Contrivance, Artifice, and Art: Satire and Parody in the Novels of Patrick White

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ABSTRACT

This study arose out of what I saw as a gap in the criticism of Patrick White’s fiction in which satire and its related subversive forms are largely overlooked. It consequently reads five of White’s post-1948 novels from the standpoint of satire. It discusses the history and various theories of satire to develop an analytic framework appropriate to his satire and it conducts a comprehensive review of the critical literature to account for the development of the dominant orthodox religious approach to his fiction. It compares aspects of White’s satire to aspects of the satire produced by some of the notable exemplars of the English and American traditions and it takes issue with a number of the readings produced by the religious and other established approaches to White’s fiction.

I initially establish White as a satirist by elaborating the social satire that emerges incidentally in The Tree of Man and rather more episodically in Voss. I investigate White’s sources for Voss to shed light on the extent of his engagement with history, on his commitment to historical accuracy, and on the extent to which this is a serious high-minded historical work in which he seeks to teach us more about our selves, particularly about our history and identity. The way White expands his satire in Voss given that it is an eminently historical novel is instructive in terms of his purposes. I illustrate White’s burgeoning use of satire by elaborating the extended and sometimes extravagant satire that he develops in Riders in the Chariot, by investigating the turn inwards upon his own creative activity that occurs when he experiments with a variant subversive form, satire by parody, in The Eye of the Storm, and by examining his use of the devices, tropes, and strategies of post-modern grotesque satire in The Twyborn Affair.

My reading of White’s novels from the standpoint of satire enables me to identify an important development within his oeuvre that involves a shift away from the symbolic realism of The Aunt’s Story (1948) and the two novels that precede it to a mode of writing that is initially historical in The Tree of Man and Voss but which becomes increasingly satirical as White expands his satire and experiments with such related forms as burlesque, parody, parodic satire, and grotesque satire in his subsequent novels. I thus chart a change in the nature of his satire that reflects a dramatic movement away from the ontological concerns of modernism to the epistemological concerns of post-modernism. Consequent upon this, I pinpoint the changes in the philosophy that his satire bears as its ultimate meaning.

I examine the links between the five novels and White’s own period to establish the socio-historical referentiality of his satire. I argue that because his engagement with Australian history, society, and culture, is ongoing and thorough, then these five novels together comprise a subjective history of the period, serving to complement our knowledge in these areas. This study demonstrates that White’s writing, because of the ongoing development of his satire, is never static but ever-changing. He is not simply or exclusively a religious or otherwise metaphysical novelist, or a symbolist–allegorist, or a psychological realist, or any other kind of generic writer. Finally, I demonstrate that White exceeds the categories that his critics have tried to impose upon him.
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Introduction

Patrick White’s novels typically involve long, complex narratives of epic proportions, they encompass a variety of modes and styles of writing, and they reflect a range of attitudes and philosophies. They are thus generally patient of interpretation and so his critics have been able to adopt highly focussed approaches to his work. These approaches have produced many interesting and insightful critiques but also a good deal of critical dispute. What appears to have lain behind these approaches was uncertainty. White’s critics were unsure of how to respond in any holistic way to a writer who did not fit any one category and who wrote against the social realist paradigm that still dominated Australian Literature in the 1950s when White first came to prominence through the burgeoning success of *The Tree of Man* in the United States and Britain. The adoption of one kind of highly focussed approach or another quickly became something of a tradition in White criticism so that his novels have been subjected to a vast number of specific, narrow analyses, most notably those produced by various symbolist-allegorical, social-realist, modernist, Marxist, religious, and psycho-analytic approaches. The net effect of this is that those aspects of his novels that White’s critics have chosen to scrutinise have been considered in isolation rather than as parts that contribute to a greater, novelistic whole.

Although White’s novels have been subject to these various approaches, it is the religious interpretation of his work that has achieved orthodox status. There are novels which foreground religious subjects and themes — one may think of the epiphanies and glimpses of eternity in *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*, or White’s drawings on Judeo-Christian religious tradition for *Riders in the Chariot*, or the Eastern mysticism and spiritualism that infuses *The Solid Mandala*. This religious content supports the orthodox conception of
White as a metaphysical and ultimately religious writer, but his subsequent treatment of religious subjects and themes in his later novels provides no such support. White comes to satirise, in *The Twyborn Affair* for example, his earlier serious treatment of spirituality, religion, and religious tradition, suggesting that treatment to have been ridiculous because pretentious and portentous.

In this study, I focus upon the satire in White’s work, showing it and what may be called ‘the satiric’ to constitute a rich and developing vein from *The Tree of Man* to *Three Uneasy Pieces*, his last prose fiction. Behind this study is my concern that most critics largely overlook or choose to ignore this satire and such related forms as the irony, the burlesque, and the parody that occur and recur in the novels I have selected. Those critics who do consider the presence of these subversive forms may discuss the ironic play and the social satire of *Voss*, or the grotesque parody of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* in *The Eye of the Storm*, or the playfully ironic comedy of manners that unfolds in the opening scenes of *The Twyborn Affair*, but they do not see these kinds of passages as part of a pattern, as the manifold and recurrent effects of White’s developing satire. The growing presence of this often exaggerated, intemperate satire in conjunction with gross or obscene parody seems hardly compatible with the orthodox conception of White as an essentially metaphysical and ultimately religious writer. Yet he has been most widely celebrated as such.

This study shows that White, after his permanent return to Australia, increasingly turns to satire’s instruments — to irony, paradox, parody, oxymoron, hyperbole, sarcasm, and burlesque — to make his subjects ridiculous so as to elicit attitudes of amusement or scorn towards them. I argue that this turn to satire is a function of White’s ongoing response to Australian history, society, and culture and, in the case of *The Eye of the Storm* (1970), *The Twyborn Affair* (1976), and *The Memoirs of Many in One* (1982), of his response to his own creative activity. His use of the satiric fluctuates but it becomes more prolific and more complex in the course of his work so that it comes to dominate these later novels. This, on its own, recommends the modal — as opposed to generic — approach that I take when I read five of the nine novels produced by White after 1948 in terms of satire or as satire *per se*.

Satire emerges incidentally in *The Tree of Man* (1955) and rather more episodically in *Voss* (1957) before it assumes structural proportions and near stylistic dominance in *Riders*
in the Chariot (1961). It subsides in The Solid Mandala (1966), The Vivisector (1970), and in A Fringe of Leaves (1976), but in The Eye of the Storm, The Twyborn Affair, The Memoirs of Many in One, and Three Uneasy Pieces, it resumes its domination to the point that these may be described as satirical works. The Memoirs of Many in One and Three Uneasy Pieces (1988) are not formally considered here because White realises his mature style in the novel that immediately precedes them. The other five novels have been chosen because satire not only emerges in the first two of them before it further develops in the later novels but also because it is, in all of them, the product of White's engagement with Australian history, society, and culture and is thus socio-historically referential; because these novels chart a radical shift in the nature of White's satire and consequently in the philosophy or worldview that his satire bears as its ultimate meaning; and because in charting this shift in the nature of White's satire we also chart the movement towards the realisation of his mature style. These five novels have also been chosen because they demonstrate that White is not only an accomplished satirist but also that he is at his best as a novelist when he writes satire. White's satire colours and energises his fiction so that his novels are confronting but amusing, entertaining, and enlightening, while at the same time they become socio-culturally valuable critical documents.

A reading of the novels I have chosen — The Tree of Man, Voss, and Riders in the Chariot, the first three novels produced after White's return to Australia, and then The Eye of the Storm and The Twyborn Affair, two of his last four prose fictions1 — from the perspective of satire affords some significant benefits. First, my reading of these novels shows that there is a measure of truth in the formalist view that satire is rhetorical, that it must have discernible, socio-referential targets and that it implies norms and standards against which behaviour may be gauged, but it also shows that satire tends to divorce itself from these purposes and interests over time. Satire becomes playful, sometimes unfairly so, and it becomes principally a means, as Stephen Greenblatt puts it, to relieve the pressure in the satirist's breast2. Because satire relieves itself of these burdens in favour of

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1 I use the term prose fictions here because while The Eye of the Storm, The Twyborn Affair, and The Memoirs of Many in One are novels, White's last published work, Three Uneasy Pieces is not. This prose fiction, as its title suggests, comprises three quite discrete satirical commentaries or disquisitions.

free play, it liberates us from conceiving of White in the time-honoured ways — as, for example, a symbolist-allegorist, a modernist, a religious or otherwise metaphysical writer, an élitist, an expressionist, or as a writer driven by unconscious, deeply embedded archetypes — while at the same time it allows us to draw upon elements of the criticism to which these novels have been subjected. We are able to recognise that White is to some extent all of the things he has been acclaimed for being — or charged with being — but none of them in particular and once we recognise that the subversive devices, tropes, and strategies that he deploys are in the service of an increasingly unfettered radical aesthetic, we can appreciate his social criticism and the breadth of his satiric vision. We see that what concerns White are such historical forces as the relentless march of suburbia, the rise of consumerism, materialism, and intolerance, and the limitations of the dominant tradition of Australian Literature. It becomes clear that White does not avoid the weight of history but goes back in time to confront it, to transfigure it, and sometimes to make fun of it through his satire. His satire thus bears his sense of how the forces of history, myth, legend, tradition, and ideology, conspire against the individual in Australian culture. This study elaborates the historical resonance that White builds into these novels and so reveals the extent to which his representations are far from being purely imaginative constructions but are the products of the meeting of the 'imaginary' and the 'real' or historic. White's imaginative transfigurations of the 'real' or historic add layers of complexity to his work and this complexity, in turn, exemplifies the considerable creative energy that he expends in his writing. The study is able to show that White uses a literal mode of writing in his early works in order to teach us more about ourselves, as Susan Lever argues, but that he increasingly turns, in the course of this, to the figurative mode of writing provided by satire to mock us. We are able to see that White not only mocks us again and again for our human foibles, follies, and failings but that he also comes to mock his own creative activity so that, in a sense, he writes satire in spite of what were his earlier high-minded intentions for his novels. This suggests a tension between his desire to play the role of moral teacher and his impulse to satirise, to mock. This tension suggests itself as the original armature of

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White's creativity and it is not resolved but enhanced by White's increasing turn to satire and, more particularly, the radical change that occurs in his satire as it sheds even a pretence to cure, as it becomes more extravagantly playful and downright degenerative. It is this satire that produces White's most exuberant and most potent writing.

Perhaps the greatest benefit from approaching White's fiction from the standpoint of satire is that the need or the desire to mythologise the author becomes much less important. Once we recognise that White comes to satirise religious beliefs and practices, including his own representations of them, it is not possible to claim that the text reflects religious insights nor is it possible to claim that the author is a religious writer 'pure and simple'\(^4\). We are also able to recognise, more appropriately, the moral outrage and the monstrous authorial persona that looms in the novels from time to time as part and parcel of the satirist's craft while at the same time we are given ample proof of his commitment and courage as a satirist. In addition, this approach allows us to account for the emergence of White's own post-modern satiric aesthetic, to see that the novels comprise subjective but valuable alternative social histories even though they are contemporary novels (from White's contemporaneous perspective), and to see that satire and its related forms are of such fundamental importance to White's work that *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* are stepping stones and *Riders in the Chariot*, *The Eye of the Storm*, and *The Twyborn Affair* milestones not only in the development of his satire but also in the development of his mature *oeuvre*. This study argues that White was pre-disposed to write satire by both his experience and by his temperament.

**An Interest in Social Life, a Worm's-Eye View, and a Puritanical Strain**

White was disposed to write satire by his abiding interest in its most fertile soil, that is, in social life itself, by his preference for adopting what he describes as a worm's-eye view of the world\(^5\), and by the puritanical strain that he seems to have acquired as a child. His interest in social life is first evident in a story published on the children's page of the

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\(^4\) Marion Spies, "'Affecting Godhead' — Religious Language and Thinking in *Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot*, in *Antipodes*, vol 6 no 1, 1992, p. 23.

Sydney Sunday Times in which he imaginatively describes, as a ten-year-old, a family outing to Mt Wilson. His ongoing interest in social life and the means by which he transfigures it is evident in the handful of satirical sketches he produced for the English theatre at the beginning of his professional writing career and in his first published novel, Happy Valley (1938).

White first indicates his preference for a worm's-eye view of the world in a letter to Manning Clark dated 17-10-77 in which he asks the Australian historian for 'something' that will give him 'the facts leading up to World War Two' and in a subsequent letter dated 27-11-77 in which he thanks Clark for the list of histories but adds that they 'all sound a bit exalted' and that they were not 'the worm's-eye view of events' he hoped to find 'somewhere'. These two letters indicate White's interest in history and historical accuracy but also the value that he places on the perspective that he describes as a worm's-eye view. White confirms this value in a letter dated 9-12-79 to the expatriate Australian novelist, Shirley Hazzard. He criticises Hazzard for her 'chief lack', that is, 'exposure to everyday vulgarity and squalor' and in a subsequent letter dated 20-1-80 he assures her that he has had a great deal of this kind of exposure himself and that he feels Australians should, as he puts it, have their noses rubbed in it.

There are many instances in White's autobiography, in his letters, and in David Marr's biography of White, that show he was in a position to observe everyday vulgarity and squalor early on. In his autobiography, for example, White recalls from childhood 'the Mad Woman' and her 'blotched alcoholic skin and munching gums' whom he met 'in our backyard rootling through the garbage bins...sorting and wrapping in greasy paper...stinking fish skeletons and heads'. White also gained first hand experience of squalor and horror during his war service in North Africa and in Greece during the Civil War that followed upon the withdrawal of the German occupation forces. White's

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6 David Marr, Patrick White Letters, 1994, p. 3.
7 For examples of White's work in this area see 'Peter Plover's Party' and others in Patrick White Selected Writings, ed. Alan Lawson, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, pp. 199-202.
8 17-10-77, in Marr 1994, p. 500.
10 9-12-79 and 20-1-80, in Marr 1994, pp. 524-525.
12 In Flaws in the Glass, pp. 92-93, White reveals that one of his more gruesome duties as an
preference for his particular view of the world owes something to this kind of experience but also to the opportunity it affords him to confront all manner of subjects, including the most unsavoury and most painful of human activities and affairs. White, having been led to confront these subjects, uses satire to transfigure them but also to relieve the kind of pressure in his breast that Greenblatt refers to and which these kinds of subjects generate. It may also be the case that such matters as vulgarity, obscenity, or degeneracy are something of an obsession for satirists so that they are drawn to embrace a low-level perspective. White’s own preference for such a perspective, in any case, serves him very well as a satirist.

White seems to have acquired a puritanical strain during his earliest formative years when, as his autobiography reveals, he spent a great deal more time with his nursemaid, Lizzie Clark, than with his parents. White describes Clark not only as ‘a paragon of virtue’ but also as ‘the Scottish version’ of the English breed of Puritan. This puritanical strain is as important to White’s satire as his interest in social life because it directs his satirical eye and it underwrites the moral norms that his satire seems to reflect before these dissolve in *The Eye of the Storm* and *The Twyborn Affair*. This puritanical strain energises White’s satire by lending it satirical bite through the antipathy it expresses and the criticism it implies while the worm’s-eye view that White adopts provides the most useful perspective from which to consider the diverse forms of social life that comprise the ground of his satire.

White’s inclination to turn to satire to deal with the realities of social life and indeed with the force of history is suggested in his much-quoted essay, *The Prodigal Son*, which he produced between Voss (1957) and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961). He describes the pointlessness of his life in Europe, he explains that ‘scenes of childhood’ drew him back to Australia in spite of ‘the perfection of antiquity’ he found in Greece, and he gives an account of the influences that led him to write *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*. White not only criticizes the Australian novel for being ‘the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic

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RAF intelligence officer in North Africa was to search the charred and mutilated bodies of soldiers on the battlefields for identification and information.


realism' but he also suggests his own high-minded intentions for these novels when he goes on to outline his struggle 'to create completely fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words' and, further, when he mentions the possibility that through art — what he symbolises as the book lent, the record played — 'one may be helping to people a barely inhabited country with a race possessed of understanding' (pp. 39-40). The point is that in making these kinds of revelations and declarations, White's essay, like the novels, is driven by noble, worthy ideas. These ideas indicate the nature and the strength of his moral philosophy, particularly the high value he places upon the redemptive and educative potential of art.

*The Prodigal Son*, however, is not only a seriously critical, exegetical essay. White suddenly turns to satire when he writes of 'the ugliness, the bags and iron of Australian life' and of what he suggests to be an almost boundless void. There is little that could be taken for considered seriousness or nobility of purpose in White's satiric description of this apparent vacuum:

> In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind eyes, in which human teeth fall like autumn leaves, the buttocks of cars grow hourly glassier, food means cake and steak, muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from average nerves. (p. 38).

This is pure satire — it expresses White's sense of the mindlessness, the emphasis on material wealth, the absence of genuine intellectual life, the brassy physicality, and the rank materialism of modern Australian life. He uses satiric exaggeration and excess, most notably in the two comically anthropomorphic metaphors in which human teeth fall like autumn leaves and in which cars seem to take on human anatomical forms, and in the wildly simplistic reduction of the Australian diet to cake and steak. Although White's voice is consistently ironic throughout, the sudden irruption of satire in this otherwise serious essay has shock value in a way that suggests stylistic inconsistency and incongruence are vital elements in satire. Satire is most effective when freely mixed with other modes and genres. The irruption of these and other subversive passages in this essay
suggests that White is going to increasingly turn to satire to deal aggressively with that which he finds in bad taste, mindless, or destructive. In addition, the irruption of satire in this context suggests that his satire will become more wayward, uncontrolled, and mixed in terms of tone, tenor, emphasis, and proportion. White's use of satire begins in *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* but it increases exponentially in *Riders in the Chariot, The Eye of the Storm,* and *The Twyborn Affair* and it does so in manifold ways.

**What is Literary Satire?**

Satire originated in the dialogic satires of Menippus (300 BC) and in the Athenian comic satires of Aristophanes before it found its classical form in the Roman verse satires of Horace, Juvenal, and Persius. The form fell into disfavour as the Greco-Roman world disintegrated but it at least survived in the goliardic verse, beast fables, and dream allegories of the Dark and Middle Ages until Erasmus (*In Praise of Folly*, 1515) and his friend Sir Thomas More (*Utopia*, 1516) revived satire in the 16th century. The success of these satirical disquisitions is almost certain to have encouraged the 17th century English Augustan poets to revive satire in its classical form. It shortly appeared in the great prose fictions of Swift, Cervantes, and Molière, and then in the broader landscape of the novel almost from the inception of the English tradition in the 18th century. Claude Rawson points out that it found a 'congenial home' in the English novel principally through the success of Henry Fielding's parody *An Apology for the Life of Mrs Shamela Andrews* (1741), his *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of His Friend Mr Abraham Adams* (1742), and Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Mr Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767).15

What this brief history indicates is that satire tends to shift to new forms. This protean ability calls into question any diachronic conception of it as a type of literature, that is, as a genre in the traditional sense of maintaining 'a relationship between a certain form and a certain content'16. This in turn suggests that it may be more appropriate to regard satire as a mode of writing, as a mode that is subject to the ebb and flow of history but also to the

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satirist's spirit or temperament. This satiric spirit seems to operate instinctively and intermittently rather than continuously and determinedly within the broad span of any given novel. White's novels are a case in point: he writes 'the satiric' incidentally or episodically in *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* before he comes to write extended satire or what may be described as satire *per se* in *Riders in the Chariot*, *The Eye of the Storm*, *The Twyborn Affair*, *The Memoirs of Many in One*, and *Three Uneasy Pieces*.

White's satire enlists such related forms as irony, parody, self-parody, and burlesque to its purposes so that these forms become additional weapons in his satiric armoury. White does not write parody in the traditional way, that is, in an exaggerated imitation of the serious subjects and themes of another work, as a riposte to another writer or critic, or in imitation of another writer's style for comic purposes such as John Phillips *The Splendid Shilling* (1705), a pointed parody of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. White writes parody rather more akin to that produced by John Barth in *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) which delivers a burlesque of the picaresque novel and formal history (a subject of interest to White) and, more importantly from the point of view of this study, a parody of its own creation. White writes parody in this vein in *The Eye of the Storm*: the extended, convoluted, and sometimes extravagant parody that he disposes in this novel mimics Shakespeare's *King Lear* but it rather more pointedly satirises by ridicule Sir Basil Hunter, the novel's central character, for conflating his private life with his professional life as a Shakespearean actor. Sir Basil is the novel's artist figure and, as such, he is engaged in the creation of fictional worlds, in the creation of art, and yet he is unmercifully mocked for this within the novel of which he is one of the most important constitutive parts. This means that where *The Sot-Weed Factor* mocks its own creation, Sir Basil, and indeed *The Eye of the Storm*, serves to mock, again by parody, the creation of fictional worlds and literary art generally. It appears that White, like Barth, writes parody for seriously subversive, satiric purposes because he is the kind of satirist who sometimes, as Gilbert Highet puts it, 'works through parody'\(^\text{17}\).

The tendency of satire to enlist and to work through other forms over time means that it no longer has a form of its own, it no longer has a particular form to adhere to. It is the case, as some critics have pointed out, that satire's inhabitation of other forms is sometimes

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so successful that it may be mistaken for those forms. This confusion of form most strongly suggests satire to be a mode of writing rather than a genre in its own right. What we thus encounter in modern and post-modern times is 'the satiric' in such works as satirical novels, verses, and essays, rather than sustained, generic satire. As satire has become more amorphous, its recognition has become more difficult and yet more crucial to the novel form in which it now most frequently appears.

