Michael Giffin announces his intention early in *Patrick White and God*, after describing White’s personal-cum-tribal relationship with the Anglican Church:

This book attempts to locate Patrick White’s fiction within a 200-year phase in western philosophy and aesthetics beginning with romanticism in the late 18th century. The attempt is ambitious because his fiction is a critique of western consciousness, in particular its understanding of reason; however, his critique looks like a metaphysics—and perhaps a metapsychology—now challenged by an unstable marriage of promethean science and intersectional politics. Because of this, his religious frame—which remained remarkably consistent during his career—is harder to recognize in the 21st century.

This bold announcement warns us against looking for too much meaning in White’s individual influences, since they tell us little about something more important—his overall context. And Giffin construes White’s context broadly, as what occurred in philosophy and aesthetics after Kant, in contrast with what occurred before Kant. If such generalisations are unfortunate, they are necessary, for in them we find the rationale for White’s romanticism, which ultimately provided the rationale for his rejection of realism and naturalism in favour of abstraction and modernism. These two movements, romanticism and modernism, cast their long shadows over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for better and for worse. Acknowledging this is both deceptively simple and frustratingly complex.

White’s novels are a persistent commentary on Nietzsche’s proclamation of God’s death. As White knew the proclamation was not about God’s existence, but about classical views of God, it presented him with the impossible task of using language to describe what language cannot describe. This has always been one of the more misunderstood aspects of his literary vision. Because the announcement is often interpreted in antithetical ways—atheistic, theistic, secular, religious, humanistic, fatalistic—Giffin believes critics will gain a better understanding of what White was trying to achieve by comparing him with his post-war contemporaries from England, Scotland and Canada, Iris Murdoch, William Golding, Muriel Spark and Robertson Davies, who he treats in the Appendix to the book. After the war, in part because of the war, these authors all commented on the consequences of God’s death. Along with White, they worked with a shared pattern of tropes (widely-used literary devices) to explore the light and dark aspects of Western consciousness. Where did the pattern
come from? This question is complex, as the pattern came from many sources. *Patrick White and God* attempts to describe that pattern.

Each White critic holds his or her favourite piece of the post-Kantian “elephant”—the most popular choices being Presocratic, Anti-Platonic, Marxist, Nietzschean, Heideggerian, Freudian, Jungian, Spenglerian or Deleuzean, and so forth—but there are others—and the entire elephant remains elusive. Before we can name and see more of the elephant’s pieces—if not the entire beast—it is worth noticing how Giffin came to develop his complex argument. First of all, he was introduced to White in the 1980s, in a once-typical English major, not as an Australian author but as part of a more expansive literary tradition:

The British and Commonwealth novel “from the romantics to the present”. The boundaries of this major—which take for granted that the romantics were an influential turning point—have influenced the way I interpret him and the other authors discussed in this book. The tutor who marked most of my undergraduate essays made similar comments on each essay, regardless of whether the essay topic was Jane Austen, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, or any other 19th and 20th century novelist taught in the major: “This novel,” she always wrote in the margin, “explores the tension between the neoclassical and romantic imaginaries.” This persistent reinforcement, which borders on monomania, may explain my obsession with situating modern and postmodern literatures in relation to neoclassical and romantic literatures.

Giffin’s obsession with exploring continuities and discontinuities across these literary genres—and with making links between literature, philosophy and theology—has been made possible by training for the Anglican priesthood in a Roman Catholic seminary. This training included four years studying philosophy, from the Presocratics to Derrida, not a normal part of Anglican or Protestant training, but immensely useful for literary criticism. After this he wrote an MLitt thesis on White’s perceptions of childhood followed by a PhD dissertation on White’s religious imagination.

Giffin believes White’s context operates across two spheres: first, that of the changing role of the artist since the Romantic movement began; second, that of the changing message which evolved with the changing role. In both spheres, romanticism has influenced what Margaret Atwood calls the author’s double consciousness, as well as his or her terms of discourse. Understanding this phenomenon requires a general sense of several lines of scholarship—the Greek origins of reason, the philological origins of the humanities, the way authors thought and wrote at different points over different periods, and how trends in literature parallel trends in philosophy.

A central point of reference for Giffin is the West’s traditional model of consciousness (at least until recently):

In Book IV of *The Republic* (c.380 BC), Plato tells us the mind has a tripartite structure (rational, spirited, and appetitive), analogous with different parts of the body (head, heart, and lower abdomen), analogous with different classes of society (guardians, auxiliaries, and producers). The difference between these parts becomes obvious as he describes what his ideal society looks like while referring to the “old quarrel” between philosophy and poetry. As the quarrel was already old, when Plato refers to it, it must have existed in some form
within Presocratic philosophy, Sophist rhetoric, or their equivalent in ancient Greek poetry and drama. Plato believed philosophy has the highest truth-claims, because it comes from the rational mind (analogous with the head). He believed poetry has lesser truth-claims, because it comes from the spirited mind (analogous with the heart) and therefore poetry can easily be corrupted by the appetitive mind (analogous with the lower abdomen). He banned the poets from his ideal republic because their poetry comes from the mind’s spirited part, not its rational part, and therefore it does not represent the highest form of truth. As he applied the same logic to rhetoricians, whether he would ban the authors mentioned in this book depends on whether he agreed or disagreed with the form and content of their stories, as rhetoric and as poetry.

