

Heaven in a grain of sand'—Patrick White's Contemporary Vision

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Abstract

Australia's Nobel Prize-winning writer, Patrick White, has unequivocally stated: "Religion—that's behind all my novels...." He remains acutely aware of the challenge before a writer with such preoccupations in the context of the contemporary world and his writing strategies present a range of subtleties designed, it would appear, to negotiate the challenges its dominant secular ethos. The dismissal of the religious stance as irrational is undermined in these texts by the consistent projection of the irrational as a source of valuable cognitive experience. Indeed the overvaluing of the rational faculties is shown to cripple the human spirit. Against the charge of the evasion of human realities, the religious experience is shown to be deeply imbricated in the mundane realities of ordinary existence. White's evocative style of writing exploits all the suggestiveness of image and symbol and the devices of poetry to enforce an acceptance of his vision of human experience as innately involved with a transcendental religious dimension. Most interesting is the nature of White's "saints." They are all sinners first, conscious of the flaws of their imperfect natures. Spiritual understanding is grasped through embracing the mundane realities of ordinary existence, not an ascetic withdrawal from it. Mystical experiences are projected as a kind of seeing deeper into the phenomenal world rather than an escape into transcendence. White's saints attain understanding of transcendental mysteries through immersion in the gritty realities of the mundane world. White's novels project a Blakean vision of "Heaven in a grain of sand."

It should be emphasised at the outset that Patrick White, so far, Australia's only native-born Nobel Prize winning novelist should not be too narrowly categorised as a "religious" writer. His works have a magisterial breadth and range of theme that have invited a range of varied approaches to his work. Yet White has himself unequivocally asserted the central concern of his novels: "Religion—that's behind all my novels ... the relationship between the blundering human being and God." (McGregor, 1969,216). As the "blundering human beings" of his novels succeed in working out their relationship to "an unseen order"—to God, their lives appear to open to the possibility of a harmonious resolution of all the vicissitudes of experience.. His own faith cannot admit of narrow categorisation: "I belong to no church but I have a religious faith ... I have lifted various bits from various religions in trying to come to a better understanding."(McGregor,1969, 218). Religion, in White's work does not imply constraints within a narrow orthodoxy; it conforms rather to the broad definition proffered by William James as "a belief that there is an unseen order and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto." (1928, 271)

Notwithstanding the obvious secularisation of the modern world which made White realise his preoccupation with religious themes ensured his work "sticks in the guts of the rigidly rational;" he also believed that 'most people have a religious factor, but are afraid that by admitting it they will forfeit their right to be considered intellectuals.(Wilkes & Herring,1973,138)' This Paper will highlight some of the writerly strategies through which White negotiates the challenges which appear to confront the writer who attempts to explore a religious vision of the world

The most significant and wide-ranging debates regarding the interface between religion and literature seem to have been mostly located in the period between the 1940's and 1970's and occupied the attention of some of the best critical and creative talents of the time. The time was also synonymous with White's own emergence as a writer of repute on the national and world stage and obviously engaged his own intellectual probing and provoked his own imaginative and creative experimentation.

Paul van Buren, commenting on the excessively secularised nature of the culture of the mid-twentieth century stated: 'Today we cannot even understand the Nietzschean cry that God is dead, for if it were so how would we know?' (1963,103.)

White was acutely aware of the difficulties inherent in the exploration of religious themes in the context of the time but was convinced of the possibilities of negotiating the challenge: 'Now as the world grows more pagan, one has to lead people in the same direction in a different way.'(McGregor,218). In the context of a world which continues to be obsessed with scientific and technological advancement and material progress it is precisely the religious experience which lacks this sense of human relevance.

The question of belief and literature—of how far it is possible for readers to respond to a work which embodies a view of life and experience diametrically opposed to their own was extensively debated in the 1950's and 60's by such eminent figures as T.S.Eliot, Cleanth Brooks, W.K. Wimsatt, David Daiches and others.(It cannot be followed in detail here, but the Note appended at the end of this Paper details some of the most significant contributions to that debate.) As one contributor to the debate has remarked, 'We are empiricists , and in so far as God is an incorrigibly non-empirical word, we find it puzzling, or more likely simply uninteresting.' (Ferre, 1968.13)While the details of the debate of the problems of belief in literature cannot be followed here, the degree of consensus that does emerge can be noted, that is, the acceptance of the idea that the acceptability of the work must depend finally on its potential to convince as the representation of a fundamentally human experience.