The etymology for 'satire' provided by The Oxford English Dictionary indicates that the term dates from the 16th century and that it comes from the Latin word satira, a later form of satura, meaning medley. The Oxford Companion to English Literature points out that satura is an adumbration of 'lanx satura, a full dish, a hotch-potch', and it defines satire as a poem or prose composition in which 'prevailing vices or follies are held up to ridicule'. The OED similarly describes satire but emphasizes that the word involves a specific application of satura, related via satur, or full, to satis meaning enough. The lanx satura or full dish of the definitions was a dish of food and fruit offered to the Roman gods and thus the term itself was originally metaphoric, inviting a comparison between an art form and a generously mixed platter. White's satire conforms to these dictionary descriptions because it comprises a very full and mixed dish, a medley of subversive devices, tropes, strategies, modes, and genres that embrace a veritable cornucopia of language, ideas, emotions, and perceptions, and because it holds up to ridicule, again and again, an admixture of our human foibles, follies, and failures.

It is interesting to speculate as to why White's satire and, consequently, his post-1948 novels, should exhibit this notably medley quality, this rich, manifold fullness. This fullness is the product of emptiness. When White permanently returned to Australia in 1948 he did not publish another novel until The Tree of Man in 1955. During this time he settled on a smallholding at Castle Hill, on the outskirts of Sydney, becoming largely self-supporting, growing vegetables and flowers, raising poultry, selling eggs, breeding Schnauzers and Saanan goats. This can be seen as White's attempt to reconnect to

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Australia after an absence of twenty years in Europe. It is a return to the land, to the land of his childhood as he describes it in *The Prodigal Son*. However, this return to a simpler, rather more elemental lifestyle did not mean that White disengaged from Australian society or culture. His experience of the relentless march of urbanisation at Castle Hill not only prevented this but it seems to have been one of the factors that prompted him to engage with the problems and issues of the day as he saw them. What White came to see was a void, the kind of socio-cultural emptiness that he speaks of in *The Prodigal Son*. His perception of this emptiness not only led him to resume writing in the novel that became *The Tree of Man* but also to increasingly turn to and experiment with satire and its related subversive forms within the context of most of his subsequent novels. The increasing fullness of his writing is thus a consequence of his turn to satire but, at a deeper level, to the emptiness that he saw around him. Writing for White was an attempt to fill that void and his satirical writing in particular served to reconnect him to a society and culture to which he was committed but with which he was disenchanted by creating a position in it and a relationship to it that was amenable to his sensibility and disposition.

Formalist critics generally agree with the emphasis the dictionary definitions place upon satire’s intention to attack. One of the strongest amongst these is Edward Rosenheim who writes that ‘all satire is not only an attack’ but also that ‘it is an attack upon discernible, historically authentic particulars’, thus suggesting that satire must be socio-historically referential. Other formalist critics confirm this intention to attack but they also imply or claim that there is a standard or moral code embedded in satire, that satire’s aggressive intentions are at the service of correction and cure, and that satire is thus generative because corrective. Northrop Frye, for example, writes that satire’s ‘moral norms are relatively clear’ and that it ‘assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured’. For Gilbert Highet, satire’s purpose is to ‘cure’ folly and vice. For Harry Levin it is to ‘scourge’ as well as ‘purge’ and thus it is moral ‘therapy’. In insisting that satire assumes pre-existing standards and moral norms, these formalist critics

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23 Highet, p. 156.
suggest satire’s norms, standards, and values to lie in the past and so indicate it to be a
conservative art form.

What must be set against this formalist view of satire, particularly the assumption that
it bears standards and moral norms and has corrective intentions, is the fact that a good
deal of late modern and post-modern satire, including much of Patrick White’s, is
instinctive or impulsive and so uncontrolled and disorderly, and, moreover, intemperate,
obscene, immoral and finally degenerative rather than corrective. Such qualities as
intemperateness, obscenity, and immorality link White’s satire to the satires of antiquity,
to, for example, the tradition best exemplified in Juvenal’s *Sixteen Satires* in which he
vociferously attacks the violent, licentious, and decadent follies and vices of Imperial
Rome\(^25\). The impulsiveness and the consequent want of control that produce these
qualities not only ensure that late modern and early post-modern satires such as White’s
make no pretence to the standards of good behaviour and right thinking but they also
suggest that the curative claim for satire may have been a ploy, a defence against criticism
in the first place. Stephen Greenblatt suggests this lack of pretence to corrective in his
study of the modern satires of Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell, and Aldous Huxley\(^26\).

Greenblatt describes how these modern satirists lock their characters into a circle of
futility that leads ever downward through levels of increasing ‘meaninglessness, despair,
and evil’. His analysis shows that the characters of modern satire are not characters in a
conventional sense but rather vehicles for the author’s satire because there is an absence of
developing plot, an absence of developing character, and no expansion of understanding.
This extends from the minor to the major characters because extensive character study is
inconsistent with the satirist’s attempt to show the ‘ugliness, pettiness, and mindlessness’
of humankind. These characters suffer but do not overcome or even understand their
suffering, they talk but do not grasp the meaning of the words they speak, and when they
rebel they do not know exactly what they are rebelling against. The modern satirist never
allows them to rise to the level of ‘true heroism or true humanity’ but ‘always inflicts them
with impotence, keeping them as dupes or instruments of forces they cannot control’.

delight in the obscene see Book 1, Satire 2 or in the gross or vulgar, Satire 6.

1965.
They are prey to 'uncontrollable and disquieting physical impulses and needs' and they are 'often mere actors in a social drama', or 'mere symbols of overpowering political and social forces', or 'mere embodiments of ideas' (pp. 105-116).

If we examine Waugh's characterisation of Paul Pennyfeather, the central figure in his novel *Decline and Fall*, we can see that he stands as an example of the kind of satirical character Greenblatt describes but also that he foreshadows the typically beaten and betrayed but poignantly human characters that we encounter in late modernist art generally and, more particularly, in the exaggerated, absurd form of Estragon, Vladimir, Lucky, and Pozzo in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1956). Pennyfeather is less exaggerated but he, too, is merely an actor in a social drama, a man who suffers but achieves nothing because his struggle is directionless. After being unjustly sent down from Oxford, he is forced to teach at a bizarre school, he becomes engaged to a socialite who, unbeknownst to him, operates a chain of brothels, he is arrested for his involvement on the eve of his marriage, he is taken to prison and subjected to psycho-analytic treatment, certain friends effect his escape by having him pronounced dead and, finally, he resumes his reading for the Church at Oxford. There is no change despite these hair-raising events: the novel ends where it began and the circle of futility is complete. Paul Pennyfeather, like Beckett's characters, suffers but he does not enhance his knowledge or understanding because he, like them, never transcends or even comprehends his fate. There is, however, a subtle difference between the satiric heroes of Waugh and Beckett. We are led to believe the former are often such fools that their suffering is as much self-inflicted as generated by a hostile society but this is not the case with Beckett's characters — we are led to believe that they are the hapless victims of society rather than fools.

Greenblatt writes that the world of the satiric hero consists of 'perverted or wasted work, ruins and catacombs, instruments of torture and monuments of folly' and that their fates seem just in a 'perverse and bitterly ironic way'. He concludes that such characters cannot bear the weight of good behaviour or right thinking and that the purpose of this kind of modern satire is 'to relieve the pressure in the satirist's breast' (p. 117). This is to suggest that the heroes of such satires are ciphers or figures for the release, expression, and enactment of the satirist's dismay, discontent, and anger rather than more or less fully

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rounded, conventional characters. The present day importance of Greenblatt's study derives from this — such satire is self-serving rather than nobly corrective or curative. It is descriptive, critical, and therapeutic from the satirist's perspective and it does not make even a pretence to general corrective or cure. These are the determinative features of the satire that this study will henceforth refer to as modern satire.

Greenblatt's study not only represents an early challenge to the formalist conception of satire's corrective or curative stance but it also suggests that Waugh, Orwell, and Huxley have gained a greater measure of creative freedom by abandoning any pretence to corrective or cure. His study implies that these modern satirists were subjectively drawn to certain historically attested subjects in preference to others, that they freely chose the means to mount their attacks, and that they unrestrainedly chose the scale, emphasis and intensity of them. These satirists do not dispose the subversive devices, tropes, and strategies of satire in any measured or consistent way so that they do not produce consistent, conventionally targeted 'pure' satire that proposes itself as a corrective or cure. This kind of creative freedom eventually finds even fuller expression in the kind of late modern/post-modern degenerative satire that David Weisenburger elaborates in his study of satire and the American novel, 1930–1980.

This 1995 study turns upon a distinction between traditionally conceived corrective or generative satire that supports the status quo by bearing the values of a past utopian society and post-modern degenerative satire that is not conservative but subversive, truly oppositional in that it subverts the hierarchies of values in society, including those of narrative itself (pp. 2-3). Weisenburger points out that this mode of degenerative satire first emerges in the satires of Nathanael West, Flannery O'Connor, John Hawkes, and Robert Coover, before it effloresces in the later, comprehensively postmodernist degenerative satires of Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis. He argues that grotesque figuration plays a fundamental role in degenerative satire of this kind and that this consists of three principal features. The first of these are the grotesque similes that the satirist disposes in order to reduce the human to lower existential orders. These tropes reach a very long way to find a likeness and thus defy any conventional relatedness.

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They signify a degraded culture and set down a virtual chaos but they also disturb the representational foundations of the narrative (pp. 52-54). This is the kind of disorder that constitutes a disarray of category and as such it is one that challenges semiotic order because it is clearly antithetical to the production and consumption of stable signs.

The second feature of grotesque figuration is its carnivalesque setting. Carnival’s historical role was to serve as the ‘topos’ or ground of grotesque figuration’ but in American degenerative satire this looms as a ‘much fuller and more disturbing image’ (p. 25). It occurs in the mob scenes of Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locusts*, in the lunatic asylum of John Hawkes’s *The Cannibal*, in Kurt Vonnegut’s novels generally, but most powerfully in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* and in Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning*. This image is crucial to the celebration of disorder that typically occurs in grotesque works.

The third feature of grotesque satire is regression as the principle of its action, its plot. Such satire requires for its plots a double action — a regress in the form of a progress — and this kind of double action plotting is the key paradox in grotesque post-modern satirical fiction. The satirist reveals language as a great cover-up by moving onto degenerate ground but it is also only with language that one keeps moving at all. Weisenburger considers this paradox to be a main force in shaping the novels of American postmodernism: the contemporary narrative satire, he writes, is far from being an imitation of the chaos and disorder of ‘Dullness’ in the manner of Pope’s *The Dunciad* but is instead ‘concisely ordered by the possibilities, in atavistic times, for a regressive diegesis’ so that it may be understood as ‘degenerative, subversive fantasy’. He implies a connection between this atavism and with what he calls post-modern satire’s ‘obsession with violence’ adding that this obsession has produced over-determined plots and thus a structural counter-pointing ‘so articulated as to resemble an intensely reasoned hysteria’.

The features of grotesque satire loom especially large in White’s penultimate novel, *The Twyborn Affair*. White challenges the semiotic order through a battery of grotesque tropes in this work; he presents an image of grotesque figuration in the form of an extended carnivalesque masquerade, a world in which little is as it seems, one in which the other, Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith Twyborn, takes centre stage, and also in a more concentrated and

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29 Weisenburger, pp. 26-27.
disturbing form in the image of Eadith's brothel as a hive of degeneracy; he constructs a complex but regressive plot and one that exhibits a certain obsession with violence. These features suggest White's satire in this novel is degenerative and thus not intended as a corrective to human vice and folly.

This study does not argue that White's satire reaches the level of post-modern degeneracy of the satires of Vonnegut or Pynchon or Gaddis, but it does argue that it becomes increasingly degenerative from The Tree of Man and Voss, through Riders in the Chariot and The Eye of the Storm, before it reaches its degenerative apogee in The Twyborn Affair and in The Memoirs of Many in One. The features of White's satire in The Twyborn Affair show a remarkable correlation to the features of degenerative satire that Weisenburger elaborates in his study. White's abandonment of apparently corrective or curative, rhetorical satire and his adoption of degenerative post-modern satire is of great significance because it means that the philosophy that his satire bears in the later novels as measure of his worldview and the ultimate meaning of his work is quite different from that of the earlier novels. Brian McHale's thesis of 'the dominant' and how this is different in modernist and postmodernist fiction helps to explain the implications of this shift from apparently curative to degenerative satire.

McHale conceives of the dominant as 'the focusing component of a work of art', the component that 'rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components' and so underwrites the integrity of the very structure that a poetic work depends upon as a structured system, 'a regularly ordered hierarchical set of artistic devices' and his conclusion that poetic evolution is, consequently, 'a shift in this hierarchy'. McHale points out that a text will yield many dominants as a function of the level, scope, and focus of the analysis. He notes that many of the 'most insightful' treatments of postmodernist poetics have taken the form of 'more or less' heterogeneous catalogues of features and that these catalogues help in ordering the variety of post-modern phenomena but that the questions that these catalogues invite as to why, for example, certain features should cluster in a particular way, what system underlies the catalogue, and how in the course of literary history one system has given way to another, require the use of the concept of the dominant as an analytical tool. This concept helps us to elicit the systems 'underlying

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these catalogues and to account for historical change' because the evolution of poetic form
is not so much a question of the disappearance of certain elements and the emergence of
others but 'rather a question of shifts in the mutual relationship among the diverse
components of the system, in other words, a question of the shifting dominant' (p. 7).

McHale examines a number of exemplary modernist and post-modernist texts in order
to elicit the shifts in their hierarchy of devices so as to establish the dominant of modernist
and that of post-modernist fiction. He proposes that the dominant of modernist fiction is
epistemological, that such fiction deploys strategies that engage and foreground questions
such as how can I interpret this world of which I am a part? What am I in it? What is
there to be known? Who knows it? How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to
another, and with what degree of reliability? The dominant of post-modernist fiction
however, is ontological: it deploys strategies that engage and foreground questions such as
which world is this? What is to be done with it? Which of my selves is to do it? Or it asks
other questions that bear directly on the ontology of the text itself or the world it projects:
what is a world? What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation,
or when boundaries are violated? What is the mode of existence of a text or a world or the
world it projects? (p. 10).

White's work bears out McHale's thesis of the shifting dominant in that the five novels
this study focuses upon encompass the shift from a modernist epistemological dominant to
a post-modernist ontological dominant. The first two novels that this study considers, The
Tree of Man and Voss, both engage and foreground, by character enactment, the
epistemological questions that are characteristic of the modernist dominant. In Riders in
the Chariot however, White's practice begins to change from a modernist poetics of the
epistemological dominant to a post-modernist poetics of the ontological dominant, most
evidently in his subversive account of Alf Dubbo's Deposition, the Aboriginal artist's
attempt to render the infinite in paint. The Eye of the Storm and The Twyborn Affair (and
The Memoirs of Many in One), more thoroughly engage and foreground, again by
enactment, the ontological questions that are characteristic of the postmodernist dominant.
These later novels do not ask the epistemological but the kind of ontological questions to
do with existence and being cited by McHale — Which world is this? What is to be done
with it? What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation or when boundaries are violated?

McHale’s theory permits us to identify the three critical dominants in the novels I have chosen to consider here — the epistemological as the modernist dominant, the ontological as the emerging post-modernist dominant, and the satiric as the stylistic or modal dominant. In these novels, the rise of the satiric as stylistic dominant is concomitant with the rise of the ontological dominant itself for these two dominants come increasingly to the fore as the epistemological dominant subsides. However, to reap the full benefit of McHale’s theory we need to recall that White was not simply a novelist and a playwright but an artist, one as committed to art as his voluminous work and the biographical material suggests. The rise of the stylistic and ontological dominants and the decline of the epistemological dominant means that White not only increasingly turns to satire but also that the nature of that satire and the philosophy that it bears quite dramatically change. When White presents a burlesque of Alf Dubbo’s attempt to render the infinite in paint in *Riders in the Chariot* he initiates a turn in upon his own creative activity as an expression of his own growing ontological concerns. These ontological concerns are both personal and professional in nature for they are the concerns of White as an artist.

After *Riders in the Chariot*, these concerns find their expression in White’s next novel, *The Solid Mandala*, most evidently in his satire upon Waldo Brown for his intellectual pretensions and for the ‘Australian–literary ambitions’ that manifest themselves in his work at ‘The Sydney Municipal Library’31, in his production of a ‘half-finished fragment of a novel *Tiresias a Youngish Man*’, and in ‘a paper’ on Barron Field that he gives in his ‘address’ to the ‘Beecroft Literary Society’32. These ontological concerns also underwrite the novel that follows upon *The Solid Mandala* for in *The Vivisector* White considers, in narrative mode, the relation of a great painter, as an artist, to society. These concerns emerge with renewed force in the various parodic satires of art, artists, and creative activity that White enacts in *The Eye of the Storm* before they re-emerge in the grotesque satire of *The Twyborn Affair* and *The Memoirs of Many in One*. It is this shift away from the

modernist epistemological dominant to the postmodernist ontological dominant that ultimately determines the nature of White's satire and, consequently, his oeuvre.

This shift and the concomitant rise of satire as the stylistic dominant in White's work demonstrates that it is his practice, ultimately, to treat the major ontological and philosophical questions that swirl around human existence, around our very modes of being, including his own, playfully and mockingly. Our focus on these dominants then, leads to the conclusion that for White everything, including art itself, falls within the purview of his satire. This is not rhetorical or curative or corrective but descriptive satire, playfully delivered, perhaps with a nudge or a wink, and, as such, a powerful vehicle for the free, unfettered expression of ideas. The central tenet of White's philosophy of satire and by extension art is that it has no boundaries and that it should shrink from nothing. This is the philosophy that his satire bears as the ultimate meaning of his life and work.

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White's satirical novels express his increasingly bleak vision of humanity but they are redeemed, so to speak, by the radical aesthetic that satire as a mode of writing confers on them. His novels increasingly deal with difficult or taboo subjects that would not necessarily — let alone typically — be dealt with in a similarly comical, intelligent, amusing, or even confronting way in purely narrative novels. It is only when we read White's novels from the standpoint of satire that we are able to grasp the crucial role that this radical aesthetic plays in producing the philosophy of free expression that is the ultimate meaning of his work. Once this has been grasped at least some of the tensions and paradoxes that the critical debate throws up are reconciled. White can be a religious writer as well as a mother-obsessed misogynist and Australia-hating misanthrope, or he can be an elitist and a modernist, or a kind of literary monster, obsessed with the mean and the miserable but a social critic worthily committed to exploring moments of transcendence, glimpses of eternity, or he can be satirist ridiculing religious belief or literary conventions. He may be a writer of verbal sludge and a Nobel Prize winner, he may be angry or sublime, he may be all of these things but the point is that satire leads him to shrink from nothing. What this reading of White's novels ultimately reveals is that as they become
more satirical his writing becomes more outraged but more insightful, more offensive but more honest, more confronting but more powerful, and for these reasons all the more significant as literary art.

Satire has been and will likely remain a protean art form because, as the satirist's personal response to society, it changes as society changes and because it enlists other subversive modes to its purposes. It may adhere to generic form but it is more likely to constitute a mode of writing in that it typically occurs incidentally, episodically, or in more extended form, especially in novel length prose fictions. In both the verse and dramatic forms of antiquity and in the verse and prose forms of the modern period, satire attacked human vice and folly by way of exaggeration and ridicule and was thus considered to be deliberately targeted in that it had a discernible, external object of attack. It was also assumed that satire implied and indeed upheld a code of normative, pre-existing standards against which the behaviour it attacked could be measured. Satire was thus not only proposed as a conservative art form, one produced by class concerns, but also as one which was intended as a corrective or a curative for the human vice and folly that it ridiculed. The extent to which satire has become descriptive and degenerative in late modern and post-modern times suggests that it may never have been generally intended as a corrective but was produced to ridicule human vice and folly, irrespective of class-based inequality, for its own sake, for the fun or for the hell of it, for the satirist's own enjoyment or to relieve the pressure in his breast alone.

Satire is socio-historically referential to the extent that it is the product of the satirist's engagement with the society and culture in which he or she is located but it is mediated by the satirist's temperament and so it is often amusing, witty, intelligent and comical but may also be exaggerated, offensive, or obscene. Its effectiveness is not only a function of the extent to which it is socio-historically referential but also of whether or not readers are disposed to amusement, wit, or laughter, or to make sense of exaggeration, offensiveness, or even obscenity. Satire, by its very nature, makes a visceral response somehow appropriate. However, its effectiveness is also a matter of recognising its aesthetic qualities, particularly its extraordinary ability to address all manner of issues, problems, or behaviours — gross or refined — that fall within the compass of human affairs in an intelligent manner. Satire, we may say, at least in its late modern and post-modern
configurations, is a multi-form medley of subversive effects, a protean, socio-historically referential form of art, typically a mode of writing, externally or internally targeted, whose design it is to entertain and amuse rather than correct or cure and whose ultimate meaning resides in the philosophy that it bears and indeed produces on behalf of the satirist.

A Review of the Critical Literature

This review traces the development of the Symbolist-Allegorical, the Modernist, the Religious, and the Psychological Approaches to Patrick White’s work. It discusses these as the four main strains of criticism, as the strains that are almost completely oblivious to the presence of satire in White’s novels, before it discusses the views of a sample of those critics who do recognise and to some extent discuss the satirical or otherwise subversive aspects of his work. This review begins with the first full-length essay concerning White’s work ‘to appear anywhere’, that produced by Marjorie Barnard in 1956. This essay makes no mention of White’s ironic voice or the rustic comedy that swirls around the O’Dowd family or the social satire that envelops the Forsdykes in The Tree of Man and thus does not recognise White’s revisionary, subversive, or satiric intentions, but it does provide an excellent introduction to the early novels and it is particularly valuable because of the way it unerringly foreshadows the approaches, the lines of enquiry, and the narrow foci, that were subsequently adopted by the vast majority of White’s Australian critics.