These twin ideas, of the “old quarrel” between philosophy and poetry, and Plato’s dogmatic yet opaque insistence on reason, are so entrenched that we tend to take them for granted. The tensions and struggles which these ideas represent pervade all of White’s influences and thus shape his context.

Giffin raises the central issue of reason in an early footnote:

As Alasdair MacIntyre reminds us, in Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (1988), the terms reason and rationality have never been defined objectively. There are only subjective theories—all contested—about what they mean to particular movements or individuals. One of the fundamental problems westerners face is our tendency to presume their meaning, as universal or self-evident givens, when there is no consensus over what they mean. One person’s rationality is another person’s irrationality and vice versa. Yet the west still needs a consensus over what these terms mean, because they are often said to define the west. Westerners must do more than wave these terms around like a fetish—or point them like a witchdoctor’s bone—at anyone they disagree with.

If Plato thought the poets told lies, do their lies tell truths, and if so what kinds of truths do their lies tell?

The relativisation of knowledge and truth has been a dominant theme in philosophy and aesthetics after Kant, as Giffin suggests:

During the neoclassical and romantic periods, philosophical and aesthetic perceptions of knowledge and truth were given form and content through theories of analogy (or analogical theories); through correspondence theories associated with Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas; through coherence theories associated with Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel. After neoclassicism and romanticism, analogical theories of knowledge and truth became less congruent, less idealistic, and more relativistic and fragmented. For this reason, many post-romantic novelists moved away from correspondence and coherence theories. Following the fashion of their period, they adapted to the new non-analogical or anti-analogical perspectivist theories associated with Nietzsche or disclosure theories associated with Heidegger. White was a creature of his period. To understand his texts in their context, it is necessary to understand this transition from correspondence–coherence theories to perspectivist–disclosure theories.

Giffin offers two examples to make his point. Apparently The Solid Mandala is essentially Austen’s Sense and Sensibility with a Nietzschean makeover, and
Murdoch’s *The Bell* is essentially Eliot’s *Middlemarch* with a Freudian makeover. The idea sounds odd until we realise how, in White’s case, characters interested him more than situations. He did not think any of his books had what we call plots. Instead they are a series of encounters between characters, each of whom sees the world differently, and paradigmatically so. Picking up these differences is essential to understanding White.

*Patrick White and God* provides close readings of the four novels from White’s middle or “religious” phase—*Riders in the Chariot* (1961), *The Solid Mandala* (1966), *The Vivisector* (1970) and *The Eye of the Storm* (1973). These four novels investigate the logos–mythos dialectic, which is still at the heart of Western philosophy and aesthetics—and also the broader varieties of Western religious experience. This remarkably systematic investigation was absent from the earlier novels and disappeared from the later novels.

In these four novels, White gives his protagonists what hermeneutically-minded critics call “horizons”, which parallel those Paul Ricoeur describes in his anthropology of Western myth and metaphor:

At the same time White was researching *Riders in the Chariot*, Ricoeur was making a similar methodological shift in *La symbolique du mal* (1960), which would later appear in English as *The Symbolism of Evil* (1969). How do we account for this intriguing postwar phenomenon? In Ricoeur’s case, the answer has something to do with the ways in which he kept evolving within romantic hermeneutics, as he continued to refine his thinking and process the antinomies he saw in Kant, the impasses he saw in Heidegger, and the aporias he saw in Gadamer. For example, Ricoeur believed that Heidegger and Gadamer had “circumvented the necessary explanatory moment demanded by the linguistic structures we inhabit” … In White’s case, his link with Ricoeur may be an example of multiple discovery or simultaneous invention, since Ricoeur was also influenced by Humboldt’s theory of linguistic worldviews, which White would have absorbed indirectly.

Ricoeur allocated the great myths into four categories—chaos and creation, tragic hero, exiled soul, and adamic—before assigning these categories to three types of metaphor: Theogonic, Hellenic and Hebraic. While some readers will accuse Giffin of drawing a long bow, he explains how these myths and metaphors turn up in the four novels of White’s religious period and he describes how White orchestrates them.