In the White text, the purely materialistic and rationalistic attitude which is at the root of the rejection of the religious experience is shown to be spiritually stultifying; true vision is reserved rather for those who live by the promptings of faith and intuition recognising the primacy of spiritual values. The White text appears to deliberately work towards undermining the mind-set which would glorify the logical and ratiocinative powers of the intellect as the only mode of understanding. Throughout the novels a regularly recurring series of figures such as the divine fool, the nun-like spinster, the Wordsworthian child-figure, the artist, constitute a kind of elect of the spiritually alive: these live primarily by the dictates of the imagination and intuition. Their admission to vision and final understanding underlines his view: "I don't reject it but I think intuition is more important".(McGregor,1969, p.218). Dependence on the limited powers of the rational intellect is shown to be the prime characteristic of the spiritually dead. The rationalist intellectual—such types as George Goodman (AS) , Norbert Hare (RC) or Waldo Brown(SM) —are all 'hollow men' spiritually crippled by their dependence on the narrow capabilities of the intellect. For example, the German professor Himmelfarb must first recognise the futility of his cerebral probing and admit ' the intellect has failed us' before he can become a rider in the chariot of the redeemed. The shallow materialist—whether prosperous merchant, rich grazier, sophisticated society woman—is a companion figure to the hollow intellectual: all remain equally emotionally and spiritually handicapped, unable to rise above the greed for wealth and status. Interestingly, Ronald Conway 's analysis of Australian society in the mid 1970's, highlights these types: the intelligentsia who reject religion as outworn myth and those only preoccupied with material contingencies, a type of 'metaphysical moron (Conway,1974, 208).

White's vision is closely akin to Carl Jung's, of the deep-seated nature of the spiritual yearnings of human beings and the need for recognition of the psychic potential of the human spirit of which the conscious rational processes are only a fraction of the totality. The harmoniously integrated personality is one which reflects a balance between the promptings

of the rational intellect and the powers of the unconscious, between the *yin* and the *yang*, the male and the female aspects of the human psyche. Androgynous motifs mark the progress of his spiritual seekers to psychic wholeness: Theodora is a “bloke in skirts”(AS) and the intervention of Holstius, an animus figure is instrumental in helping her attain psychic balance.] -Laura is the anima figure in Voss’ progress and his dream shortly before his death of swimming, joined at the waist to Laura suggests the development in him of the female virtues of humility and love(V). Himmelfarb, guided by his wife Reha, moves beyond the masculine limitations of dependence on the intellect to progress to the attainment of spiritual vision through faith and devotion

Other modes of true cognition are highlighted so that the ‘levelling rancorous rational sort of mind’ denounced by Yeats, the mind-set which is directly antagonistic to the religious experience is further undermined. Art is accorded a role of particular importance; often conveying a cognitive experience which is not of a logically analysable kind. It is through music that Theodora, like Ruth Godbold (RC) is admitted to a state of illumination. Through Arthur’s dance Mrs. Poulter grasps something of the wider meaning of their lives; disappointments and frustrations are resolved within a perception of a larger harmony. States of drunkenness, dreams, delirium where the control normally exercised by the rational mind is temporarily in abeyance enable an expansion of consciousness. For example, in *Voss*, Laura, while deliriously ill in Sydney, is enabled to perceive Voss’ sufferings in the desert and to interpret the nature of his spiritual progress. The divine fool always belongs within the group of White’s spiritual elect; madness is diagnosed as a “state of lucidity.”(AS).

Apart from distrust of its sheer irrationality, the religious stance is dismissed by the modern-day intellectual and pragmatist as simply escapist, a facile evasion of the hard realities of human experience. As T. S. Eliot puts it, the religious artist is regarded as evincing a “special and limited awareness” as though his consciousness of God leads him to neglect his relationship to his fellow man.(1972 , 39).Faith in God is used to bypass the actual complexities of the human condition—the limitations of time, of place and the other attributes of human finitude. In fact, the only means through which spiritual and transcendental truths can be conveyed to the human mind (as Christ himself demonstrated so strikingly through his use of parables in the gospels) is through analogies drawn from the material world. Otherwise, as Allan Tate has demonstrated in his comparison of Poe’s artistic failures with Dante’s success, the artist falls a victim to the “angelism of the intellect “ a neglect to project experience of the transcendental through the palpable world of ordinary human life.(Tate, 1959,471).

