

Patrick White on Religion

MICHAEL GIFFIN

OCCASIONALLY a fellow Australian asks about my doctorate. On hearing it was about Patrick White's novels, the response is generally a variation of a theme: I've never read him because I don't like him, I've tried reading him and I don't like him, I've read him and I don't like him. The subject usually drops there, or lapses into hearsay about his personality, which is often banal and malicious. Sometimes the subject focuses on his novels but flounders when the enquirer hears my research looked at the religious aspect of his work.

You looked at *what*?

I looked at the religious aspect of White's work; an aspect he admitted wouldn't be recognised in his lifetime.

How does one explain this aspect to the incredulous few? By noticing White objected to the conventions of "Aust. Lit." in his day and embraced conventions which were more broadly Western. How do we explain those conventions to the incredulous few? By noticing White struggled to create "fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words", using language the same way an artist uses paint or a composer uses sound. These "fresh forms" were White's attempts to "imagine the real" in his novels, since he believed reality—including the varieties of Western religious experience—is something we filter through our imagination in culturally-determined ways.

In the 1930s White went to Kings College Cambridge where he specialised in languages. His novels from the 1940s onwards are powerful reminders of how much he was a creature of his formative years—which is another way of saying he did what many writers in Britain and North America were doing—and he brought this ideological and aesthetic tradition back to Australia after the war. Because he was influenced by Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1922), he critiqued the Enlightenment—he conducted, as phenomenology, existentialism, and structuralism once did, a post-metaphysical interrogation of classical metaphysics—an activity nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy shared with parallel movements in literature and theology. In philosophy it was once fashionable to question the Enlightenment's focus on reason and try to reclaim what reason is supposed to have suppressed. In literature it was once fashionable for modernism to consider the tension between neoclassical reason and romantic feeling. In theology it was once fashionable to distinguish reason from revelation, descry Greek dualisms, and proclaim Jewish unities. Once there was even an influential attempt to de-hellenize Christianity and return to more holistic hebraic roots.

The current pope, Benedict XVI, criticises this attempt—which he believes is misguided—since the ancient Jews had been in dialogue with the ancient Greeks for hundreds of years and by the time the Old Testament was written down there had been a reconciliation of a high order between reason and revelation. Benedict wants us to go back and look at what the Enlightenment was really about, rather than perpetuate second or third hand assumptions about it, and that task still needs to be

done. Noticing White was part of an ideological and aesthetic fashion Benedict criticises is an excellent opportunity to dialogue with what both White and Benedict have to say.

As part of his critique of the Enlightenment, White gave some of his characters “horizons” so he could explore the varieties of religious experience within the Western imagination. He began his idiosyncratic exploration early and tentatively in *The Living and the Dead* (1941) and more boldly in later novels written at the height of his intellectual and creative powers. Two of the horizons he used are the pre-classical (often associated with but not limited to the Dionysian) and the classical (often associated with but not limited to the Apollonian), through which he explored a range of dualisms: feeling–thinking, heart–mind, passion–self-control, chaos–order, nature–culture, primitivism–civilisation, instinct–logic, irrationality–rationality, id–ego, unconscious–conscious, feminine–masculine, equality–hierarchy, darkness–light, art–science, and so one and so forth. We need to notice, however, that the once influential philosophical and literary distinction between the pre-classical and the classical is now contested; likewise, the distinction between the Dionysian and the Apollonian—as dichotomous aspects of one whole—was once attributed to the ancient Greeks but is increasingly attributed to the modern Prussians.

Along with Judaism and Christianity, the pre-classical and the classical are presented as varieties of religious experience in White’s novels. He gave these four horizons to particular characters in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), and to particular characters in *The Eye of the Storm* (1973), but one of the best examples of how he worked with them comes from *The Solid Mandala* (1966):

Once Arthur dreamed the dream in which a tree was growing out of his thighs. It was the face of Dulcie Feinstein lost amongst 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.