Barnard suggests the later comparative approach to White’s work, and its nationalist pre-occupations, when she contrasts his first novel, Happy Valley, to Norman Lindsay’s Redheap, to Kylie Tennant’s Tiburon, to Vance Palmer’s Daybreak, and to Leonard Mann’s Mountain Flat in terms of place and when she compares his work in terms of technique to that of Joyce and Hemingway. She also suggests the psychoanalytic approach when she touches on White’s psychology — he appears to be riven by internal tensions, ‘at war with himself’ (pp. 157-158). Her remarks concerning White’s prose — it is ‘fluid, sometimes arresting’, he may be discursive but it is not the traditional Australian discursiveness, his idiom may be ‘Joycean’ or it may reflect the alliterative, repetitive but

cadenced vein of Gertrude Stein, it features the broken sentence — all bespeak the later focus upon White’s language (p. 159). She also prefigures the intense and abiding critical interest shown in another aspect of White’s style — his use of symbolism and imagery. *Happy Valley* is patterned by his use of ‘several recurring incidents and symbols’ and in *The Living and the Dead* ‘every object...becomes a symbol of inner life’ (p. 160).

Barnard anticipates the criticism that came to see White as a late modernist writer when she describes *The Living and the Dead* as an ‘unhappy’ book in which all its characters are cast adrift in London, a city that is virtually ‘dead’, and when she suggests these characters as being more symbolic than real because they are ‘dwarfed by a masked battery of abstracts’ (p. 163). She also pre-configures the strain of criticism that proposed White as a kind of symbolist-modernist-allegorist when she describes *The Aunt’s Story* as being ‘an allegory of pain, a shifting image of frustration’ that is ‘bound together by a labyrinth of recurring images’ (p. 165).

The conception of White as a metaphysical but essentially religious writer is strongly implied in Barnard’s remarks regarding *The Tree of Man*. She writes that the central characters ‘fumble’ for the meaning of life, for ‘moments of ecstasy and illumination’, and she suggests the religious aspect of this when she notes how Stan Parker suffers his Gethsemane ‘ignobly in a pub’ and, more pointedly, how he finds God — if ‘strangely’ — in his own spittle. She finds unity in this novel — it is ‘woven of many threads’, being ‘of great moments, slow infiltrations, images and echoes’ — while at the same time she confirms it in both its here and now and metaphysical dimensions — it is ‘a world but a world beneath the visible surface of the world’.

Barnard finally discusses the novels’ underlying philosophy in religious terms and it is in this respect that her essay is perhaps most influential. She writes that White is ‘obsessed’ with pain and loneliness, the very inability of human beings ever to know one another, because the first three novels never depict a satisfactory or satisfying human relationship. This is the ultimate loneliness and White’s philosophy is, consequently, one of ‘pain and loneliness’ (p. 170). She posits here what may be described as the first tenet of White’s philosophy at this stage of his career, the conviction expressed by Thomas Woolfe that ‘solitariness is by no means a rare condition, something peculiar to myself or to a few specially solitary human beings, but the inescapable, central fact of human
existence. This is a bleak assessment of the human condition and, as such, a problem for Barnard, as she suggests, but one for which she finds a solution.

Barnard argues that White’s philosophy ‘seems to be resolved’ in The Tree of Man because ‘the goal of man’s long, inarticulate seeking’ is at least glimpsed in what is ‘the ineffable moment’. This moment has no substance, it is transitory and ‘of the creative spirit’, but that it should come, even once, is a positive gain, ‘an apotheosis’. This ineffable moment, this glimpse of the eternal, does not, however, alleviate man’s loneliness, for as a revelation it is personal, private and detached, and so each man’s life remains ‘a mystery between himself and God’ and his soul incommunicado, unknowable to another human because imprisoned in the flesh. Barnard finds a solution to this, the central problem of man’s earthbound loneliness, in the earlier novels’ accent upon music and poetry — these, and religion, are the paths that the soul, locked in the flesh, may take, these are ‘the paths out of sleep’ (p. 170). She thus describes what comprises the second tenet of White’s philosophy at this time — that the way, probably the only way, to enlightenment, redemption, or salvation, is through art, through its educative possibilities.

Barnard’s discussion of the novels’ underlying philosophy is of fundamental importance not only because it establishes what may be described as the three principal tenets of White his philosophy or worldview but because so many of his subsequent Australian critics took up the religious reading of his work that her discussion of it in religious terms seems to invite. This religious reading eventually came to comprise a critical orthodoxy but White’s early Australian critics did not initially focus upon White as a religious writer or upon his apparently religious philosophy. Instead, they focussed upon his use of symbolism and imagery, another line of enquiry suggested by Barnard, but one that led, in any case, to the religious reading of his novels.

The Symbolist-Allegorical Approach to White’s Novels

The first critic to follow Barnard’s lead appears to be A. D. Hope who criticises White for writing The Tree of Man as if he were writing poetry. Hope writes that the imagery,

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devices, and artifices of poetry do not work in prose because they are not married to metre and so when White uses these poetic devices they seem ‘absurd and pretentious’\(^{36}\). Kylie Tennant suggests White’s use of poetic symbolism to be the dominant but also the most objectionable feature of *Voss*: the explorer’s apotheosis is ‘most unbelievable’ and the novel itself is ‘the hellish undershadow’ cast by ‘the great clouds of poetry’ that roll around *The Tree of Man*\(^{37}\). Douglas Stewart writes\(^{38}\) that White tries to lift *Voss* beyond quotidian reality into the higher reality of symbol by presenting characters that are symbolic as well as real, but complains that these characters ‘do not manage to stay alive as well as symbolic’ (p. 58). This criticism of White for using poetic imagery and symbolism in these novels effectively takes him to task for challenging the social realist conventions of the Australian novel. In addition, these critics do not mention — let alone discuss — the presence of satire in these novels. They overlook White’s satire and this contributes to their failure to recognise that White’s use of imagery and symbolism is a function of what are his revisionary, subversive inclinations.

In the first essay to exclusively focus upon the subject of White’s symbols, A. A. Phillips writes that these are unsatisfactory because they are too often ‘algebraic’, that is, they require a major diversion of the mind before they can be recognised and translated as symbols\(^ {39}\). Instead of compelling us to a sense of our presence in a significant experience that is the purpose and value of symbolism, White seems to be content in *The Tree of Man* if his reader ‘intellectually’ grasps the meaning he has set out to convey through his symbols. In *Voss*, however, his symbolisms work effectively because they are integrated into a myth that is conveyed through them as ‘solidly existent figures’. Yet at what should be the novel’s climactic moment — the moment when we have been led to expect spiritual enlightenment — we are, as Phillips puts it, suddenly ‘jolted down to the level of the algebraic symbol, to that chariot, that tatty Grand Opera stage property’. This symbol conveys meaning but because it is so obviously a ‘devisal’ it cannot compel us to the sense of our presence in a significant experience (pp. 457-458). H. J. Oliver, in contrast to


Phillips and these other critics, sees White’s use of symbolism in a wholly positive light\(^4o\). \textit{Voss} is centrally concerned with the basic rhythms of life, with the kind of subject matter that must be expressed partly through symbols, and White’s use of them to convey meaning is ‘almost brilliant’. These symbols moreover, play the determinative role in the construction of the novel while at the same time they do not hinder the realistic narrative (p. 169).

In a more general review\(^41\), Vincent Buckley notes that White’s symbols are sometimes ‘overcharged’ but he too, is overwhelmingly positive. The symbols contribute to the surface richness and the structure of the work and they are one of White’s ‘most striking triumphs’ because their meanings derive so seamlessly from the factual account of the central character’s lives (p. 190). The influence of Barnard’s discussion of White’s philosophy and the capacity of the critical focus upon White’s use of symbolism and imagery to lead critics off in other directions emerges in this essay when Buckley unambiguously declares \textit{The Tree of Man} to be a religious novel. He argues that this is because the novel questions the meaning of life in its attempt to trace morphologies of both the life of man and of Australian society and he ascribes the critical role in realising these ‘dual effects’ to White’s symbolism (p. 196). In a later essay, Buckley describes White as opening up an imaginative world with one more dimension than our novelists have generally recognised\(^42\). This is within the individual and within the universe that White inhabits and it is ‘mythopoetic, metaphysical, even religious’ (p. 144). It seems that White the poetic symbolist is in the process of becoming White the religious poetic symbolist.

What may be noted in general terms in respect of the six critics referred to so far is that irrespective of whether they see White’s use of symbolism in negative or positive terms, they do not take into account the satire that is present in the novels they consider. Of these critics, only A. A. Philipps comes close to recognising the presence of satire in White’s novels, of what may be described as evidence of White’s satiric disposition, in his complaint regarding that ‘tatty Grand Opera stage property’, but White’s depiction of the chariot in this way clearly does not suggest subversion or satire to him.


The Modernist Response

R. F. Brissenden is another major critic who considers White’s use of symbolism but one who draws our attention to the mundane rather than the religious aspects of it. More importantly, his consideration of White’s use of symbolism in *The Tree of Man* not only leads him to consider White’s use of the symbolism of allegory in *Voss* but also to argue that it is closely bound up with and is indeed evidence of White’s modernism. Brissenden contends that although *Voss* sees his expedition to the centre of Australia in an allegorical light, as a spiritual as well as a physical exploration, the book itself is primarily concerned with ‘the ordeal of self-discovery’ (p. 417), what he goes on to describe as ‘an allegory of self-investigation’ (p. 422). This ‘real’ ordeal, in its symbolic dimension, becomes an allegory but at both the realistic and allegorical levels it remains part of ‘the more general problem of human loneliness that to some extent enters into all of White’s novels’.

Brissenden goes on to suggest that White’s use of allegory is connected to his modernism for it is in his pre-occupation with the problem of human loneliness that White is ‘most obviously’ modern, a judgement that he underscores when he writes that the picture of life White offers is ‘rather austere’ (p. 419) and that his image of man is distorted, a little ‘lopsided’, but delineated with a brilliant, ‘almost neurotic’ clarity (p. 425). It seems White’s symbolism is poetic and religious but in its allegorical configuration directed by an essentially modernist disposition.

Brian Kiernan and Michael Wilding are two major critics who also consider White’s modernism. Kiernan recognises, like Marjorie Barnard, the influence of such modernists as Eliot, Joyce, and Lawrence on White’s work but he also sources White’s modernism in a very broad context by arguing that it is attributable to his immersion in the English modernism that was part and parcel of the cultural milieu when White studied at Cambridge and when he began his writing career in London (p. 81). This is to claim that

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White’s modernism was thoroughly experiential, not simply absorbed through the works of other writers, and that it informed his worldview.

Kiernan argues that White is typically concerned as a modernist to render the alienation of the cultivated sensibility in ‘a vulgar age’ bereft of values, that he uses the ‘nightmare’ image of the city to convey the sense of a decline in civilised values and the collapse of community and order, and that there is a danger in the invocation of this image consisting of ‘a dismissal of society and withdrawal into the protective cocoon of the exquisitely cultivated sensibility’ (p. 82). He also argues that White attempts to confront actual contemporary issues of a moral political kind in spite of the tendency towards solipsism that his style leads us to expect (pp. 84-85) and that White does not simply repeat the pattern of withdrawal, the alienation, that his novels suggest. Instead, he explores different ways of engaging with the world and so ‘attempts to bridge the gulf between individual consciousness and the reality of the world beyond’ (p. 97). Kiernan thus recognises the negative, what we may call the non-life affirming aspects of White’s modernism, but he also recognises the positive, the attempt to explore new ways of engaging the world, new ways of bridging the gap between individual perception and reality.

Michael Wilding describes White as ‘the great Australian modernist’ but, in contrast to Kiernan, he sees his modernism in negative terms. Wilding argues that modernism was ‘a system of exclusions’ and that its impulse was a denial of preceding traditions, a denial that involved a refusal of realism, particularly the dominant nineteenth century mode of realism (p. 221). In adhering to this, White ‘gestures at a realism which is then denied or inverted’. The bourgeoisie for example, which 19th century realism celebrated as its subject, ‘presenting them as fit subjects for art’, become in White’s novels ‘grotesques, figures of contempt, judged and condemned from the standpoint of the sensitive, alienated, upper middle-class “outsider”’ (p. 222). These remarks propose White as an élitist writer, as a superior but alienated sensibility over and above and beyond ordinary life. This conception of White is reflected in Wilding’s argument that the artist is not demystified but idealized in The Vivisector and it underwrites his argument that White’s refusal of realism places his novels in opposition to the earlier realist tradition of Australian fiction established by Henry Lawson. Wilding describes this tradition as ‘a committed, left-wing realist mode’ that was ‘democratic in its sympathies, egalitarian in its perceptions of
character, naturalistic in its causality and motivation, precise and laconic in its verbal manner" (p. 223). Two points need be made in response to Wilding’s criticism. Firstly, the ironic voice that permeates much of Lawson’s fiction and the presence of formal satire in such stories as *The Union Buries its Dead* means that White’s ‘refusal of realism’ does not in fact place his novels in opposition to the realist tradition of Australian fiction to the extent that Wilding suggests. Lawson, like White, refuses realism when he, too, turns to satire to deal with social reality. Secondly, in claiming that White refuses social realism, Wilding effectively contends that White’s novels are ahistorical because he writes them in opposition to the Australian literary tradition and this in turn diminishes them by implying that they are inappropriate and irrelevant.

The value of a reading of these novels from a satiric perspective is that it resolves some of the issues raised by Brissenden, Kiernan, and Wilding in their criticism. Such a reading locates White as an alienated outsider and recognises him as an élitist as a function of his craft as satirist, as a hypercritical, perhaps insensitive, but fearless observer of humankind, rather than as a function of his place within the upper middle class. White is disposed to satire by his experience and temperament but he is cast in the role of observer by his craft. Such a reading also indicates that White’s novels are historical rather than ahistorical because the satire in them, as Rosenheim points out in the case of satire generally, is socio-historically referential. White’s opposition to the Australian literary tradition (and to Australian history *per se*) is cast in a different light, as historically referential and, moreover, an aspect of the radically oppositional aesthetic of satire. A reading of *Voss* from the standpoint of satire recognises that the picture of life offered by White is rather austere and his image of man distorted, as Brissenden points out, but it would not see this as the proof and product of the author’s modernism but rather as a precursor to the author’s modernist satire of humankind.

**The Religious Interpretations — an Orthodox Approach**

It is perhaps not surprising given their number, the conviction with which they are expressed, and their innate metaphysical appeal, that the religious reading of White’s novels came to comprise a critical orthodoxy by the early 1970s. This religious
interpretation is of particular importance to this study because, as an orthodoxy, it not only generated a lot of insightful criticism but it also consumed a great deal of critical energy that might otherwise have been expended on other approaches. Its rise also provides the best measure of the capacity of the original focus upon White's use of symbolism and imagery to lead critics off in other directions.

Although Vincent Buckley may have been the first critic to declare White to be a religious writer, the religious reading of his novels substantively begins with Colin Roderick's 1962 essay concerning Riders in the Chariot. This essay, in focussing upon White's use of symbolism, or, more accurately, the symbolism of allegory, proposes White as an allegorical, metaphysical, and ultimately religious writer. Roderick argues that the novel is a fictional essay in Jewish mysticism in which the characters move in a sustained metaphysical allegory that depends for its conviction on the wholeness of the author's initial idea. Because that idea is essentially borrowed from the 13th century Zohar, the Bible of Jewish mysticism, Roderick insists that the novel be understood in terms of Kabbalism and Merkabah mysticism. The novel, however, is marred for Roderick because White not only drives his symbols too hard at times but also because he imposes the central drama of Christian dogma, the crucifixion of Christ, on what is 'an exercise in medieval Jewish mysticism', one that turns upon the central tenet of Kabbalistic theosophy, a tenet, as Roderick points out, that consists of the three stages of man as spoken by Laura Trevelyan in Voss — "God into man; man; and man returning into God....In the end, he may ascend".

J. F. Burrows, in his response to this essay, also focuses on White's use of symbolism but he does so in order to take issue with Roderick's reading. Burrows elicits a different interpretation by drawing up a lengthy list of the Biblical allusions in the novel and then discussing as many of these as he can in relation to Roderick's mystic-Judaic interpretation. He is thus able to point out that the novel's reference to the Bible is 'much more constant than has been acknowledged'. Although Burrows takes issue with Roderick, he still contributes to the rise of the religious reading of White's work because of the way he concentrates and elaborates the symbols and images that he discusses in

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Christian terms. This is clearly evident in Manfred Mackenzie's essay concerning The
Tree of Man in which he argues that White's characterization is developed within his
religious vision, that it is 'always directed towards religious absolutes', that White
consequently formulates personality in terms of these absolutes (p. 416), and that since
White's vision is religious and his dispositions directed to religious absolutes then he is
'before anything else' a religious writer (p. 405).

It is at this time, 1965, that critical interest in White's use of symbolism and imagery
per se finally subsides as God and religion become the dominant presences in his work for
the overwhelmingly majority of his critics. A. K. Thomson declares that every novel
White writes is the same novel because each novel contains a character who is 'the
afflicted of God' and because in every novel the relation of the main character to his God
is important. Thomson seems to recognise that every novel relates 'a journey' but in White
'the journey is to God'. Even Peter Shrubb, who indicates that he is of an irreligious
rather than a religious disposition in his essay, describes the novel as becoming 'a fairly
specifically religious one' (p. 12) and, while Robert McDougall writes that White has 'no
use' for ecclesiastical Christianity, he also writes that he is a 'profoundly' religious
Christian writer.

Peter Beatson exponentially expands the religious reading of White's novels in his
easy concerning Voss. He describes it as 'in every part an intensely spiritual novel'
before he focuses on the three stages of man enunciated in it by Laura Trevelyan. Unlike
Roderick in his essay concerning Riders in the Chariot, Beatson does not consider White
to have drawn these from Kabbalistic theosophy but claims that he has absorbed a stream
of metaphysical philosophy that answers his inner needs as a creative writer. The fountain
of this stream is 'probably Plotinus', it is a stream that surfaces again and again as thinkers
and artists find it answering their own existential uncertainties, their 'intuitions and

48 Manfred MacKenzie, 'Apocalypse In Patrick White's "The Tree Of Man"', Meanjin, vol 25 no 1, 1966,
pp. 405-416.
51 Robert McDougall, 'Australia Felix: Joseph Furphy and Patrick White', Commonwealth Literary Fund
52 Peter Beatson, 'The Skiapod and the Eye: Patrick White's The Eye of the Storm', Southerly, vol 34 no 3,
1974, pp. 219-232. See also Peter Beatson The Eye In The Mandala Patrick White: A Vision Of Man and
God, Sydney, A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1976, which resumes and prosecutes the author's theosophical reading
in considerable detail.
gropings', and White is simply the latest artist to have found some truth in the tradition, using it to give a metaphysical structure to his novel (p. 112-113). The stages for Beatson compose a mystical three-part system that structures the novel and directs White's characterisation. This system is, moreover, one that is not limited in its application to *Voss* for it 'underlies all of White's works, from *Happy Valley* to *The Solid Mandala*' (p. 121). Beatson adds still more weight to the conception of White as a religious writer when he argues in a subsequent essay\(^5\) that one can never fully understand White's genius until one accepts that all his powers 'subserve a spiritual end'. In this later essay, he describes *Voss*, as well as *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Eye of the Storm*, as 'truly religious novels' (p. 219).

A great many other critics — too many to cite here — contribute to the conception of White as a religious writer but it is perhaps worth mentioning that Patricia Morley, the first critic to publish a full book-length study of his work, also falls into this category\(^5\). Morley argues that all White's novels are concerned with the reality of another world, the world 'wholly within', and that the affirmation of this other, spiritual world is essential to his vision. His vision is not original but traditional, an expression of the Judeo-Christian cultural heritage from which it issues and his novels are novels, not mystical essays as Roderick suggests, although the vision from which they spring belongs to the tradition of mysticism that seeks 'direct experience or direct awareness of God' (pp. 1-2).

As has been mentioned, these religious interpretations of White's novels came to comprise a critical orthodoxy by the early 1970s. In a 1973 article\(^5\) Leonie Kramer challenged this orthodoxy on the grounds that it asserts White is pre-occupied with and endorses mystical and visionary experience, transcendentalism, the mysticism of objects and the divinity of man when 'in fact' the novels reject the religious interpretations from which this orthodoxy springs. White is a sceptic, his scepticism 'bolder and more fundamental than his critics will allow', and it is thus not his purpose to describe and endorse the way of the mystic or to insist that human beings must be granted some

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transcendental revelation before they can understand their own world. The novels, for Kramer, ask religious questions simply because White is a sceptic and the upshot of this is that Kramer is able to unequivocally declare that his fiction heads away from transcendentalism ‘towards an assertion of secular humanism’ (pp. 8-9).

This challenge soon drew a spirited response from Dorothy Green. She takes Kramer to task on a number of points: her argument is illogical, statements are taken out of context, assertions are taken for fact when still unproven, and Kramer does not define her terms (pp. 36-37). These charges are rather commonplace rejoinders but the main reason why Green does not prove her case against Kramer is that what her essay demonstrates is that what is at stake in this dispute is a matter of belief. Ironically, this is precisely — and all — that the quote from Sir Thomas Browne that Green herself uses as an epigraph indicates. Green asserts her own belief but she is not able to demonstrate that White shares it. She also writes that Kramer’s grasp of religious concepts is inadequate and her theology questionable (p. 47) which is an interesting claim in light of her own citation of Browne, a 17th century English physician and essayist who mixes scepticism and scientific reasoning with faith and revelation in Religio Medici and who, in his most bizarre work, The Garden of Cyrus, conducts an historical examination of the mystical significance of the number five, particularly in respect of horticulture.