He finds in the world of nature as indeed in the world of objects and mundane life, as Alan Tate insisted the religious artist must find, ‘a coherent chain of analogies, through which some understanding of his transcendental themes may be conveyed in the only way truly convincing to the human being—through the mediation of objects and essences immediately present to the senses. William Lynch has argued that for the religious artist, the path to the transcendental must lie through the actual physical world, so that with every ‘plunge through or down into the real contours of being , the imagination also shoots up into insight ... the plunge down causally generates the plunge up (1963, 28).

So trees and flowers emerge as mandalic symbols; the sun, and fire, as images of the deity; fire can also function as purgatorial flames, water symbolises the processes of spiritual regeneration, storms are events where divine power may be tangibly manifested before the awed human being Limitations of time will not allow me here more than the crudest

enumeration of White's symbolic patterning; its subtlety depends on the diverse and shifting interconnections which constantly resist arbitrary compartmentalising. To mention one example, the white rose functions as a symbol of transcendental perfection and spiritual wholeness, the red is also associated with sensual and erotic love and in other contexts can symbolise the transient and the deceitful. White sees transcendental possibilities in the most ordinary of objects: marbles, tables, chandeliers acquire the significance of mandalas. Wood and stone can project qualities of strength and integrity, milk, yellow soap and cheese – innocence and honesty. Breaking bread acquires a sacramental significance. Embedded as they are in deeply familiar experience, these recurrent symbols and images also help generate a sense of the human relevance of the transcendental experience which is imbricated in them.

White has spoken feelingly of his struggle “to create completely fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words,” (Flynn and Brennan, 1989, 16) His strategy was the devising of a technique that is closer to poetry than to the more staid resources of traditional prose: imagery, symbol, syntax and rhythm work powerfully on the reader to evoke what one critic has described as a ‘hallucinated attention.’ Carl Harrison-Ford, while affirming his innate distrust of transcendental admits, ‘White’s skills impress me to the extent that they sway me against my own inclinations ... he overrides my scepticism by the power of his accumulative narrative skills.’ (1973, 13).

White's style which so aggravated his early readers is now recognised for what it is—an attempt to embody in language the almost inexpressible meanings he was attempting to convey: his style is “the very linchpin of what he has to say.” (Heseltine, 1973, 74)

It is primarily through the protagonists of his works, White's ‘saints’ (the term recurs significantly within the novels as a descriptor) that the religious experience must finally emerge as humanly relevant. Anthony Burgess has warned that the anaemic goodness of the conventional saint is unpromising as fictional material: “the saint has merged his will in the will of God and has renounced freedom ... he lacks colour, conflict, variety, libido.” White's saints however are no pale paragons of perfection, but imperfect beings who struggle through a lifetime to overcome ‘the great monster self.’ (AS) Theodora, impatient with her selfish, ailing mother can even contemplate the idea of murder (AS); Stan, aghast at his wife's infidelity commits his own act of betrayal with a prostitute and in a drunken fit vomits out his belief in God (TM); Ellen Roxburgh betrays her husband through her adulterous attraction to his brother and retains little gratitude to the convict who aids her return to ‘civilisation.’ In the depths of the forest this English lady can even participate in an act of cannibalism.(FL). The experience of his spiritual seekers is marked by setbacks and failures throughout the whole long human progress from childhood to old age..

Time is the all-important factor that is never bypassed. His work is therefore strikingly exempt from the fault William Lynch finds so often in the work of the religious writer, the attempt to make “a facile leap into the transcendental”. Lynch condemns the futility of this device, for “it is only by struggling through this structure of temporality ... that one can gain access to real insight ... understanding is an illumination that comes of a passage through experience...(1963,28). White's work evokes a strong sense of the lived life bound by mundane routines and homely tasks and the ever-present awareness of the march of time. Peter Beatson emphasises that the body has a solid presence in White's work: an awareness of ‘gristle and nostrils, knuckles and goitres.’ (1976, 104).