The questions that flow from this deceptively simple passage are crucial to understanding White’s novels. Why is it *the* dream rather than *a* dream? Why did the pre-classical character dream the dream? What is the significance of the tree? Why is the Jewish character lost in the higher branches? Why is the Christian character sitting on the ground? Why did the pre-classical character think his encounter with Christianity would be smooth when in fact it was rough and prickly? Why is the classical character excluded from the dream, even though he’s the twin brother of the pre-classical character and is, in fact, sleeping alongside him? Answers to these questions depend on how much the reader is prepared to engage with White’s exploration of the varieties of Western religious experience, since that exploration was conducted among a wide range of literary prejudices: some which White held; others which his readers and non-readers hold. All authors and readers have literary prejudices.

Here’s a taste of what White was doing in his idiosyncratic and eclectic way. A word of warning though: his thinking was theoretical and systematic in non-theoretical and non-systematic ways. His critique of the Enlightenment, and his sense of the religious imagination, was heterogeneous

rather than homogeneous. Also, the pope's criticism of White's ideological and aesthetic fashion is valid, so we should consider it carefully. Even so, great literature can be influenced by fallible thought. As White is still one of our most significant authors, he deserves credit for the questions he asked rather than criticism for not having the answers.

The Pre-Classical Horizon

IF HE DIDN'T make it up, where did White get the idea of a pre-classical horizon from? For much of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries it was thought the classical Enlightenment in ancient Greece, which emphasised rationality and order, suppressed a pre-classical horizon, which emphasised irrationality and chaos. This once-influential idea is now contested, as is the parallel idea that the classical Enlightenment in ancient Greece was a prototype for the neoclassical Enlightenment in modern Europe. White wasn't alone in giving a pre-classical horizon to some of his characters. British author Iris Murdoch gave it characters such as Dora Greenfield in *The Bell* (1958). Canadian author Robertson Davies gave it characters such as Mary Dempster in *Fifth Business* (1970).

In literature, characters with a pre-classical horizon are pre-metaphysical and therefore don't have the conceptual framework to understand philosophy or theology: the intellectual fruits of reason and revelation. They are usually female or, if male, are associated with the archetypal feminine, and they often have red hair. They can represent the Dionysian, or occasionally the Celtic or the Primitive. They are often part of the dialectic in which pre-classical and classical form a single unified consciousness; as such, one finds them in literature influenced by Hegel, Nietzsche, Spengler, Freud and Jung. Paul Ricoeur, a theologian best known for combining phenomenology with hermeneutics, links the pre-classical horizon with the primitive myths of chaos and creation, as distinct from other myths—hellenic and hebraic—which belong to other religious horizons in White's work.

In *Riders in the Chariot*, Mary Hare and Alf Dubbo are both given a pre-classical horizon, and because of that horizon White allows them to be riders in his chariot. Mary has an affinity with the Australian landscape and is highly intuitive. Her existence is a disappointment and a challenge to her father, since she represents a reality he's spent his life trying to ignore. She inherits her father's neoclassical-romantic folly, Xanadu, but in fact her pre-classical horizon had always owned the landscape on which the mansion was built, and on which it will slowly decay while in her possession. Apart from her fellow riders—the Jewish and Christian horizons, which she recognises and respects—the other residents of Sarsaparilla regard her as mad.

Alf Dubbo is half-Celtic, half-Aboriginal. He's fostered by an Anglo-Catholic priest and his sister who make him their Great Experiment. The priest lavishes "fatherly love, and spiritual guidance, to say nothing of Latin verbs, and the dates of battles" on Alf, but Alf can't absorb book learning. The sister teaches Alf the principles of drawing, which he takes to readily, since he's innately artistic; however, his artistic vision is, in her classical terms, obscene. He escapes from the rectory in adolescence—after the sister finds him in bed with the priest—but the religious truth they taught him

remains with him for the rest of his life. He continues to paint great moral visions, although he remains anonymous and on the fringe of society.