Green resumes her case against Kramer in her review of The Eye of the Storm. She criticises Kramer for ‘still quarrelling with a view of Christianity held by 19th century fundamentalists’ and she celebrates the novel in terms of the faith that she recognises in it as an impulse ‘which is in itself an act of faith, love, joy in the living world, openness to experience’ (p. 405). Kramer too, pursues her counter argument in another essay in which she more fully explains her conception of White as a sceptic, his sceptical method, and that she sees The Tree of Man as part of the Australian tradition that adopted a sceptical attitude towards metaphysical speculation ‘at least from the nineteenth century onward’ (p. 283). The question of whether or not White may be considered a sceptic goes

to the heart of his philosophy but it is not one that is resolved by the arguments of Kramer or Green.

The credo published by White at the end of his writing career sheds some light on this issue. He indicates that his philosophy had been and remains the product of his ongoing experience and thus it had never been fixed but subject to change — 'you'll have to write another and another, always another... So, too, unless you've given up on life before time finally escapes, you will put together another Credo'. He goes on to declare that he is

coming to believe, not in God, but a Divine presence of which Jesus, the Jewish prophets, the Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi and Co. are the more comprehensible manifestations. This Presence controls us but only to a certain degree: life is what we, its components, make it.59

This declaration suggests that White's philosophy is religious even though it appears to encompass a contradiction between the concepts of divine control and that of free will — can we be subject to divine power and still exercise free will? The answer is yes but only if we freely subject ourselves to divine power. This, in conjunction with White's use of such modalities as 'coming to', 'to a degree', and 'the more comprehensible' suggest the Credo to be a declaration of religious uncertainty rather than certainty. This, in turn, suggests that White, perhaps not to the degree that Kramer maintains, is something of a religious sceptic. While it is the case that a writer can be both sceptic and religious within fiction because the novel especially is that which is capable of embracing contradictions and antitheses, such scepticism sits rather more comfortably with the conception of White as a satirist than it does with the conception of him as a religious writer. This study argues that White's scepticism empowers his satire, quite evidently in his grotesque parody of the crucifixion of Jesus in Riders in the Chariot and in his parody of religious belief and practice as it is embodied in the figure of Mrs Godbold in the same novel.

Kramer's criticism had little effect on the orthodox religious reading of White's work. The proponents of this approach simply shifted their focus, as Brian Kiernan points out, to interpretations of the intentions behind the religious experience embodied in the novels60.

59 Patrick White, 'Credo', *Overland*, no 111, June 1988, p.16.
An example of this is Susan Moore’s 1975 essay in which she revisits Riders in the Chariot in terms of Kabbalistic and Merkabah mysticism, the very terms used by Colin Roderick 13 years earlier. Moore conceives of the novel as a quest for wholeness, as indeed its frame of religious-mystic reference suggests, and, in echo of Beatson’s argument about White’s absorption of a stream of metaphysical philosophy as a function of his own needs, she indicates this to be a personal quest, one attributable to White himself; thus she is intent upon explicating the intentions behind the religious experience depicted in the novel.

Veronica Brady adopts a similar focus. She argues, however, that White’s intentions are the product of a sense and an intuition that White shares with the French social philosopher, Simone Weil. This sense is that man is not the master of the Universe but its victim because of the extent to which he depends upon his body and is thus subject to physical necessity (p. 109) and this intuition is ‘a paradoxical truth, that man is not God but drawn irresistibly to the impossible prospect of knowing Him’ (p. 116). This suggests that the novels enact White’s own quest to know ‘Him’ and the exploratory nature of the writing, but it does not explain why the characters fail to know Him, fail to transcend, nor does it explain why White at times mocks their attempt. A reading from a satiric perspective indicates that White ridicules these characters for engaging on an impossible quest and thus it is able to account for these ‘failures’.

Caroline Bliss also considers the intentions behind the religious experience depicted in White’s novels. It is her thesis that Christianity has significantly influenced White’s thought but that it is the Judeo-Christian concepts of the religious quest and its necessary failure that White endorses and his fiction enacts. She argues that White himself assumes the ‘humbling but liberating condition of failure’ and that necessary failure as a concept permeates his vision to the extent that it shapes its thematic, structural, stylistic and generic expression. This ensures White himself fails. This failure consists of White not articulating his vision, of not distinguishing ‘the sublime from the ridiculous’, of not

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honouring 'the prerogatives of the omniscient narrator', of not resolving ambiguity, of not
clarifying point of view, of not fully endorsing a character or precept, of not providing
comfortable closure to his novels, and of not writing works which 'fit uncomplainingly
into pre-established genres' (p. 207). These 'deliberate technical failures represent the
successful incorporation of philosophical vision within fictional technique' so that the
novels gain 'an enigmatic unity which mirrors, although it distorts, that which obtains in
the full world of being'. For Bliss, White’s failure becomes 'felicitous', in other words,
his failure ensures his success, but a reading of these novels from the perspective of satire
reveals that for White it is a matter of success by failure in another way. White’s success
by failure stands as the measure and weight of his various literary subversions. White’s
'failures' proclaim his satire.

Bliss’s book, as it transpires, is the last major study of White’s fiction from a religious
perspective to appear but it does not signal the end of the religious approach to his work.
Indeed, it is a tribute to the approach’s durability that it produces Marion Spies’s 1992
essay in which she describes White as a ‘religious novelist, pure and simple’64 and Simon
During’s description of the young White as ‘a transcendentalist who made appeals to
various universal themes, which were often called “metaphysical”’65 in his 1996
monograph. The religious interpretation of White’s work, then, is the most enduring in the
history of White criticism.

The religious interpretations of White’s novels outlined here reflect major differences
of opinion in regard to such matters as the source of the religious material in the novels, the
kind of religious experience depicted, and the intention behind it, but neither these
differences, nor Kramer’s criticism, have had any measurable effect in tempering the
enthusiasm or the conviction of the adherents of this orthodox approach. These critics
have produced interesting and incisive accounts of various religious aspects of the novels
such as White’s use of religious imagery and symbolism and his drawing upon various
religious or mystic traditions, but these accounts are as highly focussed as they are highly
informed so that what we have is an extensive but fragmented and in some respects
conflicting body of religious criticism. This study, however, does not flatly reject this

64 Marion Spies, ‘“Affecting Godhead” — Religious Language and Thinking in Voss and Riders in the
65 Simon During, Patrick White, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, p. 18.
religious approach but takes issue with it for failing to consider the writing itself, for failing to account for the comic, parodic, and satiric modes of writing that indicate White's attitude in many of the novels is revisionary, mocking, subversive, and critical rather than affirmative of social or spiritual life.

These religious interpretations of White's work owe their origin to the original focus upon White's use of poetic imagery and symbolism because the symbol, as Veronica Brady points out, 'provides access to what cannot otherwise be expressed, the dimension of the ethical, the intuitive and the religious'66. This suggests that the appeal of 'the symbol' for the early critics was that it engaged with the interior rather than the exterior world of the then still dominant social realist writers. Remarkably, this focus not only led to the conception of White as a symbolist-allegorist, a modernist, and to that of him as a committed metaphysical, an essentially religious writer, but it also contributed to the development of the psychological approach to his novels.

The Psychological Approach

It is Marjorie Barnard who first suggests White's psychology as a line of enquiry, but it is Rodney Mather who first takes it up in a full-length essay67. Mather argues that symbols and images are the dominant feature of White's style and that certain images take on the character of symbols because they recur in the prose, 'apparently casually', and take on an indeterminate status between fact and symbol. These work poetically and 'almost' build up a frame of reference, a set of interrelating themes which is 'an important structural principle for White' even though 'it is often difficult to know exactly what their frame of reference is or what weight they are to be given'. For Mather, however, the symbols do not work individually or as 'an organization of themes' because the system is 'too contrived, too much part of a very personal order' (p. 98). What composes this very personal order as its motivating impulse is 'a striving for selfpreservation' and what constitutes its outcome is 'selfprojection' (sic).

Mather writes that White, in *Voss*, not only 'lusts to assert his unique identity against the destructive forces of life, to freeze his being into permanence, making life imitate his art' but also that 'the nervous, emotional and spiritual tensions and releases' so manifest in the novel are the products of White's own spiritual condition. The novel is thus a rendering of a conflict within White between 'a will to be God and the destructive forces of the natural flux about him that belie this'. The novel has the vividness and strength of a strong personality desperately refusing to make concessions to mutability and all that this involves but it is 'only partially effectual' because as a self-projection of 'a peculiarly intense kind' White isn't 'sufficiently in possession of his experience', doesn't see it with 'sufficient objectivity', and wants it to be 'too subject to his personality' (p. 93).

In describing the novel in terms of motivation, as a self-projection and a rendering of White's own conflict, Mather not only insists that it is a function of White's psychology, its proof and product as it were, but also that author and novel are inseparable. We are consequently told as much — if not more — about the author as we are told about the novel. However, in criticising White for not being in possession of his experience, for not seeing it with sufficient objectivity, and for wanting to make it too, subject to his personality, Mather indicates in reverse fashion what becomes increasingly fundamental to White's practice as a satirist. White sees his experience subjectively as a function of yielding possession of his experience to his satiric art and in this process he makes his experience partially subject to his personality, to, more specifically, his temperament.

Andrew Riemer shows himself to be conversant with Jungian psychology in an essay concerning mandalic symbolism in *The Tree of Man*, but, in contrast to Mather, he does not use his knowledge of C. J. Jung's theories to make any claims as to White's psychology. Riemer considers such key symbolic episodes as Stan Parker's final vision in terms of Jung's formulations to show that White relies on a body of mystical and visionary material that he derives from the writings and observations of Jung and that this is very similar to that which he uses in *The Solid Mandala*. His main point is, however, that White uses this arcane material without bringing it 'specifically into the conceptual framework of the novel' (p. 116) and that he employs this material because its assumptions

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happen to 'perfectly fit' his own views and pre-occupations which have little to do, ultimately, with Jung's 'somewhat bizarre notions' (p. 123). Riemer confronts the Jungian material in the novel and he answers the question of why it should be there, the question of motivation, but it is for him not a matter of psychology — Jung's assumptions fit White's own views and preoccupations, in other words, his philosophy, and so they comprise nothing other than source material for the novel.

For David Tacey, the question is absolutely one of psychology\(^69\). He writes that White's novels 'seem Jungian' but not because White draws upon Jung's writing as source material but rather because he has 'in his own way drawn upon the deep unconscious and its archetypes'. Tacey further rejects Riemer's interpretation by arguing that White's vision of the circular form that becomes the mandala appears in all his works from *The Living and the Dead* to *The Solid Mandala* itself. Consequently, White's reading of Jung simply allows him to name, or rather to misname, the image that had been central to his work. Mandala is a misnomer because White's mandala had never been a true mandala, 'a symbol of the integration of the personality', but a representation of the uroboros, 'the womb-like image of complete unconsciousness'. This image is one of the unconscious psychic and mythic structures that Tacey's own psychoanalytic method, archetypal depth analysis, is particularly interested in. The uroboros is the principal archetype that works on White's unconscious, directing and assailing him 'from within' so that he 'does not have ideas' but 'bears witness to inward realities' (p. xviii-xix)). The dominant inward reality for White is what Tacey calls his mother-complex or 'White's experience of the mother complex,' the key elements of which are his obsessive relation to his mother, his unwillingness to separate himself from her, and his refusal to cooperate with the internal developmental process. These elements have a debilitating outcome: they compel White to cling to the unborn state that is 'his peculiar pathology, his personal flaw' (pp. 213-214). In consequence of this, White's novels cannot be the products of an author and his more or less conscious mature thought, as literary criticism has traditionally assumed, but are the products of the *puer aeternus*, the eternal youth, the subject of unconscious mythic and psychic structures, the archetype of the uroboros in particular.

Like Mather’s more general psychological reading of *Voss*, Tacey’s Jungian psychoanalytic analysis tells us as much about the author as it does about the novel despite his claim that his method ‘assumes the novel to be greater than the author’ (p. xix). This comes about because Jungian archetypal depth analysis treats the contents of the novel as if it were evidence — and evidence unwittingly given — not only of the author’s psychology but also of his psychopathologies. Such approaches, in explicating the author rather than the work, confuse the primary object of literary criticism.

Although she is primarily concerned with locating Patrick White in terms of colonial/postcolonial literature, Helen Thomson specifically rejects Tacey’s Jungian psychoanalytic approach. His Jungian analysis is only convincing because it ‘wilfully’ blinds itself to other, contradictory kinds of analysis. Instead, Thomson adopts and adapts a Freudian psychoanalytic approach as way of connecting ‘the significantly repeated’ patterns of dysfunctional family relationships found in both White’s autobiography and his fiction so as to suggest possible links with the problematic relationship of the writer to the Mother country, to Europe, and most of all to Australia and its inhabitants (p. 61).

Thomson notes that Tacey’s analysis recognises the importance of mothers in its emphasis on the great Mother Goddess of Myth (the fount of the uroboros archetype), but she argues that feminist analysis could well characterise the loved, feared, scorned, devouring and sometimes monstrous mothers that occur in the novels as the Phallic mother of Freudian theory, evidence of an incomplete Oedipal episode in the life of the child. She writes that White’s autobiography and Marr’s biography confirm this, enabling us to see the history of White’s family as a ‘flawed Family Romance’, one which is ‘the source of the reiterated pattern of remote upper-class parents, the mother dominant, withholding affection from her child but never letting him go’ and the emotionally repressed father, ‘shy and essentially passive’ (p. 66). Thomson adds that versions of this familial drama appear in novel after novel — as indeed they do appear — but this is not only to claim that the novels are the products of this flawed Family Romance but more particularly of the psychology of which it is the outcome. This psychology, however, is not simply based upon the biographical material contained within Marr’s biography or White’s

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autobiography, as Thomson suggests, but upon her interpretation of it, upon the autobiographical argument that she derives from it. This argument conforms to the biographical facts and is thus convincing enough — White is a ‘profoundly split and divided subject’ because his intellect was formed in England and his imagination nourished by an Australian childhood, he was separated by class and affluence from his fellow Australians and from heterosexual family life by his homosexuality, and his own consequent outsider status is recreated in key characters in novel after novel (pp. 61-62). Thomson’s Freudian analysis does not prescribe a deeply embedded unconscious process and so it does not impinge upon the author’s agency to the same extent as Tacey’s archetypal depth analysis, but, like psychoanalytic approaches generally, it nevertheless tells us more about the authorial personality behind the novels than the novels themselves. Moreover, what it tells us about the novels is dependent upon what it tells us about the author’s psychology. The psychological reading of White’s novels consequently proposes them to be the products of an apparently flawed — because Mother-fixated — psyche. This situation simply does not arise when the novels are read from the standpoint of satire because the focus is upon the satiric as the dominant feature of the style, form, and content, of the novels. This modal approach provides a way to see the novels as art rather than as the products of an apparently flawed psyche while at the same it recognises the part played by the author’s temperament in shaping his satire in terms of tenor, tone, and emphasis.

Some of the proponents of the four major critical approaches that I have mentioned in the foregoing review touch upon and to some extent discuss in their criticism one or more of the satiric, parodical, ironic or otherwise subversive aspects of White’s work. Brian Kiernan, for example, draws our attention to the O’Dowds in The Tree of Man as ‘stage-Irish stereotypes’ and thus as ‘comic versions of the conventional poor selector and his wife’, to the satiric edge that White confers on Thelma Forsdyke and how she is used as a vehicle for social comment71, and later to ‘the poised irony’ of the social comedy that he encounters in Voss72. Veronica Brady examines the parody of King Lear within The Eye of the Storm in some detail, describing Dorothy’s undoing of Basil’s button and the uprooting of his penis as ‘obscene parody’ but she nevertheless remains convinced that the

novel is 'about the holy'. More recently, Susan Lever has pointed out the extent to which *The Twyborn Affair* exhibits a sense of a literary past in offering up numerous literary allusions to such writers as Edith Wharton, La Rochefoucauld, Kipling, Swinburne, Defoe, Meredith, de la Ramee (Ouida), and so on, and how White in this novel parodies a long tradition of literary heroes when he has Eddie Twyborn drop his D.S.O. into a drain.

None of these insights are disputed here, but these critics tend to consider these satirical, parodical, ironic, comic, or otherwise subversive aspects of White's work in isolation — they are not considered as comprising a pattern as the interrelated, manifold, and recurrent effects of White's developing satiric art, as the products of kindred, mutually reinforcing, revisionary, subversive strategies.

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In hundreds of articles, essays, monographs, and book-length studies, White's Australian critics in particular follow up the lines of enquiry that Marjorie Barnard suggests. This body of criticism is as highly informed as it is highly focused, as esoteric as it is enlightened, and as valuable as it is conflicted, and it tends, moreover, to revere or reject White. This criticism thinks of him as a deeply religious writer of high moral purpose who gave us the kinds of metaphysical or high art novels that Australia and Australian literary culture desired during the 1950s and 60s, or it proposes him as a kind of literary monster, a mother-hating misogynist and Australia-hating misanthrope; an elitist and a modernist obsessed with the mean and the miserable but a Most Serious Writer worthily committed (nevertheless) to exploring moments of transcendence, glimpses of eternity, mystic or religious experience, or the artist's relation to society. The focus on 'the satiric' adopted by this study as the core of its modal approach to White's work is not only a way of negotiating or reconciling the oppositions, contradictions, and paradoxes that White criticism has so far produced but it is also a response to such critics as John Rorke in the 1950s, Harry Heseltine in the 1960s, and Alan Lawson in the 1970s, whose trenchant

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criticism of the criticism of White, so to speak, had little or no effect on any of the major approaches outlined here.75

This modal approach is a way to account for the chief characteristic of White’s work, the mutability that the dominant religious reading of his work, as well as the other three established approaches discussed here, overlook and are indeed are unable to account for. White does not produce religious novel after religious novel or symbolist or psyche-driven or modernist novel after modernist novel. He produces novels that only initially use symbolism and allegory, novels that inconsistently draw on religion, that are psyche driven to a variable degree, that come to express post-modernist as well modernist concerns. White experiments, he changes his mode of writing, he addresses fresh issues, problems, and concerns, including the art of fiction, his novels display a changing array of elements and features held in variable balance but also the nature of his satire itself changes so that his oeuvre develops in a way that reflects the great shift from modernism to post modernism that occurred in the second half of the 20th century. His writing is, consequently, mocking but ever-changing because enquiring in new ways, in new areas, and not static as the still dominant orthodox readings of his work suggest.

The Chapters of this Study

The first chapter proper of this study focuses on The Tree of Man and Voss, recognising both as narratives of loneliness, isolation, and alienation, but also as novels which express White re-engagement with Australian society and culture, particularly with the history, myth, and legend that underpins our sense of Australian identity. These novels make manifest the conviction that solitariness is the cornerstone of man’s existence as the first tenet of White’s philosophy but they also propose a better future for they offer the Enlightenment idea of history as inevitable progress as the second tenet of his philosophy. The novels also suggest the idea of redemption, or salvation through art as the third tenet

of White’s philosophy. These two novels enact these progressive aspects of White’s philosophy throughout their narratives but most pointedly at the end of *The Tree of Man* when we learn that Stan Parker’s grandson is to put out his shoots of ‘green thought’, to write a poem of all life, and at the end of *Voss* at when Laura Trevelyan assures us that the story of Voss will be written by those who care. This first chapter establishes the three tenets of White’s philosophy or worldview at this point in his career and it establishes him as an emerging satirist at the same time by demonstrating that he employs the techniques that have been traditionally associated with social satire in these novels. This chapter thus demonstrates that White ridicules and satirises human foibles and follies even though these are revisionary historical novels of serious purpose in which he seeks to teach us more about ourselves, particularly about our history. This sometimes comic, typically informal, and incidental or episodic satire can be seen to have curative or corrective intentions and thus it, too, appears to have a moral, educative purpose. This chapter gives an account of White’s sources for *Voss* to show the extent of his drawings upon the historical records as a measure of his engagement with Australian society, culture, history, myth, and legend, and to provide the basis for a discussion of the extent to which he transfigures those drawings.

Chapter Two elaborates White’s use of the devices, tropes, and strategies of Modern Satire in *Riders in the Chariot* to extend but also radically transform his formerly rather mild social satire of the two previous novels into satire that is much more hard-edged, biting, confronting, and, for some critics, offensive in terms of tenor, tone, and targets. This sea change suggests that White has become disillusioned with the prospect of educating Australians and of changing or realigning the values that underwrite Australian culture and society in any literal, moderate, or measured way. His previously positive attitude regarding the prospects for Australians and Australia is dissolving and so is his belief, consequently, in the idea of history as progress. White’s satire in this novel thus produces dramatic changes in his philosophy of history and of Australia. It is because of the radicalisation of his satire, however, that White’s writing becomes more excessive but more exuberant, more intemperate but more powerful, more implicitly critical but more fearless.