'Time, place and circumstance, the physical body itself—all the limiting factors of our being in the flesh have ample place in White's narratives. However high the spirit of his visionaries might soar, their spiritual strivings are never divorced from the ordinary business of daily life: so Hurtle Duffield's speculations as to the nature of the deity are scrawled on the walls of his dunny(VIV), Elizabeth Hunter's final surrender to the infinite, in the moment of death takes place as she sits on the commode . (ES). It is not only this particular novel (centred on a protagonist in the final stages of old age and illness) but all of White's work could be described as being pervaded with 'the smell of mortality.'(Kiernan, 1973,13).

These saints are not reclusivse ascetics; rather, they lend a capable hand with the tasks of the workaday world: Theodora nurses her aged mother "it was she who came when the voice called."(AS). Stan helps his neighbours in emergencies of flood and fire and even enlists in the country's war effort, as well as in more mundane tasks of setting a fence-post, or helping a cow give birth to a calf.Arthur Brown(SM) bakes the bread and milks the cow; Mrs. Godbold sings her paens of praise in the shed in which she lives as she irons the laundry she takes in order to support her family . As William James expresses it, "a saint who cannot bear a hand with the day to day tasks of the world is but a poor creature" (1928, 273).

All of them show a particular openness to the world of nature. Stan is not only moved by the majesty of the storm;he can also perceive the hand of the Creator in a veined leaf or the glimpse of a lizard in his garden. (TM).In Ellen's youth,'rocks had been her altars, spring water her sacrament.'(FL). A special empathy exists between these saints and the world of birds and animals: Theodora(AS) and Arthur (SM) find in dogs the affection denied them by their families; Mary Hare rears a nestling in her blouse and feeds the snake in her garden; burrowing through the tunnels of grass and undergrowth of the ruined garden of Xanadu, she is herself more animal than a human , as indeed her very name suggests. From Theodora who is deeply moved by the 'touching grub' (AS .23) in the heart of the rose or consoled by the affection of a dog for peoples' neglect of her, to Stan to whom even the sight of a solitary lizard can be the occasion of 'love and wonder' (TM .22), or 'Voss, who even at the height of his pride had always shown his concern for his animals to Arthur Brown who attempts as a child to reach towards the beauty of the sun, a feeling for the things and creatures of the natural world appears to be virtually the mark of of spiritual election. It is a common quality in all his visionaries. Mary Hare 'liked animals, birds and plants' (RC .18) and Himmelfarb agrees with her that 'the earth is wonderful' (RC ,154).

The most ordinary of objects function as sources of spiritual illumination. The sight of chairs and tables can console in moments of stress.So in Stan Parker's last moments, a gob of spit becomes charged with transcendental implications while for Arthur Brown the contemplation of a glass marble brings an experience of the numinous. Himmelfarb would have his wife remember that 'God is in this table' (RC 142) as a reason for comfort and Duffield at one stage paints only chairs and tables because he feels 'What can be more honest? More real?' (VIV.404).Throughout her trials, Ellen Roxburgh clings to her wedding ring which functions for her as a kind of protective mandala, 'a continual source of modest reassurance' (FL.245).

Does the experience of mystical vision granted these saints detract from this impression of their homespun humanity? While some critics have been considerably repulsed by these episodes, when analysed closely they appear as experiences of heightened, not of diminished, awareness . Indeed they are more appropriately described in the words of William James as states of cosmic consciouness." (1928,39. E.M. Forster has pointed out that when an element of the 'fantastic' is introduced into a novel, it can result in choking off the participation of the

reader (1972, 85). The objection to the mystical experience whether in fiction or real life, derives from the feeling that it is an evasion of the realities of the ordinary world. Yet investigators of the experience hold that rather than being an escape from, it is a seeing deeper into, the nature of all reality. William James quotes one researcher's description of the state as being one of 'cosmic consciousness;' its features appear to strikingly resemble the experience of White's characters:

The prime characteristic of cosmic consciousness is a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe. Along with this there occurs an intellectual enlightenment which alone would place the individual on a new plane of existence.(James,1923,39).