In *The Solid Mandala*, the Dionysian Arthur Brown has a pre-classical horizon, which allows him to dream his dream, and decide who shall receive one of his mandalas, or marbles, which symbolise wholeness. Like Alf Dubbo, Arthur isn't good with book learning, and is regarded as mentally deficient. But he's intuitive, like Mary Hare, and has a gift for maths. His spirituality allows him to establish a relationship with the other two religious horizons in his dream, the Jewish Dulcie Feinstein and the Christian Mrs Poulter. While Arthur's Apollonian twin Waldo isn't part of his dream—and never receives a mandala—they can't exist without each other as they are two halves of one whole.

Arthur inherited his pre-classical horizon from his mother, the red-haired Anne, who's a powerful force, as most of White's literary mothers are, although her status in the novel is muted and she lives in the shadows of her husband's classical horizon. Anne used to "sit on the front veranda twisting the wedding ring on her finger" and "might have been grunting if she hadn't been taught how to behave". She doesn't really like being a wife and mother but had no other choice. Her younger son Waldo "knew, from what he knew" that, apart from his twin brother and himself, "there wouldn't be" anymore children from her marriage. Behind her apparently acquiescent nature there lies a font of intuition, strength, and resilience. As Waldo once said: "she was by no means *soft*."

In *The Eye of the Storm*, Flora Manhood has a pre-classical horizon, which makes her one of the "acolytes" who minister to Elizabeth Hunter. Flora is beautiful, radiant, "something of an anarchist", and has a self-centred animal presence. She's Elizabeth's favourite "acolyte" because Elizabeth sees something of herself in Flora. Flora's existential dilemma throughout in the novel is trying to resist her boyfriend—Col Pardoe, a sort of "light" classical character—who wants to marry her and turn her into something she either fears or doesn't want to become. As one way of resisting Col—and assisting her employer (or so she thinks)—she sleeps with Elizabeth's son who is visiting from Britain. After spending a few weeks wondering whether she's become pregnant with Elizabeth's grandchild, Flora finally menstruates and decides she needs to marry Col after all.

The entire novel revolves around the powerful, intuitive, and manipulative bitch goddess, Elizabeth Hunter. Her husband Alfred adored her but she was never able to return his love. She gave him two children but they never loved her. She has a retinue of retainers who understand her flaws but remain loyal nevertheless. Always generous but never grateful, for most of the novel she's described as forbidding and cruel—which is true—but that's not the end of the matter. White insists Elizabeth is in touch with something fundamental, which allows her to achieve a level of moral recognition few characters achieve. First, her experience of being alone on an island in Queensland, during a tropical cyclone, makes her realise no one is immune from suffering, not even herself. Second, as an act of partial atonement, she returns to her husband's rural station, to nurse him by herself while he dies from cancer. Third, she wants Flora to marry Col and love him in a way she never loved Alfred.

The Classical Horizon

IN CERTAIN genres of nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel, the Greek façade—its pediments and its columns—symbolises an eighteenth-century vision: the neoclassical Enlightenment in modern Europe looking back at the classical Enlightenment of ancient Greece. Notice there are two “looking backs” here, both of which have margins for error, since neoclassicism may have misunderstood ancient Greece, and modernism may have misunderstood neoclassicism. Authors who use this symbolism are questioning the idealised accounts in which the ancient Greeks are seen as originators of what we assume distinctive about Western civilisation: including democracy, philosophy, and reason. Admiring the Greeks because we see in them an earlier version of ourselves is misleading, since ancient Athens wasn’t Washington DC.

In literature, characters with a classical horizon are usually male, and often homosexual, or if female are associated with the archetypal masculine. They can represent the Apollonian or the more hellenised forms of Western religion. They represent the conscious mind, and the rational, and they fear or suppress the unconscious mind, the irrational, and the archetypal feminine. Ricoeur links three types of hellenic myths with the classical horizon: the myth of a fall (promethean not biblical), the myth of the tragic hero, and the myth of the exiled soul. White’s classical characters represent the last two—the tragic hero and the exiled soul—more than the promethean fall.