This study does not formally consider *The Solid Mandala* (1966) and *The Vivisector* (1970) because White uses a largely non-figurative, narrative mode of writing in these
novels to explore subjects and themes that appear to have been of personal and professional interest to him. The former novel concerns itself with sibling, familial, and social relations, and the latter more particularly with the relation of a great painter, as an artist, to society. Chapter Three focuses on *The Eye of the Storm* because White treats these subjects and themes in an altogether different, radically subversive way. He turns to parody, or more accurately satire by parody, to mimic and mock human behaviour in specific and self-referential ways that not only reveal but also mock the processes and problems involved in the creation of fictional worlds. This chapter also considers the vast battery of literary references, allusions, and signposts that White playfully but insistently disposes in this novel. These invite us to recognise the artifice of art and thus they seem deliberately designed to draw our attention to White's own creative activity in this novel. This chapter not only shows White's satiric art turning in upon itself and is thus is able to chart another major shift in the development of his art but also that this inwards shift confirms the change in dominant suggested by White's treatment of Alf Dubbo's attempt to render the infinite in paint in *Riders in the Chariot*. White's ontological concerns come to the fore in *The Eye of the Storm* (hence the self-referential title) at the expense of his epistemological concerns so that this novel rather more turns upon a postmodernist ontological dominant as opposed to a modernist epistemological dominant. This new dominant not only redirects White's satire inwards but it also has an important consequence in terms of the philosophy that it produces: White's conviction that solitariness is the keynote of man's existence remains firm but his satire on art, for example the tendency to conflate art and life, signals a serious weakening of his belief in the redemptive power of art. This, in turn, strongly suggests that his belief in the progressive idea of history itself — in a better future — is dissolving.

The changes that occur in White's satire and the changes in philosophy that his satire consequently bears, culminate in *The Twyborn Affair*. Chapter Four thus elaborates the degenerative satire that White disposes in this novel, its subversion of the hierarchies of value in society, including those of narrative itself, by way of grotesque figuration, carnivalesque setting, and an image of masquerade that sets down a virtual chaos that challenges the semiotic order and instead celebrates disorder. The chapter shows that the first tenet of White's philosophy — that man is irretrievably locked in solitariness —
remains intact, for the narrative of this novel, too, is about loneliness, isolation, alienation as well as reconciliation denied. However, the second tenet of White's philosophy — his faith in the possibility of enlightenment, salvation, or redemption through art — dissolves as function of the kind of post-modern degenerative, non-corrective satire that he employs in *The Twyborn Affair*. This novel enacts the final abandonment of the notion of salvation, redemption, or enlightenment through art as the second tenet of White's philosophy because its employment of regression as the principle of its plot composes a regressive diegesis — man does not progress to a better future but rather regresses or remains, at best, locked in his solitary condition — while at the same time White's degenerative satire, through its celebration of disorder and disarray of category subverts the hierarchies of values, including those of narrative itself, of the society of which it is a part and a product. White's vision for humankind is, consequently, bleaker, even more despairing.

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Chapter One

Satire and History in The Tree of Man and Voss

The Tree of Man was preceded by The Aunt's Story (1948), a novel that Patrick White wrote in the aftermath of World War Two, in the spring and early summer of 1946. White sets the central Jardin Exotique section of this novel in the South of France in the period immediately before the war and in it he depicts Europe as a world already falling apart, as an exotic but crumbling garden comprising the ruins and relics of Western civilisation. The novel consequently suggests that White was thoroughly disillusioned with Europe. His disillusionment was well founded for, like millions of Europeans and a far smaller number of Australians, White had first hand experience the rise of Fascism in Europe in the 1930s and of the war that ensued. It is this disillusionment that seems to have spurred his permanent return to Australia in 1948.

White and his partner, Manoly Lascaris, settled on a smallholding at Castle Hill on the outskirts of Sydney where they grew vegetables and flowers, raised poultry, maintained a dairy cow and made their own butter, bred Schnauzers and Saanan goats, and generally became self-supporting. This return to the land can be seen as White's attempt to reconnect with Australia, as I note in the Introduction, but also as a search for new meaning — for the kind of meaning that Europe, the Old World, could not offer. This search for new meaning took the form of a return to the land that was not only in keeping with the history of his forbears who had been settler-pioneers in the upper Hunter Valley from the early 19th century, but also with one of the myths of Australia – that there is land for everyone and the prospect of happiness and prosperity for those who are prepared to work it. What this return involved for White, however, was the abandonment of writing in favour of living. His writing instinct lay dormant for a few years but he resumed writing in 1952 when he began work on the novel that was to become The Tree of Man (1955). This novel is the product of his engagement with Australian myth, legend, history, society

and culture generally but what seems to have provided the impetus for the re-engagement that lay behind the novel was the impact of urban development on Castle Hill in the early 1950s. This kind of development exploded the myth that White, and others in semi-rural areas and communities on the fringes of Australia’s great cities, could actually live on and work their land as they saw fit. This kind of development not only runs counter to the myth but it also informs The Tree of Man, where Stan Parker’s life’s work, his farm, is eventually subsumed by suburbia.

This chapter argues that White’s search for meaning took the form of a general concern about the myths and legends of Australia but particularly about what it could mean to be Australian in terms of the idealised qualities that had become accepted as being typical of the Australian character by virtue of their being propagated and disseminated in the myths and legends of Australian identity. That White was a repatriate novelist attempting to reconnect to the land of his childhood made his concern about these myths and legends all the more acute. It is this essentially ontological concern that led White to resume his writing, to produce The Tree of Man and Voss, novels that enact quests for enlightenment and for self-realisation respectively, as his critics have pointed out, but also novels that draw on the history, myths, and legends of Australia. These novels explore and extend the limits that these myths and legends of identity set on the normative model of ‘Australianness’, on the Australian character. These drawings for Voss are more extensive than White suggests in The Prodigal Son and rather more direct than his critics seem to have realised.

The Tree of Man and Voss are not only novels of epic scale encompassing the entire lives of their main characters but White also historicizes his characters and his narratives, setting them in recognisable historical contexts, so that these are eminently historical novels. The Tree of Man and Voss consequently emerge as serious, high-minded novels that seek to teach us more about our history, ourselves, and our future. White assumes the role in these novels that he suggests in The Prodigal Son, the role that Susan Lever describes as ‘social teacher’.

These novels are particularly important to our understanding of White and his work for two reasons. First, it is through these overwhelmingly Australo-centric novels that White reconnects and re-engages with 'things Australian' rather than through simply working the land, rather than through living the myth. This suggests his engagement with Australian society and culture will be reflectively critical rather than organically romantic or mythological. Second, these are the novels in which White first writes from and into rather than to Australia. White effectively (re)writes Australia in these novels.

What makes these two novels logical as the point of departure for this study is the sometimes comic, incidental or episodic satire that occurs in them. This satire appears because White’s satiric impulse, as well as his writing impulse generally, receives a jolt from the encroaching suburbs. This satire may seem out of place at first glance but White’s turn to it within the context of these predominately serious, historical novels, suggests that it constitutes another way of writing history, another way for him to engage with the force of historical developments such as urbanisation and the consequent loss of rural land and community. This first chapter elaborates White’s sources in order to establish the historical accuracy of his work. It considers his satire per se, it more fully explains why he turns to satire in the context of these historical novels, and it discusses this satire in terms of the novels’ philosophy.

The cornerstone of White’s technique in The Tree of Man is to draw on the heroic qualities contained in two of the legends of Australian identity, that of the bushman-pioneer and that of Anzac⁴, and then compose them in Stan Parker to produce an historically resonant central character. White locates Stan in the familiar locus of the Australian bush, he sends him to fight in World War One, and he celebrates him as a model of the hardworking, modest, and courageous but inarticulate bushman-pioneer type of legend. Stan conforms to the model qualities of these two legends of identity and is thus a recognisably historical figure. At the same time, however, White transforms Stan by ascribing to him a heightened sensibility that exceeds the limits of the legends and ensures that he extends the possibilities of what it might mean to be Australian.

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⁴ See John Carroll ed., Intruders In The Bush The Australian Quest For Identity, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1992, for a detailed account of how these legends were formed and how they inform Australian identity.
This sensibility is primarily Romantic in the 19th century German tradition. White suggests its nature and his admiration for it in his autobiography:

Between '32 and '35 I spent the greater part of every vacation in Germany. I had to catch up on a language which, until I visited the country, I could never take seriously: comic, hedgehog words constantly colliding, syntactical structures to get lost in. Then while exploring the country itself I became obsessed by its Romantic literature, which in later life was dispossessed by my passion for the French. I moved drunkenly through German landscape, the feverish greener-than-green which so often gives out a smell of rotting, the black green of pine forests, the austere, dead green North, scruffy with sand as it approaches the Baltic coast.

White, by ascribing this intensely nature-oriented Romantic sensibility to Stan, not only confers on him ‘a mind of more than ordinary sensibility’ but also casts him as a more complex character than those we generally encounter in the social realist novels that are contemporaneous to The Tree of Man. Stan is a typically taciturn, heroic Australian of legend but he is also an aspirant to infinitude, a kind of poet not quite in the making, whom White nevertheless celebrates for having the inclinations of the poet and for his willingness to be enlightened. Stan Parker evokes Henry Lawson’s Joe Wilson in these respects but there is a subtle difference between these two characters. Stan is a kind of perverse ‘refinement’ of Joe in that he is an exaggerated example of the taciturn, inarticulate Australian bushman of legend. Joe demonstrates insight when he declares that he is or should have been a poet — ‘I reckon I was born for a poet by mistake, and grew up to be a Bushman...’ — and that he is aware of poetic sensibility when he reports Mark Twain’s observation that he lost ‘all the beauty of the river when he saw it with a pilot’s eye’. The difference is that both men have poetic sensibility but Stan is unaware that he has it — he is aware of something but he never articulates what it might be. Stan’s unspoken sensibility is most evident in his intense engagement with the elements and forces of the natural world, in his rescue of Madeleine from the fire at Glastonbury, in his

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6 Annegret Maack, ‘Shakespearean Reference as Structural Principle in Patrick White’s The Tree of Man and The Eye of The Storm’, Southerly, no 2, 1978, p. 131. Maack compares White’s Stan Parker to Shakespeare’s Hamlet — both possess “a mind of more than ordinary sensibility”.
involvement in World War One, and in his response to the performance of *Hamlet* in Sydney that he and Amy attend\(^8\).

White’s depiction of Stan and Amy Parker at a performance of *Hamlet* taps into what is something of a trope in Australian Literature. This is the idea of the common man embracing Shakespeare’s art. Stan and Amy’s attendance at *Hamlet* invites us to recall Bill and Doreen’s engagement with another Shakespearean play, *Romeo and Juliet*, in C. J. Dennis’s *The Sentimental Bloke* (1915) and to recall the considerable knowledge of Shakespeare exhibited by the narrator of Joseph Furphy’s *Such is Life* (1901)\(^9\). White taps into this trope, making *The Tree of Man* all the more resonant while at the same time he connects it to the tradition of Australian Literature.

However, although Stan Parker’s lack of insight and inability to express himself means that he is like such unadorned, rough-edged social realist figures as Kylie Tennant’s Snow of *The Battlers* (1941) or Darcy Niland’s Macauley of *The Shiralee* (1955), his Romantic sensibility sets him apart from them. These kinds of characters still provided the dominant models for Australian Literature in the 1950s and while they exhibit certain sensitivities and sensibilities in their interactions with their families and fellows they never display a Romantic or any other kind of sensibility that can be equated to that of Stan Parker. White’s Stan, because of the difference I have outlined, remains much closer to Henry Lawson’s Joe Wilson, than the later social realist figures of Tennant or Niland.

The extent to which Stan embraces and enacts his historical but European Romantic sensibility casts him as something of an ahistorical figure in Australian terms. Since he is also at least as stoic and as inarticulate as the characters of legend produced by Tennant, Niland, and Lawson, and because White engages him in such particularly Australian historical activities as clearing the bush, developing the farm, and fighting in the momentous event that was the First World War, he is a recognisably historical figure. Stan is an internalised and subjective version of the Australian type but White is also careful to sufficiently historicize Stan so as to ensure that he is a recognisable but enhanced figure who challenges the dominant literary model of the Australian character.

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\(^9\) Joseph Furphy, *Such is Life*, Sydney, Angus and Robinson, 1969 Reprint.
Stan’s Romantic sensibility is vital to his enhancement for it enables his sense of ‘the beyond’, his sense that there is more to life, more beyond the bounds of everyday existence, and so it underwrites his willingness to discover, to understand, and to be enlightened. White, in presenting Stan in this way, extends and improves the type of literature and legend by suggesting and valuing our human will to knowledge and to art. This confirms White in the role of social teacher — he writes his story, his history of Stan Parker, to teach us more about our history and thus ourselves but also about our potential as a people. Stan Parker, despite his limitations, is a much more promising — and aesthetically pleasing — character than the battlers of the bush or the meretricious materialists of Australian suburbia.

_The Tree of Man_, however, does not present Stan as being actively engaged on a quest as such critics as Peter Beatson and Brian Kiernan have suggested. Stan never speaks of a quest and so to describe this character as a man engaged on a quest for enlightenment or on a search for a vision is not quite the case — the novel does not present Stan as man actively pursuing a goal or a quest of which he is aware — Stan does not know what it is he seeks. Stan is ‘unknowing’ but the novel presents him as a man who is drawn to engage with nature and with the beyond and who is willing to receive whatever enlightenment or otherwise that may be granted to him. It needs be noted that even when Stan appears to realise that the Almighty is within life, immanent in its most humble part by observing, very late in his life, that God exists in a gob of spittle, we cannot be certain that it is this kind of religious insight — or any other — that he has been seeking. The point is that Stan has been and remains willingly disposed to receive, despite his inarticulateness or other limitations, whatever insight, illumination, or vision, that is forthcoming. What the novel thus advocates and what it teaches is the value of this openness and this willingness to receive and accept whatever may or may not be granted to us. Stan seems to enact this to suggest it as a pre-requisite for a better future.

10 Peter Beatson, _The Eye In The Mandala Patrick White: a vision of man and God_, Sydney, A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1976, p. 96. For Beatson, all of White’s characters are ‘groping to find’ an answer to the existentialist or ontological question of ‘Who am I?’


However, Stan Parker, like Theodora Goodman of *The Aunt's Story*, Elliot Standish of *The Living And The Dead*, and Dr Halliday of *Happy Valley*, also enacts the solitariness of man as the central tenet of White's philosophy. This enactment turns upon his failure to establish satisfactory or satisfying relationships with his wife and children (and they with him) and it is underscored by his want of mateship even though he is a pioneer firmly located in the Australian bush and is later an Anzac soldier. Yet because Stan engages with nature, exhibits a sense of the beyond, and is willingly disposed to enlightenment, the novel evinces an affirmative view of the potential of humankind. This is most clearly confirmed at the novel's end when we learn that Stan Parker's grandson is to write 'a poem of life, of all life, of what he did not know, but knew' and that he will, consequently, 'put out his shoots of green thought' so that 'in the end there is no end' (p. 480). But this is to specifically value art, White's own activity, by affirming the connection between life and art and by alluding to the educative possibilities provided by it — art not only has the capacity to reflect but to inform life. The novel thus asserts that progress and its promise, a better future, is to come through art and in doing so it confirms this as the second tenet of White's philosophy at this time.

What makes *The Tree of Man* all the more remarkable is that White writes satire in this otherwise serious historical novel seemingly in spite his high-minded design to teach us more about ourselves. This satire is limited in that it centres on the Parker's daughter, Thelma, her husband Dudley Forsdyke, and their social aspirations, but it also envelops the Parker's neighbours, the O'Dowd family. White's satire is incidental but its presence indicates that he has regained the subversive spirit that produced the satirical sketches that he wrote for the English theatre in the 1930s.

**Thelma and her 'stomachy' solicitor**

Thelma Parker and her brother Ray both abandon the bush for Sydney, but where Ray becomes involved in crime, Thelma gains legitimate employment with a shipping company where she is soon noted for having the sharpest pencils in the office (p. 260). Thelma's career and her social status improve markedly when she goes to work for a firm of solicitors: she marries 'young' Dudley Forsdyke, a partner in the firm, even though he
is a ‘bit bald’ and ‘stomachy’ (p. 263). These ironic notes initiate the satire that mocks Dudley and Thelma for their various affectations and social pretensions.

The novel deftly ridicules Dudley for posing as someone he is not, an ordinary man, when he chooses a car, ‘an English make, neither old nor new, neither elongated or low, of a good negative colour’, because it does not reveal his economic status. Dudley emerges as a kind of inverted _poseur_ here, a fake egalitarian. He is further ridiculed for driving this car through gaps ‘with some dash’ even though he does not ‘ordinarily’ possess this quality and for soon wondering, like ‘everybody’, why he married Thelma (pp. 334-335).

Thelma attracts a good deal more scornful treatment than her husband. White inadvertently demonstrates that fairness is of no concern to the satirist when he attacks Thelma for her appearance: she is ‘this pale girl, skinny even, with noticeable elbows, and the upper vertebrae visible beneath her oblivious skin’. He also ridicules Thelma for her obsession with her hair — it is a duty to which she attends ‘with a passion’ so that its ‘pale, disseminated gold’ is kept ‘beautifully washed’ (p. 336). There is, too, the problem of her voice on which ‘she had worked, and spent quite a proportion of her salary’. This had become ‘cultured, without strain’ and ‘well modulated, without discarding firmness’.

Thelma’s voice even comes between her and Dudley in a way that causes ‘endless irritations, even unpleasantness’ so that others ‘feel sorry for him’. As a country girl and an _arriviste_ in Sydney society, Thelma continues with her self-improvement but is deeply undercut for it: she takes lessons in French, not to learn the language, but because she wishes to assure herself that events do ‘follow a sequence’ (p. 338) and she sits ‘cautiously’ on various charity committees. It is a measure of the vacuity of her existence that when she ‘discovers literature’, she only holds books to ‘disguise her indolence’. What finally induces her to read is an obsession with ethics and anthropology which seems to arise out of her fear that her mother might develop cancer in her old age and might need ‘intimate attentions’ for which she would pay because ‘she was rich’ (p. 371). As her status and her prosperity increases so do her pretensions: Thelma gives generously to the church but to the Rector so as not to encourage the parson who ‘did not fit her social scheme’ (p. 372). She becomes ‘deliberately’ generous ‘far in excess of the occasion’ so that her eyes redden ‘for her own acts’.
White goes on to mercilessly dissect Thelma’s philanthropy: ‘the voluptuousness of generosity became necessary to her’ as if it were ‘her secret vice, her wardrobe gin or hypodermic’. She also likes to bring presents to her parents, ‘exquisitely remorseful, thoughtfully expensive things,’ but her mother wonders what she is to do with these. White’s antipathy towards Thelma extends to her as a social type — on the occasions when she visits her family and her former home she remembers the ‘abyss of her origins’. This is antipathy expressed in pure hyperbole that produces a form of words wildly incongruent to that which they describe. This ‘abyss’, moreover, is something from which ‘it is not possible to escape’ (p. 373). White simultaneously attacks Thelma’s appearance and her perception of it — her face becomes ‘not convincing to her, even at its best’ — and then he extends his attack to Thelma’s social milieu — her self-doubt produces the unfortunate consequence of causing her voice ‘to falter when ‘discussing music’. White’s satire upon Thelma reaches its apogee at the end of the novel when she receives news of her father’s death. Thelma freezes then becomes ‘limp’ at the news, not because her father has died, but because his funeral coincides with a dinner at Government House to which she has been invited. This leads her to express her hope that ‘funerals in the country, little funerals of simple insignificant people that trail through the yellow grass in hired cars and a variety of dreadful clothes, are over quickly’ (p. 471). This cynically superior view completes the transformation of Thelma from innocent country girl to pretentious Sydney socialite. White’s satire of Thelma is thus double-edged — he attacks her for going to Sydney, for abandoning her origins, and he attacks her for her aspirations, for attempting to embrace and emulate the rules and values of the higher echelons of Sydney society. In addition, he also uses Thelma as a vehicle to excoriate this society, a society that appears to value surface over depth and money over worth. White treats the O’Dowds in a different manner to the Forsdykes by locating them within a web of comic rather than social satire.

Mrs O’Dowd and ‘that bastard’

Mrs O’Dowd’s own words cast her as a comic figure as soon as she enters the narrative. When she introduces herself to Amy Parker she soon tells her that she was
“born in a bog, to be sure” but that it is “sometimes those that knows nothun; that knows”. She also reveals that her husband has “an affliction”, one that he thinks of as “a gentleman’s pastime”. Mr O’Dowd apparently believes it is his privilege “to get shickered periodical, like a lord or a bastard, and fling out the marines”, while Mrs O’Dowd she fears she will break her ankles on the bottles “floatun’ round”. Mrs O’Dowd’s explanation of just how easy it is to find her house — ‘you only have to look for the old dead horse that he left layun for a sign’ — is rather more darkly comic and implicitly critical of Mr O’Dowd (pp. 44-45). Later we learn that Mrs O’Dowd’s house had been fixed ‘pretty enough’ for her honeymoon but that it has fallen down because “that drunken bastard has been on it” (p. 119).

This is comic satire because Mrs O’Dowd produces laughter: she serves to pointedly and amusingly ridicule her husband for being an inept pioneer too much given to the grog. And she produces further laughter when she serves to mock herself: her account of the removal of her teeth by a “travellun’ gentlemen” is a case in point. Complications arise because Mrs O’Dowd has what she calls ‘stomps’ instead of teeth and this produces more comedy than sound medical procedure. Despite the blood and the gentlemen “strainun’ like a bullock”, she does not give up her last tooth — “I would not part with that bugger, not if me whole life depended on it” (p. 119). She later reveals that she prefers little boys because they are “indiapendent” (p. 122).