As these experiences are dramatized within the novels, the impression of a heightened, not of a diminished awareness, emerges. Usually the character is presented as deeply engrossed in some detail of the external world, which detail becomes then somehow invested with a broader, more inclusive reality. It is while listening to music that Oliver Halliday feels himself 'passing with a fresher knowledge of the tangible, to a point where this dissolved, became the spiritual' (HV.19). Elyot Standish recollects Ard's Bay as one of the 'positive moments' of his life, a moment when he had 'looked into the water and saw the shapes of things' (AS 101). For Theodora it seems that when Holstius 'laid his hands on, she experiences a new clarity of vision so that 'leaves glistened down to the least important vein,' (AS .294). Stan in the garden observes the trees, the cabbages the onion seed, even 'the bare patches of each on which rabbits sat' (TM .1.75), and all these details of the external scene merge into the 'large triumphal scheme of which he was becoming mysteriously aware' (TM 175), so that he invokes these details in his final act of faith: 'I believe, he said in the cracks of the path on which ants were struggling over ...' (TM p.477). Similarly, Laura too is acutely conscious of her surroundings, and as she describes her experience in her letter to Voss, 'my understanding seemed to enter into wind, the earth, the ocean beyond ... I was destroyed yet living more intensely ... (V 239). It is the contemplation of the actual glass marble in his hand that sweeps A ur Brown into the consciousness of a more inclusive reality: 'the circle of the distant mountains would close round, the golden disc spinning closer in the sky as he contemplated the smaller sphere lying on the palm of his hand' (SM 23). For Duffield, it is the spectacle of the sky: 'The colours were vibrating. The extra indigo sky above the casseta houses ...' (VIV 549) enforces a realization that he must 'Hang on to the last and first secret of the indigo' (VIV 549). It is the text above the altar in the crude chapel which appears to trigger Ellen Roxburgh's experience; she is overwhelmed by its implications and though 'the tears were running down her cheeks' (FL 390), her mind also registers all the details of the scene before her, the 'bright sunlight', the birds flying 'first one, then a second, in at a window and out the opposite'. As with the others, it seems that her view of the immediate corporeal phenomenon is somehow purified and enhanced so she 'could not have seen more clearly, down to the cracks in the wooden bench, the bird droppings on the rudimentary altar'. All of these varied yet similar experiences convey the impression William James describes as follows:

"The keynote of it is invariably reconciliation. It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles were melted into unity."

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Appendix

1. Novels by Patrick White

Includes abbreviations referring to works mentioned in this Paper.:

- Happy Valley (1939). London: Harrap. HV
- The Living and the Dead (1941). Ringwood, Vic: Penguin. LD
- The Aunt's Story (1948). Ringwood, Vic: Penguin. AS
- The Tree of Man* (1955). (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin. TM
- Voss* (1957). Ringwood, Vie: Penguin. V
- Riders in the Chariot* (1961). Ringwood, Vic: Penguin. RC
- The Solid Mandala* (1966). Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, SM
- The Vivisector* (1970). Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, VIV
- The Eye of the Storm* (1973). London: Jonathan Cape. ES.
- A Fringe of Leaves* (1976). London: Jonathan Cape. FL
- The Twyborn Affair* (1984). London: Jonathan Cape.

2. NOTE: A Religion And Belief In Literature

For a discussion of T. S. Eliot's varying attitudes to this problem, see Allen Austin (1961) "T. S. Eliot's Quandary," *University of Kansas City Review*, Vol. XXVII, 60, pp. 143-148. See also, Cleanth Brooks (1958) "Implications of an Organic Theory of Poetry," *Literature and Belief: English Institute Essays*, ed. M. H. Abrams Columbia Univ. Press, pp. 53-79; Nathan Scott, "The Collaboration of the Poetic Vision in the Poetic Act," *Literature and Belief*, 106-138; W. K. Wimsatt, (1954) "Poetry and Morals: A Relation Re-argued," in W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, Univ. of Kentucky Press, 85-100; David Daiches (1948) "Literature and Belief," *A Study of Literature*, New York: Cornell University Press., 212-226.

NOTE B. Australia—Contemporary Culture and Religion.

Despite the general sense in Australian life—as in most Western nations—of a dwindling of religious belief and church attendance in contemporary times, Elaine Lindsay cites in the Introduction to her study of Australian women's religious writing, at least a dozen books in

the past decade that attempt to explore and examine the symbols of an indigenous (ie Euro-Australian as distinct from an Aboriginal) theology; varied attempts to ‘ockerise’ the church .See *Re-Writing God: Spirituality in Contemporary Australian Women’s Fiction*(2000), Amsterdam: Rodopi.

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