In *Riders in the Chariot*, none of the riders has a classical horizon. Why? Because, according to White’s logic, that horizon is out of touch with something fundamental. Norbert Hare, Mary’s father, is an exiled soul focussed on the neoclassical (and romantic) civilisation of Europe rather than on the social and economic reality of the Australian colony, or on the mythical and existential reality of the Australian landscape. Norbert does nothing practical or useful, such as protecting his capital or providing for his family; he squanders his inheritance living the life of an elegant gentleman. He builds Xanadu, a pleasure dome or folly, which remains incongruous on the outskirts of nineteenth-century Sydney. As the birth of his daughter, the ugly and red Mary, reminds him of a reality he’s spent his whole life ignoring, he ends up committing suicide.

The fragmentary and insubstantial Jinny Chalmers-Robinson is one of many society matrons White satirises in his novels. She lives within a pseudo-establishment world of nominal upper-class Anglicanism but flirts with Christian Science as a way of denying the reality of her life, and the reality of other people’s lives. It was the classical “mind over matter” aspect of Christian Science which White disagreed with, since “the Science” drives a wedge between the spiritual and the material. Jinny is always making half-hearted attempts to study “the Science” in order to transform “hard, unloving thoughts” and become a “new creature”. Her problem, though, is she could “never emerge from her own distraction” long enough to give or receive love. And love isn’t scientific.

In *The Solid Mandala*, none of the characters in Arthur’s dream has a classical horizon. Why? Because, according to White’s logic, the Apollonian Waldo’s classical affinities exclude him from the dream even though he’s the twin brother of the Dionysian dreamer. Waldo is associated with rationality and the life of the mind. He’s a celibate homosexual, although his Platonic distaste for anything physical means he’s incapable of a balanced or integrated emotional or sexual relationship with

anyone, whether male or female. The only orgasms he's capable of are vicarious and come through reading: "he would stand shivering for the daring of words, their sheer ejaculation". He becomes a librarian so he can be around books all his life. While he imagines he's leading and protecting his Dionysian twin, Arthur is in fact leading and protecting him.

Waldo inherited his classical horizon from his father, George Brown, who had a limp (an oedipus): "He put his hand on Waldo's shoulder, through which the limp transferred itself." George left Britain to escape a dying civilisation but, ironically, he brought one of the central myths of the dying civilisation with him, and he never ceased to be the exiled soul White makes him. He came to Australia, where he believed there "aren't any shadows" and every man jack "can do what he likes". He builds a modest house on the outskirts of Sydney but asks the builders to place a classical pediment over the veranda. Under this classical pediment, which represents his myth, the veranda becomes the proscenium on which the comedy–tragedy of the Brown family is acted out.

In *The Eye of the Storm*, none of the "acolytes" who nurse Elizabeth Hunter has a classical horizon. Why? Because the main classical characters are her children; Dorothy is associated with the myth of the exiled soul; Basil is associated with the myth of the tragic hero. Neither child has the resilience of their mother; both leave Australia as adults and align themselves with European culture; both are divided and unhappy characters that despise Australia and only return because they want money from their mother. It's possible they become who they become because their mother is who she is: "As humanity was not what one got from Elizabeth Hunter, one should not have felt disillusioned."

Dorothy moves to France, marries a nobleman, becomes a princess, has a bad marriage, remains childless, gets divorced, lives by her wits in comparative poverty—presumably with handouts from her wealthy mother—and practices a pre-conciliar Roman Catholicism that reinforces rather than protects her from a sense of perpetual exile. Basil moves to Britain, becomes a famous actor who specialises in playing Shakespeare's tragic heroes—Lear, Macbeth, Hamlet—has a couple of bad marriages, and receives a knighthood for his services to the theatre. Neither Dorothy nor Basil loves each other, or their mother, or themselves. While visiting their dying mother in Sydney—in an attempt to put her in a nursing home and fast-track their inheritance—they travel together to the rural station where they were born. On the last night of their visit, the classical siblings sleep with each other, in the bed in which they were conceived, and on that same night their pre-classical mother dies back in Sydney.

The Jewish Horizon

WHITE MADE a thorough investigation of Ashkenazi Judaism, its Yeshiva framework, and its option to study Kabbalah outside that framework. He thought the Ashkenazim were wonderful. He empathised with their lifestyle, theology, wisdom, mysticism, and suffering. He must have been successful in his portrayal of the Ashkenazim, as it has attracted Israeli scholarship and praise from Jewish readers, one of whom has commented: "How does this man know it all? He has written what I thought nobody but me and my kind could possibly know and with the understanding of a god".