Giffin’s desire to place White in dialogue with Benedict XVI will also strike some as strange and unexpected:

If there are no correct approaches to experiencing the breathtaking range of White’s performances, there are baseline measures when interpreting them. I believe his critique of logos is one of those measures. As his view of logos was conditioned by romantic hermeneutics, understanding his performances means coming to terms with the assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses of romantic hermeneutics. One way of doing this is comparing his negative view of logos with Benedict XVI’s positive view of logos, described in the pope’s Regensburg Lecture of September 2006.
Comparing Benedict and White is not as challenging as it may seem because, in different ways, they were reacting to the challenges of romantic hermeneutics: Benedict from the outside, White from the inside. In Platonc terms, the former is a philosopher, the latter is a poet. Together they represent an updated version of an “old quarrel” which has always revolved around the differences between logos and mythos. In this sense, Benedict and White are contemporaries, obverse sides of the same metaphysical coin, like the Dashwood sisters or the Brown brothers, and it would be misleading to label one conservative and the other progressive. Such labels are meaningless and do neither of them justice. If Benedict’s vision of logos seems antithetical to White’s, and irreconcilable by comparison, both visions exist in parallel.

If we assume Benedict has a Platonic–Aristotelian understanding of logos, and White has a Presocratic understanding of logos, we limit ourselves to Frankfurt School-type assumptions about classicism and romanticism, rationalism and empiricism, and transcendence and immanence. This will not promote a meaningful dialogue between the two men. The first step to any dialogue is acknowledging that a working definition of logos is needed. The second step is acknowledging the Hegelian or Marxist assumptions that accompany immanent or emancipatory critiques.

According to Osborne [Catherine Osborne, *Presocratic Philosophy*, 2004], the Heraclitan definition of logos is the “systematic structure that underlies every aspect of our experience” which needs to be noticed in order to understand “the true significance of the world”. Other possible meanings include: language, theory, reason, ratio, proportion, definition, word, speech, argument, formula, principle, reason as rationality or explanation, and account as story or value–amount … As one person’s logos is another person’s mythos, the scope for logos is broad.

Giffin believes both Benedict and White are central to an ongoing debate which can be said to define Western civilisation. He explains that they are opposite sides of the same metaphysical coin because both are committed to investigating or critiquing the nature of logos as reason or rationality. Thus it is helpful to draw attention to White’s persuasive post-Kantian context (more focused on mythos), and to be alert to Benedict’s persuasive pre-Kantian critique of that context (more focused on logos).

Giffin notes: “Admittedly, in White studies, this is a road less travelled. In the current literary and cultural climate, there are as many obstacles to promoting the rhetoric of the emeritus pope as there are promoting the rhetoric of White’s novels.”

In the twentieth century, the fault line among White’s critics was between the minority who were sympathetic to his program and the majority who found it challenging, even confrontational. In the twenty-first century, the fault line is more between the minority who approach him on his terms and the majority who use him as a screen upon which to project their own critical agendas which have little or nothing to do with him or his work. This is particularly so with queer-theory approaches, the relevance of which “is not self-evident, beyond queer theory’s desire to remake the world in its image”.

Giffin notices a curious tendency among twenty-first-century critics, to distinguish the fiction White wrote in “the closet” from the fiction he wrote after “coming out”. He insists that this distinction is erroneous, as there never was a before or an after. White could not have come out of a closet he was never in:
If White is read alongside his contemporaries he is obviously—yet perhaps unconsciously—manoeuvring himself within a postwar genre where Plato, Nietzsche, Freud, and Jung were influential in providing different authors with a shared terms of discourse. Male protagonists, who are often but not always homosexual, had evolved into tropes for logos, civilization, the ego, and the conscious mind. Red-haired protagonists, who are often but not always female, had evolved into tropes for mythos, nature, the id, and the unconscious mind. This manoeuvre, where logos and mythos are tropes within an overarching frame, is fundamental to White’s literary vision. Given his sexual orientation, the manoeuvre was particularly fearless, and is easily misinterpreted, as there seems to be a widespread inability among his critics to distinguish between his life as a male homosexual and how male homosexuals function in his fiction. Whenever he assigns a male homosexual a role, in his mythological–metaphorical scheme, it is a philosophical–psychological role rather than a biographical–autobiographical role. In this world, gender fluidity was a mental phenomenon not a medical process.

Giffin explains that many of the limitations of criticism and commentary on White “stem from our desire to fit external assumptions into his texts rather than working outwards from the texts themselves”. Ultimately, however, the fictional universe which White created is larger than the pigeon-holes that are used by commentators and critics. White will endure because he escapes all our efforts to confine him:

> White issues difficult challenges. He forces us into uncomfortable territory. Like Nietzsche and Heidegger, he has always been and continues to be a screen on which strong, ambivalent thoughts and emotions are projected. Occasionally he has been used as a kind of scapegoat. His novels and short stories still fascinate me, as I struggle to interpret them, yet they remain just beyond my reach. Is this the function of great art?

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