This tension seems irreconcilably dualistic, yet she is the only acolyte who seems self-consciously aware of the numinous as a category within her lived experience. While Badgery has lost, through the Reformation and the Enlightenment, any sense of the numinous which her imagination might once have given her, and while grace is not a part of the Manhood or Lippmann myth, grace is still a part of the language with which White surrounds Mary de Santis.

Perhaps this sense of the numinous, divine power which Mary apprehends and participates in, this sense of grace, is what projects her into the future. Mary de Santis continues White's tradition of closing most of his novels with a character whose background, in some overt or covert way, is connected with the Christian imagination. She is one of his figures who are always poised and waiting to be launched, or perhaps thrown, into their unknown future.

VII

I have very briefly sketched an outline of how White has portrayed the Christian imagination in some of his novels, and I have suggested

that he did this in a densely schematic way, in much of his fiction, to highlight his postmetaphysical concerns. If the attempt has been successful, then it is possible to place White firmly in a tradition that embraces literature, philosophy, and theology. It also becomes possible to offer a voice against those who argue that White never understood his own writing and who propose that each novel welled forth from his unconscious like a kind of literary ectoplasm.

A reading of his works should reveal just how densely, consciously, and intentionally their canvases are constructed, not just to illuminate the struggle of Classical, Romantic, modern, and postmodern but also to convey the author's sense of how the Western eye has constructed quite different imaginative realities which remain within and without Arthur's dream. Christianity is a large part of this dream, and so it must be a large part of that interrogation of the imaginative realities of myth and metaphor which White believed it was the function of literature to explore, even if that meant, in his own words, "launching into that admittedly disturbing marriage between life and imagination." For White it was a marriage which was "like many actual marriages in fact—all the risks, the recurring despair, and rewards if you are lucky" (Brennan 83).

In his final novel, *Memoirs of Many in One*, White reflects upon this disturbing marriage through the character of Alex Gray, who is an aspect of his own psyche. Some of Alex's flights of imagination take her into the world of Christian myth and metaphor as a Catholic nun or simply as Alex Gray, who picks up a stray dog and calls him Dog and invests him with all the elusive Christian symbolics of sin and salvation. As Alex tells us, "Dog has been sent to atone for the evil I was born with—to lick me clean" (101). Of course, no "atonement" is forthcoming, for according to the author's postmetaphysical logic the word is elusive and conceals as much as it reveals. This forces Alex Gray back to her typewriter, like White himself, where she senses she has "got to discover" by "writing out" the "reason for my presence on earth" (157).

Ultimately the language of Christianity confounded the author. It did not match his experience of being-in-the-world. Yet all language is a flickering of revealing and concealing, and here White's hermeneutic is no different from that of many other contemporary writers, philosophers, and theologians who write, think, and pray in a postmetaphysical tradition. Certainly his vision does not negate or overturn what is being explored in the seminaries and universities of the mainstream churches. For the sake of truth, perhaps it is time we acknowledged this.

NOTES

¹Postmodernity does not react against the discourse of modernity. Rather, it contains and develops it. Habermas points out that postmodernity is not a twentieth-century movement but began with Nietzsche in the nineteenth century.

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