Perhaps his investigation of Judaism was narrow—in not covering the Sephardim or the complexities of modern Israel—but, to be fair, his investigation related to the Western imagination and was conducted before the Six-Day War in 1967.

His Spenglerian thinking gave him a sense of the folly of an Ashkenazim becoming absorbed by the Haskalah—or Jewish Enlightenment—a movement that advocated the adoption of enlightenment values, promoted secularism, opposed mysticism and inwardly pious learning, and pressed for integration into Gentile society. In White's novels, the apostate Jew—or the Jew who loses touch with his or her spiritual roots—suffers the consequences. Ricoeur notices at the centre of the Jewish horizon the hebraic myth of a fall, which isn't to be confused with the hellenic myths of the promethean fall or tragic hero or the exiled soul, since the hebraic myth is the only myth focussed on an eschatological vision.

In *Riders in the Chariot*, Mordecai Himmelfarb is caught between an enlightened father who desires that in his son “the world should recognise a good man” and an orthodox mother who desires that in her son “God will recognise a good Jew”. While in his youth his father's desire has the stronger hold over him, at his wedding a guest prophesies that he's destined to become a *tzadik*. However, he'll only discover this vocation once his wife, career, and enlightenment are consumed by the *Shoah*. After the war he's free to pursue his vocation as a *tzadik*, not in post-war Germany, nor in what will become Israel, but in a dilapidated hut in White's iconic Sarsaparilla. His vocation is only recognised by the other riders not by other Jews.

Those other Jews who refuse to recognise Himmelfarb are Haim and Shulamith Rosenbaum, who've also fled the *Shoah* but whose response is different from his. They live in an existential hell, as the prosperous Harry and Shirley Rosetree, convert Roman Catholics trying to be anything Australia wants them to be as long as it isn't Jewish. Harry eventually realises his mistake and commits suicide. Like all White's women, Shirley is stronger. She abandons Roman Catholicism, remarries, and finally arrives at her ultimate destination: St Mark's Darling Point. Under the surface she remains a lost soul in a world which she aspires to but isn't comfortable in. Sheila's shadow always “dogs” her and reminds her of a truth she denies.

In *The Solid Mandala*, Dulcie Feinstein is also caught between a father who is consciously enlightened and a mother who humours her husband but remains unconsciously orthodox. While Himmelfarb was raised among Jews in Germany, Dulcie is being raised among Gentiles in Australia and is separated from Jewish culture. Two opposing architectural metaphors frame her life and represent the tension between her father's conscious and her mother's unconscious. Her family own “Mount Pleasant” in Sarsaparilla, a house of enlightenment which commands the loftiest view of any house in the novel. They also own (but do not live in) another house, a mock fortress with medieval battlements in Centennial Park. These two metaphors signify the dilemma facing contemporary Ashkenazim: whether to embrace the Enlightenment or orthodoxy.

Dulcie has a different relationship with Dionysian Arthur and Apollonian Waldo. According to White's logic, her bond with Arthur is strong because they have religious affinities, while Waldo

imagines more of a bond with her than is possible. Mrs Feinstein, the transmitter of Jewishness, takes Dulcie to Europe to discover her spiritual roots, and prepares her to become a matriarch. When they return after the Great War, “Mount Pleasant” is sold, Dulcie marries an observant Jew, and the young couple move into the mock medieval fortress in Centennial Park where they raise an observant family. Mrs Feinstein dies. Mr Feinstein has a stroke and chooses to remain in the “attic” of the medieval fortress, taking refuge from what he calls the “Jewish Reaction” downstairs.