Near the end of the novel White directly describes the O’Dowds’ farm. Their house is ‘entering on a further stage of its collapse’, the wind is ‘torturing the roof’ and when it tears ‘a leaf of iron’ it flings it across the yard where it slaps ‘a pig’s arse fairly hard’. This done, the iron sinks into a pond, ‘or spill of brown water’, and this causes a spray of white ducks to shoot out in ‘such a quarking and groaning of animals, it was near murder’. This account of the O’Dowds’ farm as chaos personified is exaggerated, funny, and comical, but there is a degree of scorn in this that indicates White’s purposes are mixed, both comic and satiric. This scorn, this disdain, is inherent in his final observation that ‘all these events go unnoticed except for the blue dogs lifting their legs’ (p. 451).

White essentially depicts the O’Dowd family as poor, bumbling, comical, Irish squatter-pioneers — we may recall Mrs O’Dowd’s reference to her birthplace in a bog, her idiosyncratic, exceedingly demotic speech, Mr O’Dowd’s liking for the grog, the fact that
they never marry, and their monumental ineptitude as pioneer farmers. The O'Dowd’s, through these qualities, invite us to recall the hugely popular bush stories of Steele Rudd (Arthur Hoey Davis), those of Henry Lawson, particularly his A Day On A Selection, and Miles Franklin’s novel My Brilliant Career. These qualities inform many of the bush characters of Rudd, Lawson, and Franklin, as well as White, but there are both similarities and differences between White’s treatment of the O'Dowds and the earlier writers’ treatment of their bush characters.

Where, for example, Rudd treats his bush characters in a purely comic manner, White treats his characters in a comic satiric manner. It is possible to see White here as the son of ‘the Whites’, the very successful upper middle class squatters of the Hunter Valley, disdaining and thus satirically attacking, rather unfairly, the very much less successful, and much less well resourced, lower class settlers of the selections. However, White is not alone in disdaining this class of settlers for disdain is quite apparent in Miles Franklin’s depiction of the M’Swat family in her My Brilliant Career (1901). The difference, again, lies in the manner of treatment for, although there is a trace of irony in Franklin’s voice and hyperbole in her description, her treatment of the M’Swats is not comical or satirical but literally critical. White, despite his background, is no more disdainful of Mr and Mrs O'Dowd than Franklin is of the M'Swats. It may be noted in this respect that Lawson too, exhibits some disdain for his selector in A Day On A Selection — he describes him as ‘careless...too shiftless to put up a decent fence, or build a decent house, and who knows little or nothing about farming’. Although White’s O'Dowd family are recognisable habitués of the bush, he does not make them the objects of comedy like Rudd, or subject them to literal criticism like Franklin or Lawson, but instead subjects them to satire. However, White’s satire of the O'Dowds is at times markedly comical. This not only suggests that satire generally may slide towards comedy, thus indicating its capacity to produce laughter, but it also moves White’s treatment of his bush characters closer to Rudd’s comic treatment of such characters.

The comic elements to which I have referred ‘soften’ White’s satire of the O'Dowds so that while it is still pointed it is rather more benign than the satire that he directs

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towards the Forsdykes. This suggests that he is playing and having fun with the O'Dowds, possibly mimicking and mocking them not so much as socio-historical types but as deeply embedded Australian literary stereotypes. This kind of play, this sense of White as an author 'at play' with his material, is also discernible in his account of Stan and Amy Parker's attendance at a performance of Hamlet in Sydney.

Stan's initial response to the appearance of Shakespeare's prince on stage is to comically ask 'Is this our Hamlet? With poor knees'. The question remains unanswered, however, because his mind immediately slides away to other, tangential recollections:

Once he had known an old horse called Hamlet, a bay, no, an old brown gelding, a light draught, that belonged to an old cove, Furneval was it, or Furness? who would drive through the village for groceries, flicking at the flies on Hamlet with the whip. That was one Hamlet. (p. 401)

These references to Furneval and Furness may be seen as an obscure literary joke, as Mark Williams points out, for F.J. Furnivall and H. H. Furness were indeed nineteenth century scholars whose fields included Shakespeare studies, philology and bibliography. But this is a limited view for this passage not only mocks these scholars by reducing them to the equine order of things but it mocks their subject, Shakespeare's plays, and, consequently, White's own use of Hamlet. Shakespeare's Hamlet causes Stan to drift away, it elicits an idiosyncratic response from him, and so the play is suggested to be not appropriately meaningful to its Australian audiences. White thus not only taps into but also playfully mocks the Australian literary trope that depicts everyday, ordinary people engaging with Shakespeare's plays. This passage exemplifies White's liking for literary play but it also marks the emergence of a subversive, at times self-parodic, tendency that is to increasingly appear in the later novels.

The Tree of Man generally presents the prospect of a better future through its affirmation of the educative possibilities provided by art. This is a limited affirmation but a positive one in that it confirms White's belief in the benefit of educating Australians about their past and their future while at the same time it demonstrates his conviction that Australians can be so educated, that they are capable of this kind of improvement, that

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they will be redeemed by art. These affirmations are significant in terms of the novel's philosophy — they indicate a positive view of Australia and Australians, past and future — but White's satire seems to militate against this positive philosophy. The novel offers on the one hand the prospect of a better future while on the other hand its satire of the Forsdykes, Thelma in particular, seems to deny this same idea.

Thelma leaves the family farm at Durilgai, marries Dudley, and soon appears to make material and social progress by embracing the behaviours and values of Sydney society. The novel satirically undercuts her and that society when it ridicules and exposes those behaviours and values as affected, pretentious, and ultimately empty. Since curative or corrective satire is a conservative art form that holds up pre-existing values, those of the past, as a standard against which present values can be measured, White's satire, in offering a critique of the values that rule Thelma's contemporary life within Sydney society, implies that the values that determined her past life on the family farm at Durilgai were superior because unaffected, honest, and genuinely organic rather than pretentious, dishonest, and inorganic because superficial. The implied superiority of these values of the past, the bush, over those of the present, the city, means that Thelma's embrace of the life of the city is not progressive but regressive. The course of Thelma's life can be seen as an expression of the tension between Sydney and the Bush that operates as a trope in Australian Literature but, more importantly, it does not appear to support the idea of a better future for it instead proposes the idea of a regress to a worse future, one of despair, decay, and decadence. White's depiction of Thelma in this way seems to call into question the idea of progress itself and that of educating Australians about their past, present, and future.

As it happens, White's depiction of Thelma's failure to progress reflects the failure of all the characters in the novel to progress. This failure most evidently confirms that the first tenet of White's philosophy is that humankind is inextricably locked in solitariness. This failure is ubiquitous and multi-faceted: Stan and Amy Parker do not succeed in establishing satisfying or satisfactory relations, Stan remains friendless and his discovery of God in a gob of spittle is not only late but of no use or comfort to him, his son Ray becomes a criminal and is murdered, the O'Dowd's continue in their vulgar, comic ineptitude until Mrs O'Dowd apparently kills her husband, and, most noticeably, none of
these characters — or any others — have anything to say of a substantive or profound nature.

One of this novel’s achievements is the extent to which White’s satire successfully coexists with the serious, historical elements that constitute his narrative. This is a significant achievement because The Tree of Man is not a straightforward, conventional narrative of progress — Stan is willing to be enlightened but remains unenlightened and inarticulate as indeed do the other characters — and so it does not appear to enact the prospect of a better future for Australians. Thus the novel, in its narrative aspect, is not aesthetically pleasing because it is an expression of the first, bleak, tenet of White’s philosophy. However, the novel is aesthetically pleasing in its visionary and satiric aspects: it does enact White’s vision for Australia — Stan’s grandson is not only going to write his poem of all life but Australians generally will be redeemed through art — and it is also made aesthetically pleasing through White’s subversion of the Forsdykes, particularly of Thelma as a social type, as a country girl and an arriviste falsely made good, and through his mockery of her contemporary Sydney life. This satire, and thus the novel, is not only pleasing because it is pointed but amusing and funny but also because it teaches us more about our society and culture while at the same time it warns us of the dangers of attempting to become someone other than who we were. The novel teaches us, through its satire, to examine our aspirations and in doing so it offers the prospect of a better future even though that future implies a return to the past, to our earlier, original values. This is the kind of return to the past and its values that White initiated for himself when he resettled permanently in Australia in 1948. That this return to past values is implicit in White’s satire suggests that this kind of corrective or curative satire is indeed a conservative art form. White turns to satire within the context of this predominately historical novel to warn us of the dangers of false aspirations and in this, in turn, indicates that at this point in his career he is experimenting with the satirical mode of writing as another way of writing history, as an alternative means of dealing with its force. This process continues in Voss, his next novel.

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Voss, as White acknowledges in *The Prodigal Son*, is influenced by the story of the German explorer Ludwig Leichhardt's expeditions in Australia. This novel concerns itself with the earliest period of European exploration and settlement, the period immediately before the pioneering period, and it encompasses the sweep of the epic, it carries the weight of the historical saga, and it relates to actual people and events within a discrete epoch. By drawing on the story of Leichhardt, this novel also taps into the third great legend of Australian identity, that of the heroic explorer, and so it goes back further into Australian history, myth, and legend than *The Tree of Man*. This is consequently an eminently serious historical novel, one that provides a further measure of White's determination to re-engage with Australian history, society and culture, and yet he writes satire in it by resuming and extending the social satire that he began in *The Tree of Man*.

*Voss* contains two interrelated stories — one about coastal settlement set in early 19th century Sydney and another about inland exploration during the same era — and so it reflects the historical divide between Sydney and the bush, between the coast and the interior of Australia. This historical divide produces a tension that has considerably informed Australian Literature, finding its expression in the idealisation of 'the Bush', particularly in the short stories, ballads, and articles produced by *The Bulletin* writers of the 1890s. However, it should be noted that not all literary critics agree that these writers idealised the bush and its values. John Docker, for example, writes that *The Bulletin* writers 'occasionally spoke of the virtues of the Australian national character' but were 'goaded' into this response by the contempt towards Australian literature inherent in British cultural imperialism. They did not, he writes, eulogise the bushman 'as the ideal citizen'16. Graeme Davison, however, points out that most of the *Bulletin*’s leading contributors lived in the coastal cities, especially Sydney and Melbourne, but had grown up in the Bush. The most prominent of these new city dwellers — ‘Henry Lawson, Bernard O’Dowd, Edward Dyson, A. G. Stephens, and the Lindsays’ — had come to the city as ‘fortune seekers from the declining goldfields’. ‘Banjo’ Patterson, he writes, was the only important figure who retained “even fair ‘bush’ credentials”17. In these circumstances, it seems reasonable to suggest that these writers romanticized and indeed

idealised the bush, the bushman, and particularly his notions of mateship and
egalitarianism, as a response to their dismay and discontent with city life, as a function of
not finding their fortune there.

This tension between the city and the bush not only informs both White’s narrative and
his satire in The Tree of Man but it also takes sharper form in Voss — it produces the two
interrelated stories to which I have referred while at the same time it produces rather more
sustained satire. This tension energises the novel while at the same time, as a
foundational, dynamic trope, it connects the novel to the tradition of Australian Literature
even though White has effectively written two stories in this novel — an historical story of
inland exploration in predominately narrative mode and an historical story of coastal
settlement in predominately satirical mode. The successful melding of these stories in
this way is a significant achievement because it demonstrates, firstly, that there need be no
tension or discrepancy between satirical and historical fiction and, secondly, that White
has the power to reclaim, energise, and make history contemporaneously meaningful for
his readers.

In this section proper, I begin by demonstrating that White’s research for Voss was far
more extensive than he suggests in The Prodigal Son. I elaborate his sources, suggesting
how White came to them, and I show how he uses these to inform and historicize his
narrative and three characters in particular, Voss, his central character, and two subsidiary
characters, Mr Palfreyman and Professor Topp. This section demonstrates that White was
not simply influenced by Alec Chisholm’s Strange New World, or Edward Eyre’s Journal,
or ‘the megalomaniac of the day’, as he suggests, but that he directly drew on historical
figures such as Ludwig Leichhardt, John Gilbert, and Isaac Nathan, as they appear in
Daniel Bunce’s Travels with Dr Leichhardt in Australia (1859), in Ludwig Leichhardt’s
Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia from Moreton Bay to Port Essington, a
distance of upwards of 3000 miles, during the year 1844-1845 (1847), in Louis Politzer’s
Dr. Ludwig Leichhardt’s Letters from Australia (1944), and in C. H. Bertie’s Isaac
Nathan, Australia’s first composer (1922).

This section will elaborate White’s sources to provide a measure of the extent of his
research and to demonstrate that his narrative and his characters are historically
referential. It will establish this in order to argue that it is these drawings from the
historical record that lead White to write satire in this novel. These drawings, by their nature, make White complicit in the process of myth-making that seems to be irretrievably bound up, to a greater or lesser extent, with the writing of history. In this context of complicity, satire becomes for White an alternative, non-Romantic way of writing history, and *Voss* becomes an important stepping-stone in the development of his satiric art.

I will finally examine the satire that extends from the mild ridicule that is inherent in the comedy of manners with which the novel opens to the much more pointed and sometimes wildly excessive satiric description of Belle Bonner's ball. I will consider this satire in terms of its targets and what it means in terms of the philosophy that it bears. I will show that it targets, mocks, and ridicules the social codes and conventions as well as the foibles, follies, and excesses of Sydney society, and that in doing so it seems to suggest that social activities and affairs are lightweight, frivolous, and ultimately meaningless, and that therefore the answers to the profound questions that pertain to the human condition are not be found in the area of social activities.

White's satire presents 19th century Sydney as a developing society but one whose elite — essentially the merchant class — is materialistic, self-serving, and self-indulgent almost to the point of decadence and thus it enables White to treat with history in a non-Romantic way. White's satire can hardly be said to endorse the idea of progress — development leads only to decadence — but it does confirm the formalist view that satire has corrective intentions in that White is not only telling us more about ourselves, about our general history, but also about the 'decadent' history of some of our antecedents. In doing so, he appears to be warning us or at least inviting us to reconsider our own behaviour in these terms. This, too, is a further demonstration of his commitment to the educative possibilities of art.

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**Mr Palfreyman and the Incident of the Mustard and Cress**

One of the more obscure historical records that White draws on for *Voss* is the diary of Daniel Bunce, published as *Travels with Dr Leichhardt in Australia* (1859). Bunce,
who accompanied Leichhardt as botanist on his first expedition, records an incident on the 23 March 1847 that concerns the cutting of some mustard and cress that he had planted for the sick members of the party:

On arriving, however, at the spot, judge my surprise and disgust at finding that the whole of it had been cut, and that too by someone wearing European boots. Now, I know that we were surrounded by wild blackfellows, who might have cut it, although it was not probable, but when considered that they were not in the habit of making or wearing boots, my suspicion fell on three persons only, namely, Dr. Leichhardt, Mr. Mann, or myself, the others being too ill to get about. Of course I was in a position to account for my own innocence in the matter, and as I had an equally good opinion of Mr. Mann, I was compelled to appeal to Dr. Leichhardt for a solution to the mystery, who at once admitted that he had cut and eaten it. This admission on the part of the doctor was a sore disappointment to the poor individuals who were unable to eat anything as substantial as meat and had been led by me for the last few days to expect on this particular day a dish of this salad. Dr. Leichhardt observed that there would be more of it for cutting in two or three days, and if the invalids liked to cut it themselves they might have it, but not otherwise. This was tantamount to saying that they should not have it, as they were not capable of moving twenty yards from their blankets without assistance.18

Alec Chisholm gives an account of this incident in *Strange New World* (1941) his biography of John Gilbert, the ornithologist killed by Aborigines on Leichhardt’s first expedition. He acknowledges Bunce’s diary as a source but provides an account of the incident that is quite different from Bunce’s in that it presents Leichhardt in an even worse light. White seems to have come to Bunce through Chisholm for his *Strange New World* is one of the two literary sources that he acknowledges for *Voss* in *The Prodigal Son*. White incorporates this incident into *Voss* but transforms in a way that makes it less damaging to *Voss* than both Bunce’s and Chisholm’s accounts are to Leichhardt.

It is Palfreyman the ornithologist who plants the seeds in *Voss*, there being no botanist on the expedition. White follows Bunce insofar as the seeds are apparently planted in response to the needs of the men but what motivates the planting is Palfreyman’s sense of guilt over his failure to return the love of his deformed sister (p. 288). His sister ‘preferred mignonette’ but ‘was also in the habit of nursing up pots of mustard and cress’ as ‘he remembered’. It is quite clear from the terms and tone used to describe the planting and

germination of these seeds that it is for the ornithologist an attempt to expiate the guilt he feels in respect of his sister — ‘Palfreyman sowed, and the miraculous seed germinated, standing up on pale threads, then unfolding…the importance of which was enormous’ (p. 263).

In a further adaptation, where Bunce discovers all his greenstuff to have been cut, Palfreyman discovers only half of his to have been. His reaction to this theft is adverse, like Bunce’s, but adverse in a rather more poetic and less practical way: his ‘eardrums were thundering’ and he ‘began to watch for birds, or animals, and would hang about in the grey rain’ so that ‘his feet made sucking noises in the grey mud’. Palfreyman is ‘stunned’ when he discovers Voss cutting the remaining seedlings and ‘stuffing the greenstuff into his mouth, like an animal’. He asks Voss if he realizes ‘how this greenstuff comes to be growing here?’ Voss does not answer, merely remarking that ‘It is good…but in such small quantities, it cannot give the greatest pleasure’. Palfreyman, we learn, ‘was on the point of asking whether the leader knew that the seed had been sown by the hand of man, but desisted. He felt that he did not wish to hear his suspicions confirmed’ (p. 289).

The inclusion of this incident in Voss gives an indication of the extent of White’s historical research for this novel. It also suggests Palfreyman to be a composite character drawn from two historical figures, Gilbert the ornithologist and Bunce the botanist, and so it exemplifies White’s method of historicizing his novel while creatively transforming his source material. In this process, Palfreyman emerges as a fictional but historically resonant figure.

A Harpsichordist, a Composer, and ‘poor’ Professor Topp

Professor Topp is the Colony of New South Wales’s ‘Music Master’, a cultured man who plays the flute for pleasure and who teaches pianoforte for a living. White draws Topp from two historical figures, Mr Marsh the harpsichordist who sailed out to Australia with Ludwig Leichhardt in 1841 and Isaac Nathan, the colony’s first composer who settled in New South Wales a few months before the arrival of Leichhardt and Marsh19.

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19Isaac Nathan settled in Sydney in April 1841. The Australian Dictionary of Biography, vol 2 1788-1850, 1979 reprint, pp. 279-280, cites him as the first musician with ‘an international reputation to
Leichhardt, in a letter to his brother-in-law in Germany dated at Sydney 21st October 1847, describes Marsh playing his harpsichord during a storm at sea in terms that disclose both his own and Marsh’s Romantic inclinations. It is not now possible to determine whether or not White read Leichhardt’s letters but they were certainly available to him pre-Voss in the collection translated by L. L. Politzer and published by Pan Books in 1944. This book has been available at the State Library of New South Wales from December of the same year:

After my three years in the wilderness I’ve been re-reading Schiller’s poems. What mastery of language, and how he stands out for his nobility of feeling! Never has music made such a deep impression on me as during my voyage from England to Sydney. It was a wild night, and the ocean roared below the keel of the advancing ship; I had long listened to the strange noises. I suddenly got up and entered the cabin of Mr Marsh, my travelling companion, who was a great master of the harp, and who was improvising on the harp when I entered. Hearing the harmonious tunes after the distorted roar of the wind and the waves moved me strongly but pleasantly and tears clouded my eyes. I was overcome when I read Schiller again.

Marsh quite clearly informs Professor Topp. Where Leichhardt depicts Mr Marsh’s harp playing in the refuge of his cabin to be a Romantic response to the threat posed to him by an actual force of Nature, the sea storm enclosing him, White depicts Topp’s flute playing in the refuge of his house as a Romantic response to the threat posed to him by a symbolic force of Nature and the cultural desert enclosing him (p. 40). And where Leichhardt indicates Marsh’s playing to generate pleasure for him by way of his ‘harmonious tunes’, White indicates Topp’s playing to generate pleasure for ‘the people passing on the street’ by way of his ‘pearly, translucent notes’ (p. 30). Leichhardt’s account of Marsh indicates him to be a source for Topp but White also drew on Isaac Nathan, another historical figure and the subject of C. H. Bertie’s 1922 biography.

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settle in Australia. It notes that he probably contributed to the prevailing pseudo-Byronic tone of Sydney’s artistic life and that his Romantic Don John of Austria was the first opera to be composed and produced in Australia.


It seems that White came to Bertie’s biography of Nathan by again following up Chisholm’s sources for *Strange New World*. Chisholm mentions in an incident concerning Nathan’s setting to music of *Leichhardt's Grave*, an ode written by Robert Lynd, the barrack master at Sydney, that mourned the supposed passing of his friend. On Leichhardt’s return, Nathan quickly replaced this ode with a paean of praise entitled *The Greeting Home Again*. Nathan’s musical attributes suggest him as a source for Topp. However, Chisholm’s mention of Nathan is limited to the incident of the ode and paean and his purpose is to poke fun at Leichhardt and his friends: the ode is described as a ‘dirge’, Nathan is described as “Hebrew Melody” Nathan who ‘strayed’ into Sydney, and Lynd’s verses in performance are described as ‘an early example of crooning’.

Chisholm’s treatment of Nathan is disparaging so it may have influenced White’s conception of Topp to some extent: certainly the Professor is a forlorn figure whom the novel often describes as ‘poor’ Topp and in other terms that reflect his low status in Sydney society. Chisholm’s mention of Nathan, however, is brief so it is difficult to conclude that he directly influenced White’s depiction of Topp. It is much more likely that Chisholm, in recounting the incident of the ode and paean and in specifically mentioning Nathan, suggested the composer to White who then referred to another historical source whose subject was Nathan.