In *The Eye of the Storm*, the cook–housekeeper, Lotte Lippmann, is one of four “acolytes” caring for their dying employer, Elizabeth Hunter, a brutal, powerful and psychic force of nature. Although aware of herself as an Ashkenazim, Lotte never had the opportunity to connect with her spiritual roots. Her parents were “liberated Jews who worship scientifically. Medicine you might say, is their religion, their rabbi a physician, when not a psychiatrist”. She was enlightened in her youth. She fell in love with a Gentile and became an actress, oblivious to the consequences of *Kristallnacht*. Arrested for having an Aryan lover, “the boy’s family agreed to see her safely delivered into Switzerland—alone—and Mrs Lippmann had accepted for her lover’s good”. After the war, Lotte became a “suffering servant” in Mrs Hunter’s household, shackled to her bitch goddess of an employer, pursuing a vocation of atonement.

Lotte senses Mrs Hunter’s death before she is told about it. She puts a towel over her mirror; now that her reason for living is gone, she can no longer bear to look at her reflection. Amid images of sackcloth and ashes, the grief-stricken Lotte declares: “I shall be with friends”. She slits her wrists and drifts away in a warm bath. Her suicide is accompanied by the signs and symbols of the *Shoah*: “the heater, with its permanent smell of gas and flames roaring”; the sky outside her narrow maid’s bathroom “was more convincingly on fire, the blaze smudged by chimneys of smoke”.

The Christian Horizon

WHITE once said: “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.” He once wrote me a letter in which he said: “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.” He was raised an Anglican. His family had strong connections with the church. While some suggest he criticised Christianity this isn’t true. He criticised Christians who deserved to be criticised. He admired Christians who deserve to be admired. As his Christian characters can be evil as well as virtuous, he obviously knew the church from the inside out.

Understanding White’s treatment of his Christian characters depends on understanding his critique of the neoclassical Enlightenment. If we take our cues from Benedict XVI, we could now argue White’s critique was misguided, but we commit an injustice if we use the benefit of papal hindsight to dismiss White’s insights rather than appreciate their complexity. To get a sense of that complexity, Ricoeur notices there are no specifically Christian myths of origin and end; over the centuries, the Christian horizon has become a homogenous amalgam of hebraic and hellenic myths: the myth of a biblical fall, the myth of the tragic hero, and the myth of the exiled soul.

In *Riders in the Chariot*, no protagonist apart from Himmelfarb suffers as much as Ruth Godbold or is able to turn the other cheek in the same way as she. Her family were hard-working non-conformists or “chapel”; her life is described in language that reveals White’s familiarity with the Bible. Her saintliness gives her the grace to overcome adversity and move forward, physically and spiritually. At the end of the novel, she continues “along a road which progress had left rather neglected”. On that road she has a vision, in which her past and present appear as a coherent work of art, which she’s content to leave behind, “since all converged finally upon the Risen Christ, and her own eyes had confirmed that the wounds were healed”, before continuing her earthly journey.

The novel has other Christian characters too. There are Alf Dubbo’s inept foster parents, Reverend Calderon and his sister, Mrs Pask (who is the ultimate in narrowness). Calderon is a man of “high ideals” who “failed perpetually to live up to them”. He’s a disappointment to his flock and his bishop, which has much to do with his English temperament, and encyclopaedic knowledge of old world history and dead languages, both of which White feels are useless within the Australian landscape. There are Mesdames Jolley and Flack who—like the furies of Greek mythology—are messengers of viciousness and hatred in suburban disguise.

In *The Solid Mandala*, Mrs Poulter’s faith isn’t as saintly as Ruth Godbold’s but she’s heroic in a different way. Her commonsense and intuition accept all dimensions of love, from *agape* to *eros*. Her focus is on the humanity of Jesus, although her sense of what a human God really means evolves gradually. She befriends the Dionysian Arthur—because there’s an affinity between them—but as her husband thinks Arthur is weird he orders her to stop seeing him. In her heart she continues to believe she and Arthur are answerable only to God and eventually there will be a day of reckoning in which God will vindicate their friendship. She has no affinity with the Apollonian Waldo.

At the end of the novel, after Waldo dies and Arthur goes mad, White writes: “And He released His hands from the nails. And fell down, in a thwack of canvas, a cloud of dust.” Critics often interpret this as the collapse of Christianity—the end of Mrs Poulter’s faith; the end of White’s faith too—but here’s another interpretation. When the police arrive to collect Arthur, Mrs Poulter asks them to be kind to him: “This man would be my saint,” she said, “if we could still believe in saints. Nowadays,” she said, “we’ve only men to believe in. I believe in this man.” Rather than losing her faith because of Arthur, the humanity of God is revealed through him.

In *The Eye of the Storm*, two of the “acolytes” who nurse the dying bitch-goddess, Elizabeth Hunter, have Christian associations, although both are ostensibly secular characters. Sister Mary de Santis works the night shift; she comes from a mixed Roman Catholic–Greek Orthodox background and is linked with the unconscious mind, feeling, and spirituality. Sister Jessie Badgery works the day shift; she comes from a Presbyterian background and is linked with the conscious mind, reason, and enlightenment. The logic of White’s treatment of these acolytes comes from his critique of the neoclassical Enlightenment. We can tell his sympathies are with Mary, since Jessie is the target of much withering satire, but he still allows us to consider Jessie as an acolyte with one or two virtues.

Jessie and Mary imagine “reality” differently, according to the logic of their given horizons. Jessie’s world is superficial. When Elizabeth Hunter dies, she makes a quick exit because, having an archetypal fear of the irrational, she doesn’t want to share the emotions of the other acolytes. In fact, Mary is the only “acolyte” strong enough to remain in the empty house. Roaming through it “her veins, her heart, were throbbing with life as she went from room to room throwing open the windows.” The novel closes with Mary performing her “rites” which include planting seeds in the garden. These seeds grow in a “prism of dew and light”. Through that same prism Mary is “amazed and not a little frightened by what she saw in Elizabeth Hunter’s looking glass.”

The Symbol gives rise to Thought

WHITE REALISED aspects of his work wouldn’t be understood in his lifetime, particularly his exploration of the varieties of Western religious experience (à la Ricoeur), and perhaps the depth of his critique of the Enlightenment (à la Spengler). Given his stature as a novelist, what he was trying to achieve—as idea and as art—ought to be understood on his terms; however, once we notice he belonged to a tradition that was simultaneously intellectual and aesthetic, and was influenced by some of the assumptions of that tradition, we should also notice no tradition is infallible. What would happen to White studies if it’s discovered the dichotomy philosophy and literature constructed around the Dionysian and the Apollonian is a Prussian invention, or the neoclassical Enlightenment misunderstood the classical Enlightenment, or the modernists misunderstood the neoclassical Enlightenment? Would that undermine White’s stature? Probably not, since he was suspicious of all systems and careful to not become too identified with any one system—for example, with Freudianism or Jungianism—and his literary greatness transcends his modernism. His gift to the world is mirroring Australian self-understanding at a particular point in time. Of course the reflections would be different now—if the mirror were held up today—but there would still be similarities. We have changed dramatically but we haven’t changed completely.

Not long before Cardinal Ratzinger was elected pope, he made the following observations during a lecture in Subiaco, Italy:

From the beginning, Christianity has understood itself as the religion of the Logos, as the religion according to reason ... In this connection, the Enlightenment is of Christian origin and it is no accident that it was born precisely and exclusively in the realm of the Christian faith ... It was and is the merit of the Enlightenment to have ... given back to reason its own voice. In the pastoral constitution, *On the Church in the Modern World*, the Second Vatican Council underlined again this profound correspondence between Christianity and the Enlightenment, seeking to come to a true conciliation between the Church and modernity, which is the great heritage that both sides must defend. Given all this, it is necessary that both sides engage in self-reflection and be willing to correct themselves.

One wonders what would have happened, had White been influenced by Benedict rather than Spengler, or had his impressionable young talent been formed now instead of during that defining period between two terrible world wars. It would be simple to assume—without thinking too much or too deeply about the subject—that the novelist and the pope are antithetical and irreconcilable, but the more I read their work the less certain that seems. They share a similar sense of the crisis facing Western civilisation, because of their different approaches to the Enlightenment. I suspect those who don't like White don't like Benedict either; however, the novelist and the pope are obviously on different pages of the same book. And they cast a dazzling light upon each other.

~ THE END ~