There were two studies of Nathan available prior to the publication of *Voss* in 1957 — Bertie’s 1922 biography and that of Olga Philipps’s published in London in 1940. White could have consulted either of these biographies but it seems more likely that he drew on the former as it was published in Sydney and was far more readily available. Bertie quotes Nathan’s description of the response of a Sydney audience to the performance of two fugues, one from Beethoven’s Mass in C, and the other from Mozart’s 12th Mass:

One part of the audience, who had only been accustomed to listen to simple melody, on hearing these scientific compositions, looked at each other with interesting wry faces, such as sucking babes make at the first taste of an olive. Another part of the assembly whispered aloud, in the seeming agony of those convulsed with cholera. ‘There, do you hear, they are all behind — they can’t keep

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22 Chisholm, p. 349.
23 Olga Phillips, *Isaac Nathan, Friend of Byron*, London, Minerva Books, 1940. This study draws on Bertie’s study and acknowledges it as a source.
together; how they are scampering after each other — they are no musicians — they know nothing of them. Can he be Nathan, the composer of the Hebrew Melodies, Lord Byron’s protégé and friend? No!24

This extract illustrates the nature of the problem that Nathan confronted in Sydney. Nathan, however, seems to have been undaunted for Bertie tells us that he ‘lost no time’ in continuing the musical education of Sydney and in teaching the citizens ‘to appreciate the taste of the musical olive.’ White ascribes this same problem to Topp but it is one that has largely defeated him: ‘I came to Australia through idealism…and a mistaken belief that I could bring nicety to barbarian minds’ (p. 40). Topp, by his own admission, is unsuccessful in educating the people of Sydney and so he appears as a downcast figure, ‘poor’ Topp. He can hardly be said to affirm the idea of progress for the course of his life does not propose a better future, either for himself or for the colony. Topp does continue to play his music and teach pianoforte and it is this that enables him to survive and to survive long enough to appear at the end of the novel to criticise the colony and to deliver his warning about coming to grief ‘on our mediocrity as a people’ (p. 446). This warning elicits from Willie Pringle, another artist figure in Voss, his much-discussed statement that he is confident that the mediocrity of which he (Topp) speaks is

not a final and irrevocable state; rather is it a creative source of endless variety and subtlety. The blowfly on its bed of offal is but a variation of the rainbow. Common forms are continually breaking into brilliant shapes. If we will explore them. (p. 447)

Thus Topp is instrumental in enabling White to finally extend the idea of progress to a better future. This idea, however, is particularised for mediocrity it is to be overcome by art, through the educative possibilities provided by the exploration and artistic transformation of common forms.

White deftly draws Professor Topp from two historical figures, Mr Marsh, the harpsichordist, and Isaac Nathan, the colony’s first composer. The Romanticism that White draws from these artistic figures for Topp is historically referential and thus he is

24 Isaac Nathan, cited in Bertie, 1922, p. 17. Bertie does not supply a reference for this or any other citation. However, his sources are suggested when he writes that ‘Mr Nathan had a pleasant custom of prefixing a disquisition to his published pieces’ (p. 19).
another thoroughly historicized figure. Topp, in embracing and enacting the Romanticism of Marsh and Nathan, gestures to the want of artistic sensibility in Sydney and provides a counterpoint to the cultural desert that is colonial society. This want of artistic sensibility is also historical for, as Bertie points out, 'the colony...in the early years of the forties...passed through a financial depression which swamped any interest in such un-financial things as the arts'.

**Johann Voss and Ludwig Leichhardt**

White, at the narrative level, quite evidently draws on the legend of the heroic explorer as well as such historical accounts as Ludwig Leichhardt's own *Journal* and Alec Chisholm's *Strange New World* for Voss. Both men are Germans who stoically endure all manner of trials and tribulations on their expeditions before they, and all their men bar one, White's convict Judd, eventually meet death on the expeditions that they lead into the interior of Australia. Both explorers, in spite of their failures, are accorded heroic status, memorialised, and make their contributions to the myths and legends of Australia.

White's narrative directly draws on some of the incidents that Leichhardt records in his *Journal*. On one occasion Leichhardt comes upon a natural wonder that he describes as consisting of 'high sandstone rocks, fissured and broken like the pillars and walls and high gates of the ruined castles of Germany'. This formation rises from 'the broad sandy summits of many hills on both sides of the valley'. He names the area 'The Creek of Ruined Castles'. This incident reappears in *Voss* when White's explorer first encounters Mr Sanderson's evocatively named station, 'Rhine Towers'. The novel describes it a series of resplendent mineralogical metaphors:

> it was the valley itself which drew Voss. Its mineral splendours were increased in that light. As bronze retreated, veins of silver loomed in the gullies, knobs of amethyst and sapphire glowed on the hills, until the horsemen rounded that bastion which fortified from sight the ultimate stronghold of beauty. (p. 128)

The phrase ‘it was the valley which drew him’ is significant here because it indicates that this is Voss’s response to the splendours of the valley. That this response is directly drawn from Leichhardt’s *Journal* is confirmed when, ‘upon seeing’, Voss cries out ‘“Achhh!”’ and Sanderson points out that the rocks ‘‘on that bit of a hill up there, are the ‘Towers’ from which the place takes it name”. It is instructive that Voss is in full agreement: ‘‘It is quite correct...It is a castle.”

In a letter to his sister in Germany dated at Sydney 15\textsuperscript{th} May 1844, Leichhardt writes that

You are enjoying the beautiful flowers and their scent, you enjoy the tree and its shade, you gaze across the forest and meadows, from the earth to the starry sky, and you feel yourself moved by higher emotions, confronted sub-consciously by many voices speaking to you about an eternal Supreme Being. If nature impresses you so kindly, how much more must I feel it, devoting myself to penetrate its deepest secrets and to discover the eternal laws according to which it acts so wonderfully. Would it not be sinful to give another answer than the one which our Saviour gave to his anxious Mother when she found him in the temple?\textsuperscript{27}

This letter reveals Leichhardt’s chief characteristic to be an intensely nature-oriented Romantic disposition. This Romanticism finds its expression in Leichhardt’s response to the Australian landscape that he records in his *Journal*. On the 26\textsuperscript{th} January 1845 for example, after working his way through ‘dismal scrub’, he discovers

an entirely open country — covered with grass, and apparently unbounded to the westward; now ascending, first, in fine ranges, and forming a succession of almost isolated, gigantic, conical, and dome-topped mountains, which seemed to rest with a flat unbroken base on the plain below — was spread before our delighted eyes. The sudden alteration of the scene, therefore, inspired us with feelings that I cannot attempt to describe...\textsuperscript{28}

In *Voss*, White’s explorer similarly discovers a valley

\textsuperscript{27} L. L. Politzer, trans., *Dr Ludwig Leichhardt’s Letters From Australia*, Melbourne, Pan Books, 1944, p. 28. This letter is also available post Voss in Aurousseau, 1968, pp. 764-765.
\textsuperscript{28} Leichhardt, p. 123.
sculptured in red rock and quartz, in which a river ran, rather shallow and emotional, but a river of live water such as they could remember, through the valley of wet grass. Heat appeared to intensify the green of a variety of splendid trees, some sprouting with hair or swords, others slowly succumbing to a fleshy jasmine, of which the arms were round and round their limbs. These deadly garlands were quite festive in immediate effect, as they glimmered against the bodies of their hosts. The breath of jasmine cajoled the air. Platters of leaves presented gifts of moisture. (p. 195)

This picturesque response to the natural world is rendered through Voss’s eyes and it is even more Romantic than Leichhardt’s in terms of its pictorial quality, vividness, and expressiveness. White clearly draws on Leichhardt at the level of character for Voss and the chief trait or characteristic that he ascribes to him is this Romanticism. Horst Priessnitz describes Leichhardt’s Romanticism as being typically German in its pictorial descriptions of nature and in his ‘religious interpretations of nature’s workings and its force’. Leichhardt, he adds, ‘looked on nature, whether in Australia or Europe, as, in the strict sense of the word, picturesque’29. That this is also Voss’s practice is confirmed when Palfreyman joins him at the head of the valley:

‘Is it not splendid?’ asked Voss, admiring the prospect of sculptural red rocks and tapestries of musical green which the valley contained.

Palfreyman agreed.

‘Ennobling and eternal,’ persisted the German. ‘This I can apprehend.’

Because it is mine, by illusion...(p. 196)

Voss’s exceedingly Romantic disposition is his chief characteristic or personality trait. It is, moreover, clearly drawn from Leichhardt for it is almost identical to that of the actual explorer in terms of thought, spirit, and action. Voss too, intensely engages with the natural world, he is inclined to the same typically picturesque descriptions of it, and he appears to see or feel God in that world. White does not draw on his own knowledge of the German Romantic tradition for Voss, as he does for Stan Parker, but instead draws Voss’s Romanticism directly from Leichhardt, an historical figure. This produces a central character who is, like the narrative, thoroughly historicized.

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I have elaborated my research into White's sources for *Voss* not simply to illustrate the extent of his drawings from the letters and journals of the explorers, and from subsequent scholarly sources, but to demonstrate that *Voss* is, consequently, a thoroughly historicized and an eminently historical novel. White draws on these sources and creatively transforms them, adopting and adapting elements, features, and incidents, creating composite characters, and constructing his own narrative of exploration. However, the very nature of these historical drawings implicates the author and his story, indeed what is his creative history, in the process of myth-making. White seems well aware of this for his novel enacts this very process when it shows Voss being widely lauded before his expedition and honoured after it: he is 'hung with garlands of rarest newspaper prose', he is caste in bronze by the Premier, 'still shaky from the oratory prescribed for an historic occasion', and we learn that 'they would write about him in the history books'30. These ironic notes suggest that the myth-making process is of some concern to White. It is this concern that leads him to write satire in this eminently historical novel even though *Voss* is no less high-minded than *The Tree of Man* — White is again determined to teach us more about our history and our future. The ironic observations I have referred to also prefigure the self-conscious or self-reflexive interpolations that increasingly occur in the later novels.

**Satire in *Voss***

In this section I will focus on three episodes — Voss's introduction to Laura Trevelyan and the Bonner family, Mrs Bonner's dinner party, and Mrs Pringle's ball for Belle Bonner — to map the development of White's satire in *Voss*. I will demonstrate that he mixes ironic, mannered comedy of a rather gentle order with informal social satire through these episodes but that the tendency is towards the greater use of the latter. The tendency is therefore away from a form of mildly ironic, highly mannered comedy à la Jane Austen to a kind of pointed social satire that is reminiscent, particularly in its gustatory excess, of a range of satirists that extends from Petronius to Christina Stead. I will argue that White's comedy and satire serve the same purpose: they lighten the *gravitas* of this

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historical novel and so diminish its myth-making potential while at the same time they seem intended to teach us, through the mockery of social life that they enact, that answers to the deeper questions that bedevil human life cannot be found in the arena of social activities and affairs.

'An expert mistress of trivialities' and 'a kind of foreign man'

It is very noticeable that Voss does not open in the context of the high drama of exploration but in the genteel ambience of the salon or drawing room. Its opening scenes are marked by ironies from the outset. Laura Trevelyan receives, in the absence of her uncle and aunt, a visitor whom Rose, her maid, describes as 'a kind of foreign man' (p. 7). Laura is not quite herself — she has 'ventured on a headache' — and the matter of which room the foreigner should be received in considerably exercises her mind. Rose suggests this man, who is Voss arrived early, be shown to Mr Bonner's study because 'no one ever goes in there' but Laura rejects this idea because 'it would not be civil' (p. 8). As soon as this is settled, the issue of what wine to serve and when to serve it arises: Laura decides on the second best port and that it should not be served 'too soon'.

When Laura actually receives Voss correct behaviour is observed but it is immediately undercut by irony: he is 'shabbily dressed' and his beard is 'ragged and coarse' but Laura puts the explorer at ease. They sit 'in almost identical positions, on similar chairs' and they become 'what is called comfortable' (p. 12). Laura informs Voss that for her aunt 'all things that should be done, must be done' (p. 14) and she too, quite evidently adheres to her aunt's model of propriety. Laura's commendable behaviour however, begins to unravel when she reveals — 'far too soon'31 — that she was born in England, that her mother was Mrs Bonner's sister, and that her mother and father are dead. These 'inappropriate' revelations serve to suggest superficiality of the Bonners' values.

When Mr Bonner returns he takes Voss into his study and asks him if he is aware of what his great expedition could mean. Voss replies by remarking that 'if we would compare meanings...we would arrive at different conclusions'. The matter of different conclusions is of no concern to Mr Bonner:

It pleased him to have bought something he did not altogether understand. Refinements are acquired in this way, and eventually clothe the purchaser like skins, which he will take for granted, and other people admire. Mr Bonner longed to experience the envy of others. So his nostrils now grew keener. (p. 20)

White clearly turns away from mannered comedy to satire at this point — he doubly undercuts Mr Bonner by way of the paradox of his being pleased by failure and by the irony of his belief that he can purchase refinements. Refinements are difficult to acquire and impossible to purchase so he appears here as a philistine and a fool, a man stupid enough to believe and apparently content with the idea that such refinements ‘eventually clothe the purchaser like skins’ but also as something of a brute. The reference to skins rather than skin suggests that Mr Bonner is not going to wear his refinements as if they were a second skin but rather as skins in the manner of primitive man who wore the skins of the animals he had killed. This is a notably pointed satirical attack on Mr Bonner for his pretensions and preoccupations and brutishness within the context of this comedy of manners. As such it prefigures White technique of mixing his comic and satiric modes in his story of settlement. White’s attack on Mr Bonner is the first irruption of satire in Voss and it is, moreover, historically referential. White is not attacking Mr Bonner as an individual but rather as a type, as a representative of the Sydney merchant class who, as businessmen, had their own profit-oriented reasons for supporting such actual expeditions as Ludwig Leichhardt’s.

**Mrs Bonner’s Dinner Party**

White’s description of a dinner party that Mrs Bonner gives to celebrate the departure of Voss’s expedition begins as the guests assemble in her drawing room. This is rich in ironic comedy: the drawing room has been transformed into ‘a perfect, luminous egg’ by two big lamps but the guests, although their eyes appear ‘hopeful’, are themselves ‘enclosed egg-shapes with uncommunicative veins’ waiting ‘to be hatched by some communication with one another’. There is conversation here in which ‘the white threads of voices tangled and caught’ and the voices of men ‘toughened the fibre’ but ‘nobody said
what they intended to say'. The speakers 'stand smiling' and adopt, 'even with traces of sincerity', the words that had been put in their mouths. Belle Bonner is dressed in a gown of 'pure, whitest light, streaming and flashing' that is sufficiently distracting to Tom Radclyffe that it causes him 'little shivers of devotion' as it brushes along his skin. When this dress threatens to split it causes Voss to suffer 'a pang for cornfields and ripe apples'. In a dramatic irony, and rather comically, the explorer is so disturbed that he voices his "'yearning to experience another German summer'" (p. 80).

The ambience of the party is disturbed when Laura Trevelyan announces that the words she hears are not 'sympathetic' because they are not 'detached from their obligations'. Laura clearly finds the words she hears to comprise conditioned responses and the conversation around her inane. She does not stop at this for she points out that the empty trivialities of her material life are ever-present: 'the pretty dish of quince jellies', 'Miss Hollier's garnet brooch', and 'the drumstick on Mr Palfreyman's plate'. Laura however, also mentions that she has been thinking of "'the bones of a dead man, uncovered by a fox...that I once saw in a Penrith churchyard'". Laura's speech starkly juxtaposes the trivialities she cites to her perception of death and decay. This confirms that she is not only a young woman who finds her life with the Bonners vacuous but also one who harbours a concern for the weightier matters of life (p. 82).

However, what Laura's critical speech elicits from the party is more of the very trivialities that she decries. Mrs Bonner fears 'the limits of convention had been exceeded' and her response is as comical as it is decorous: she makes 'little signs' to her niece 'using her mouth and the corner (only the corner) of a (thankfully) discreet napkin'. Tom Radclyffe despairs of "'these educated young ladies'" because ideas "'disturbed his manliness'" and Miss Hollier declares that she is sorry that Laura should have 'such horrid thoughts on a jolly occasion' (pp. 82-83). These further trivialities, especially in light of Laura's speech, do not satirically undercut Mrs Bonner's and her guests personally but as social types, inviting us to recognise the self-indulgence, the material excess, and the effete complacency of the society that they represent. A certain puritanical distaste for display or excess of any kind appears to drive White's satire here so that this episode recalls Erasmus, particularly his satirical essay, *The Praise of Folie* (1509), in which he advocates a return to a more restrained life based on elementary Christian ethics. White's design for
his satire seems corrective, confirming him in his self-appointed role of social teacher, but
this diminishes when Rose Portion, Mrs Bonner's unfortunate maid, serves her mistress's
dinner guests. White's satire suddenly becomes comic: Rose, whose condition is 'not yet
obvious' is assisted by an elderly man, 'lent by Archdeacon Endicott', who is of 'awful
respectability', dressed in 'a kind of livery and cotton gloves'. This man only puts his
cotton thumb in the soup 'once'. These comic touches give way to a rather more pointed
and pure satirical attack when White describes the meal itself. This indicates that culinary
excess and indulgence particularly angers him: the diners are served a 'profusion' of
dishes — 'overdone beef', 'baskets of caramel', 'great gobbets of meringue' and 'jellied
quinces' — and they subside into a 'stupor' of shock and food. Our sense of this wild
excess of food is enhanced by the consequences of Mrs Bonner attempt to rescue the
situation by having Mr Topp play his pianoforte: all that is created is 'groups of statuary'
that are 'transfixed upon the furniture' (pp. 81-82).

White resumes a more comic vein when he describes the affect Tom Radclyffe's song
of love has on Belle. It not only causes 'some vibration among the objects in glass and
china' but it also so deeply affects Belle that she becomes 'a cloud of the most assiduous
tenderness' and her thoughts turn to 'perpetual bliss', 'prosperity and elegance', and
'seven babies'. Finally, she blushes, which does not go unnoticed 'by those who had been
looking for it'. Belle's response to Tom's song, in turn, effects the atmosphere — 'the
lamplight was suffused with palpitating rose colours' and the 'big, no longer perfect roses
were bursting with scent and sticky stamens' — so that it becomes comically sexualised
(p. 84). This sexualised passage refers us to the burgeoning hedonism of 1950's Australia
that White symbolizes in The Prodigal Son as 'beautiful youths and girls' who 'stare at life
through blind blue eyes' and rather more satirically as 'the buttocks of cars' growing
'hourly more glassier' (p. 15). While this may suggest that this satire has been
inappropriately transposed to the early Victorian, colonial context of the novel, it is the
practice of satirists to attack their historical or contemporary targets in any historical or
geographic context. In his satirical novel, Erewhon (1872), for example, Samuel Butler
attacks the customs and manners of contemporary England even though the novel is
largely set in New Zealand. Voss recalls Erewhon in that the subject of White's satirical
attack on Sydney colonial society is the English customs and manners of that society.

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White’s satirical treatment of Mrs Bonner’s party frequently slides towards comedy. His satire per se is pointed and biting but when it becomes comical it is funny and amusing and no more than mildly ironic. His satire per se reflects a curative or corrective design, most evidently in the juxtapositioning of the weighty and the trifling or trivial that Laura Trevelyan serves to effect, but his comic satire reflects no such design. White seems to be able to play with and have fun with some of his targets, subjecting them to comic ridicule, simply because they anger him less than others. These modes of writing are both subversive in that they mock and ridicule the same subjects — the party and its participants — but there is a difference in terms of the nature of that ridicule and in the purpose behind it.

**Mrs Pringle’s Ball**

Two days before her marriage to Tom Radclyffe, Mr and Mrs Pringle give a ball in honour of Belle Bonner that is clearly intended to be a grand occasion. The Pringles spend a ‘considerable sum of money’, they hire the ballroom of Mr Bright’s Dancing Academy because it is ‘an elegant establishment’, and Mrs Pringle and her daughters, Una and Florence, become personally involved in preparing the ballroom. They artistically arrange ‘quantities of cinerarias’ and fill ‘every visible gap’ with asparagus ferns (pp. 314-315). The terms in which White couches his description of these preparations suggest another genteel comedy of manners but White, in a further demonstration of his liking for gustatory satire, takes us into what might be expected to be the rather more mundane world of the kitchen.

Here, some ‘respectable women in black’ are making other preparations for the ball in ‘the retiring-and refreshment-rooms’. White’s chief means of attack is hyperbole: he not only lists a range of emergency aids available for the ladies that includes eau de Cologne, lozenges, safety pins, and needles and thread, but also ‘for the entertainment of both sexes every variety of meat that the colony could provide, in profusion’. White, with satiric flourish, adds to this excess ‘vegetables cut into cunning shapes, and trifles and jellies shuddering under drifts of cream’ (p. 315). This satirical attack on gustatory excess is
appropriate to the novel because it is historically referential — it refers us to the same kind of 19th century material excess that attracted Dickens's attention in *Our Mutual Friend*.

White seems to have found his *metier* for his satiric description of the atmosphere of expectation before the ball commences is wildly — if not excessively — ironic. The ballroom itself is 'in a state of mystical entrancement' and such is 'the strain of stillness' it would not have been surprising if the walls had 'flown apart from the pressure, shattering the magic mirrors, of golden mists and blue, gaseous depths, and scattering the distinct jewels from the leaves of the cinerarias' (pp. 315-316). This state of entrancement flies apart in an unexpected and outrageous way when several 'drunken individuals' invade the ballroom. White takes careful aim at these gatecrashers — they have 'pale, tuberous faces' and they are oblivious to the occasion for their faces only 'loll for an instant' on the banks of purple flowers that the Pringles have taken so much care to arrange and he goes on to describe their faces of as being 'terrifying in some cases, infuriating in others, (to) those who had succeeded in thrusting ugliness out of their own lives'. White thus not only pointedly reduces these gatecrashers to a lower order by applying a vegetable metaphor to their faces but he also invites us to recognise them as the *hoi polloi* by drawing a distinction between them and the invited guests, those who had succeeded in thrusting ugliness out of their own lives. What this demonstrates is that White satirically attacks the gatecrashers and those who would exclude them. He thus attacks the unseemly behaviour of the *hoi polloi* as well as unkind, privileged behaviour of the guests. His attitude is made evident when we learn that it is the attendants who bring this 'disgraceful episode' to an end by running the invaders 'into the night' (p. 316).

As soon as the ball resumes, White reverts to mildly ironic comedy. Belle Bonner is acclaimed as 'the loveliest girl in Sydney' but is described as grimacing 'like an ugly boy' (p. 317), Dr Badgery gallantly dances with Chattie Wilson but becomes 'engulfed in the tragic hilarity of the polka' (p. 321), and Tom Radclyffe, the bridegroom, is not yet 'reconciled to his nakedness' because he has resigned his commission and thus forgone his uniform (p. 324). These comic subversions however, only serve as a prelude to the more sustained satirical attack that White delivers in the ball's climactic scene.

In this scene, Mrs Pringle's guests 'burst' into the supper room as if they have been subjected to deprivation as great as that endured by Voss's party. They comprise two
groups — 'those well-conducted, but prudent people who had quietly stationed themselves in readiness' and 'the feckless rout, which had continued to dance, and chatter, and fall in love'. As soon as the doors to the supper room open these two groups effectively enact their own ridicule by becoming one undifferentiated mass. This mob, in 'common thought' and 'in final eruption', surges into the supper room 'in a rush of churned bodies right to the edge of the long tables' where they 'threaten the rosy hams and great unctuous sirloins of bloody beef'. Mrs Bonner remarks that 'it is disgraceful' that 'a gathering of individuals from genteel homes should behave like cattle' (p. 326). In this outrageous scene, the behaviour of Mrs Pringle’s guests is no better than that of the hoi polloi who were earlier turned out into the night.

White’s attack on Mrs Pringle’s guests for their gross behaviour is purposely exaggerated and thus acidly satirical in the long tradition of gustatory satire. It does not, however, refer to its own epoch alone for it also refers us to the 20th century, to 1950s Australia as White symbolizes it in The Prodigal Son, to those aspects of a culture in which ‘nothing seemed important beyond living and eating’ and in which ‘the mind is the least of possessions’ (pp. 14-15). This provides another frame of historical reference for White’s satire.

White’s satire on the guests who charge the supper room is effectively an attack on all Mrs Pringle’s guests and so it is an attack on gross, unthinking, mass behaviour rather than an attack on individual behaviour. When White attacks individuals he is gently comical rather than corrosively satirical. This is evident in his measured and amusing ridicule of such as figures as Belle Bonner, Dr Badgery, Tom Radclyffe, Mrs Pringle, and Mrs Bonner. When the Bonners arrive at the ball, Mrs Pringle who had been receiving her guests ‘in a disguise of greenery’, comes forward ‘especially far to embrace her dearest friends, the Bonners’. There is a comical embrace involving ‘a clash of onyx and cornelian’. It seems that the characteristic ‘sin’ of these pillars of Sydney society is no worse than a tendency towards self-indulgent, vain display. Mrs Bonner congratulates her friend ‘on what appears to be a triumph of taste and festivity’ but is only able to do so after extricating herself ‘from the toils of jewellery’. When her guests charge the supper room, Mrs Pringle is frightened ‘at first’ and seeks protection behind ‘a most convulsive palm’ but she soon recovers her aplomb and resumes her role as the epitome of the Victorian
hostess. She walks among her guests offering 'a little of this fish in aspic' and recommending 'the Salad a' la Roosse', seemingly mispronouncing or over enunciating the French name for Russian Salad in the process (p. 326).

The marked difference in tenor and tone between White's satirical attack on the guests who charge the supper room as a mass and on those who do not, particularly Mrs Pringle and Mrs Bonner, suggest a third frame of historical reference for White's satire. The manners, mores, and pre-occupations of these women, as well as the Bonner and the Pringle families more generally, certainly refer us to their own early Victorian but essentially English colonial epoch but they also exemplify a world with which White was familiar — the privileged Edwardian world of his pastoralist parents with which he expresses a certain dismay in his autobiography\(^3\). White seems to not only draw on the manners, mores, and pre-occupations of this world but he also transposes the antipathies he acquired in relation to them to Voss. This Edwardian world was historically adjacent and very similar to the actual Victorian world of Voss and this ensures that these manners, mores, and pre-occupations, as well as White's antipathies, are historically appropriate and that his satire is historically referential in manifold ways.

White not only resumes and expands the comedy and the satire that he began in The Tree of Man but he also intermixes these two modes within the same episodes in Voss. Despite this intermixing, both modes assume more certain forms — the comedy is mildly ironic in the manner of Jane Austen and the social satire gustatory in the manner that began with the classical satirists of antiquity. White's satire in Voss then, as emergent as it is, follows on a long tradition for gustatory excess as an honoured trope in the tradition of satirical description. Gilbert Highet sees this excess as one of the chief themes of satiric description and finds its earliest source in Horace's eighth satire in his second book concerning a grossly sumptuous and equally tedious banquet. He traces the theme through Juvenal's fifth satire to the Banquet of Trimalchio in Petronius where 'everything is in bad taste' in this 'satire on vulgarity'. In early modern times, the painful dinner resurfaces in Regnier's satire, The Absurd Supper, with 'an adaptation of Horace' and some 'rascally reminiscences of Petronius' and later in Boileau's satire, The Ridiculous Meal, 'where disgust is more neatly and wittily expressed'. The theme of the dismal dinner 'later passed

into the semi-satirical or satirical novel’ writes Highet, citing the Veneering’s banquet in Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* as an example. Finally, he considers the painful dinner to have been succeeded by the painful party, as in Evelyn Waugh’s *Vile Bodies*. The theme, in its original Horatian form of the grossly sumptuous banquet, also informs the satires of Christina Stead, particularly her last satirical novel, *I’m Dying Laughing* (1986). Her descriptions of the banquets and dinner parties hosted by Emily and Stephen Howard comprise, as Anne Pender points out, ‘a very significant plank in her satire’.

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White historicizes *The Tree of Man* by giving it the historical sweep of the epic, by engaging his characters in historical events, and by drawing on two important legends of Australian identity, that of the bushman pioneer and that of Anzac. He celebrates the normative qualities of these two legends in Stan Parker but he also more fully imagines Stan so that his main character extends the idealised model of Australian identity. His principal means of transformation is to ascribe to Stan the disposition of the early 19th century Romantic poets — particularly their intense engagement with and exaltation of the natural world — and the heightened sensibility associated with it. White’s attention to history proves his high-minded, serious purposes for the novel — he would suggest our potential and teach us more about ourselves. His role in this novel, and in *Voss*, is that of social teacher.

This chapter demonstrates, however, that White, seemingly in spite of his serious purposes, engages in literary play and writes satire and comedy in both *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*. *The Tree of Man*, in its narrative dimension, nevertheless upholds the progressive idea of history and its promise of a better future by enacting this idea through Stan’s apparent quest for enlightenment, or, more accurately, through his sense of the beyond and through his willingness to receive enlightenment or illumination. This novel, in its satirical dimension, upholds the same idea if we accept the formalist proposition that satire has curative intentions. If we do, then White satirically attacks Thelma and Dudley

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Forsdyke for their pretensions, inanity, and hypocrisy, as an object lesson in what not to do that is designed for our improvement. He warns us and in doing so he implies that he believes that we are capable of this improvement. In other words, he affirms the promise of a better future if we examine our aspirations. This is also the case in respect of *Voss*.

White’s engagement with history is even more thoroughgoing for *Voss* than it is for *The Tree of Man* because he not only draws upon myth and legend but also directly on various historical or scholarly records of exploration and settlement including the *Journal* and the *Letters* of the actual explorer on whom his narrative is based. The single most important characteristic that White draws from these sources is the intensely nature-oriented Romanticism that he confers on Voss. White thus again subjectively but partially transforms his main character by ascribing a peculiarly German Romantic disposition to him as he does in the case of Stan Parker but on this occasion it is drawn from a historical figure rather than from his knowledge of the tradition.

I have elaborated White’s sources to demonstrate the extent to which they historicize *Voss* by compelling this novel to carry the weight of history, myth and legend. While *Voss* is, consequently, socio-historically referential, White’s drawings from these sources, by their nature, imbricate White in the process of myth-making. White’s social satire mocks our antecedents and it teaches us that the answers to the weightier matters that beset human life on earth are not to be found in the social arena but at the same it serves to lighten the *gravitas* and the historicity that accrues to *Voss* from his historical sources. This satire thus also serves to reduce White’s imbrication in the process of myth-making. I have examined White’s satire to illustrate its technical limitations and to show that it eventually adopts a focus and a form that places it in a tradition of gustatory satire that harks back to the Roman satirists of antiquity. I have pointed out that White’s satire is historically referential so as to suggest that the writing of satire provides him with another, non-Romantic way of writing history, from his perspective more particularly, of engaging with its force. To put it very simply, this chapter suggests that White is drawn to and writes satire because he is drawn to and writes history. This implies that history will be further subjected to the bite of his satire.
Chapter Two

Satire and Religion in *Riders in the Chariot*

There is a great efflorescence of satire in *Riders in the Chariot* that has not attracted the critical attention it deserves. Brian Kiernan suggests one of the reasons for this when he points out that this satire was considered to be a product of White's "'patrician'" disdain for the vulgarities of modern life\(^1\). White himself was well aware of what he had written in the novel for he writes in a letter to Geoffrey Dutton dated 19\(^{th}\) October 1960, that *Riders in the Chariot* is about contemporary Australia and that there is 'bitter comedy or satire running all through' it\(^2\). Yet White's academic critics paid little or no attention to this satire. Almost from the outset, they focused upon the novel's metaphysical-allegorical-religious aspects so that in 1962 Colin Roderick judges it to be 'a sustained metaphysical allegory'\(^3\), in 1969 R. F. Brissenden describes it as 'a religious allegory that recreates the main events of the Christian story in modern Australia'\(^4\), and in 1974 Peter Beatson considers it to be 'a truly religious novel'\(^5\). These readings are neither relevant nor irrelevant, neither good nor bad, but they are the dominant, orthodox readings of *Riders in the Chariot*.

In her 1973 review, however, Leonie Kramer argues that White's fiction 'heads away from transcendentalism towards an assertion of secular humanism' and that 'the central "thesis" of the novel is that man is the measure of all things'\(^6\). Despite this and her review's satiric bite — Kramer pointedly

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describes White's chariot, for example, as being 'stubbornly unconvincing...it is about as moving a symbol of the transcendental as a plastic model of a spaceship from a cereal packet'\(^7\) — her fellow critics did not take their cue from her review, they did not rethink the novel or revisit its satire. At best, their critical interest, as Kiernan notes, simply shifted from the religious experience presented in the novels to interpretations of the intentions behind this religious experience. This focus on the intention behind the religious experience is evident in Simon During's 1996 description of 'the young White' as a transcendentalist who 'made appeals to various universal themes, which were often called 'metaphysical'\(^8\), and in Marion Spies's 1992 description of White as a 'religious novelist, pure and simple'\(^9\). These views also confirm the durability of the transcendental or religious approach to White's work.

The orthodox readings of White as a religious or otherwise metaphysical writer do not take into account the novel's satire and so they suggest that these critics may have simply preferred to think of White as a religious or metaphysical novelist rather than as a satirist. There are a number of possible reasons for this preference. First, this omission may have been a function of the traditionally low status of satire — it is often considered by critics to be 'a low, parasitic, or compromised genre'\(^10\). Second, some critics may simply have not expected satire in a novel of serious ideas. Third, other critics may have overlooked and effectively rejected White's satire because of the extent to which it constituted a challenge and indeed an antidote to the social realist paradigm for Australian fiction. Fourth, it may be the case that some critics saw pure invective rather than satire because the work will not offer up a consistent vision of Australia and Australians. Fifth, other critics may have recognised White's satire but turned away from it because of the nature of that satire — it seemed and was thus deemed to be elitist and patrician. White and

\(^7\) Kramer, p. 11.
\(^9\) Marion Spies, ' "Affecting Godhead" — Religious Language and Thinking in *Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot*', in *Antipodes*, vol 6 no 1, 1992, p. 23.
his satire frequently look downwards to their subjects of attack when the few Australian writers who do write satire tend to look upwards towards theirs. The satire of Joseph Furphy, for example, typically looks up to the pretensions of those above his narrator-diarist, Tom Collins, most evidently in Tom’s discussion of the ‘Coming Australian’, in which he humorously describes the wife of Vivian, a station owner, as a type of Australienne, ‘of the station-bullock-driver species’\(^{11}\). However, to not consider White’s satire for any reason is to lose the opportunity to recognise one of its great advantages as a mode of writing. White’s use of satire, like Furphy’s, liberates his work from the presumption and pretence of reality that is the great burden of realism — the satirical events, characters, and scenes that he depicts are more than themselves, they have symbolic value, they exceed their apparent narrative functions in that they refer us elsewhere, to, like Vivian’s wife, a social type.

A second major strain of criticism focuses on the structure and tone of *Riders in the Chariot* as a function of what it clearly perceives to be the author’s underlying pre-dispositions. The critics who take this approach neither see White as a religious writer nor as a satirist. Brian MacFarlane, for example, cites the novel’s ‘hysterical misanthropy’ and finds it to be ‘at the service of a schematically elitist vision’\(^{12}\), John Docker complains of the novel’s ‘hysterical anti-urbanism’\(^{13}\), and Michael Wilding expresses his concern over the elitism that he finds in the novel by describing White’s use of demotic speech as ‘generally offensive’\(^{14}\). The tenor of these remarks indicates that these critics are attacking the novel for not being what they think it should be, for not affirming the values that they themselves would uphold. This criticism is not groundless — *Riders in the Chariot* is at times notably vulgar and offensive — but it ignores an important dimension of the work. These

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\(^{11}\) Joseph Furphy, *Such is Life*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1969 Reprint, pp. 179-180.


satirical features and qualities energise the novel and prevent it from becoming a stultifying, pretentious realistic work. Such qualities are acceptable if they are in the service of a radical subversive aesthetic that is designed to shock as much as it is designed to entertain and amuse.

I argue that the expansion of White’s satire in this novel is the product of an intensification of the struggle between his Puritan-derived moral high-mindedness, evident in *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* as a determination to teach us more about ourselves, and his worm’s-eye-view-derived vulgar but brilliant and burgeoning impulse to satirise, evident in *Riders in the Chariot* as a sustained and unmerciful mockery of all manner of human frailty, folly, and weakness, at both the individual and societal levels. I argue that anger lies at the root of this impulse to satirise — many things anger White but some things more than others and none more so than our obsession with the human body. This strongly suggests White’s satire to be as much a product of his temperament as of moral purpose.

Since some things anger White more than others, his satire in *Riders in the Chariot* is mixed and highly volatile. It varies greatly in terms of tenor and tone, it may be wayward or controlled, it may be trivial or momentous, it may run counter to our narrative expectations, it may be unfair, and it may be misogynistic or more generally offensive. His satirical attacks are thus generally disruptive, they are typically disparate to each other, they are sometimes disproportionate to their objects, they are sometimes incongruent with their context, and they are sometimes disjunctive in terms of our expectations. White treats some characters sympathetically and others meanly or unfairly; he may attack, for example, by way of subtle wit, gentle irony, gross parody, or pointed satire, and the targets of his attacks range from suburban domesticity and consumerism to anti-Semitism and the effects of the Holocaust. The disproportion between White’s attack on Mrs Jolley’s and Mrs Flack’s cosy but vacuous suburban domesticity and his attack on anti-Semitism makes the former all the more alarming and the latter all the more arresting, and both all the more powerful. These qualities provoke the adverse criticism
that I have referred to but when the novel is read from the perspective of satire, one's own objections to White's more exaggerated or extreme attacks diminish because they can be seen in the context of what is a highly subjective art form. Such attacks are properly part of that form.

I will demonstrate that White's satire is not only mixed by the different levels of anger that produce variations in tenor and tone as well as disjunction, disparity, and disproportion, but also by his practice of selectively drawing on and experimenting with the devices, tropes, and strategies of both parody and burlesque as well as those of modern satire and classical Menippean Satire. This further enriches the mixture, it enhances the medley quality of the novel, and it contributes to the volatility of White's satire so that it energises the entire work.

In this chapter proper I will examine a number of episodes to demonstrate the way the qualities I have referred to produce the offensiveness that generates the more severe criticism of this novel. I show that White's most severe critics react to these qualities but that they do not recognise them as the legitimate elements and features of satire. I demonstrate that it is when the four elect characters meet and are forced to engage with what White depicts as a decrepit and decadent world, when the ideal meets the real, that he produces the most unfair but entertaining, the most exaggerated but exuberant, and the most offensive but potent satire. I consider the extent to which White's satire is socio-historically referential because it is, at times, unfair, excessive, and as exaggerated as some of his critics have pointed out. I also consider the ethical questions that the adverse criticism of White's satire invites — are all subjects fit for satire and, if so, to what extent may the satirist exaggerate his treatment of those subjects?

* * * * *

White's critics quite commonly describe Mary Hare, Mordechai Himmelfarb, Mrs Godbold, and Alf Dubbo, as his elect characters or his *illuminati*. These characters do appear to be White's chosen ones: he dispatches each of them on a spiritual, religious, or otherwise transcendental journey and he vouchsafes a vision of the chariot to each one them at some point in those journeys. He seems to engage these ideal figures as part of a moral vision and thus appears to be working towards creating a universe of moral, religious, and spiritual meaning, as Roderick's description of this novel as a sustained metaphysical allegory implies, but White the satirist soon intervenes in this scheme. He ranges the weapons of modern satire as described in the Introduction against a number of targets from the beginning and he makes increasing use of the techniques and strategies of classical Menippean satire as the novel unfolds. The idea of allegory soon disappears under the weight of these attacks. I will discuss the Menippean characteristics of White's satire first.

*Riders in the Chariot* features four of the characteristics of Menippean satire cited by Mikhail Bakhtin in his study *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. White thus depicts scandalous scenes, actions, words and events; he plays with sharp transitions and mésalliances; he engages with the tendencies and currents of the times, and, most importantly, he employs the strategy of confronting the man of the idea, the wise man, with what Bakhtin lumps together as 'evil in the world'. White varies the strategy of effecting a confrontation between the man of the idea and evil in the world by employing four figures instead of one and by including two females but he embodies worthy or high-minded ideas in each of them and then sends them out into the world in the traditional manner of the form. Mary Hare embodies and enacts the idea that God is immanent in nature, Mrs Godbold the idea of Christian loving-kindness, Himmelfarb the idea that he is the Redeemer of his people, and Alf Dubbo the idea of redemption through art.

These four figures hold fast to their ideas, setting them up as standards and values, as measures and mirrors against that corrupt world. These are indeed
White's elect characters but because they serve this purpose they do not appear as rounded, credible, representative characters but rather more as eccentric elite figures, the embodiments of ideas. They enable White to mount his satire by eliciting his targets in response to their 'goodness' — they encounter but also effectively generate the vulgarity, baseness, and depravity, as well as other forms of human frailty, folly, and failure that White sends up. They thus serve as agents provocateurs, as literary reagents, for the satire that he directs towards his targets. This satire extends to Himmelfarb and Dubbo's attempts to transcend this world. White's use of these figures in this way has consequences for the orthodox religious reading of this novel. These are the chosen ones, the elect, but for subversive rather than allegorical, religious, or transcendental purposes. They are not so much characters but figures who serve as vehicles for satire.

It is for these reasons that Riders in the Chariot exhibits one of the characteristics of Menippean Satire formulated by Anne Payne in her study *Chaucer & Menippean Satire* (1981). This is of major importance in light of the orthodox religious reading of White's work:

No God or unquestionable authority is represented. The satire is based on the feeling that there is probably no abstract certainty outside of us that we can know, merely the infinitely elating possibility that there might be, if only we could get by the claptrap of our own concoctions.\(^\text{16}\)

This characteristic, this absence of 'God or unquestionable authority', is, paradoxically, evident in Riders in the Chariot as the presence behind the satire, as Leonie Kramer suggests, and it underwrites the work to the extent that it suggests itself as becoming central to White's philosophic disposition. The presence of the characteristics of both Modern and Menippean satire in Riders in the Chariot suggests that these two forms cohere philosophically. This is most evident in the fact that both forms reflect a bleak, despairing view

\(^{16}\) Anne Payne, *Chaucer and Menippean Satire*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 9-11.
of man in an apparently godless world. I will now exemplify the other three characteristics of Menippean Satire present in this novel.

Norbert Hare’s fondling of his daughter, Mary, on the terrace at Xanadu (p. 24) is one example of a scandalous event in this novel and his wildly excessive behaviour at the Hare family dinner in which he fires his pistol into a chandelier then tries to commit suicide is another that is, in addition, replete with outrageous words and actions. This satirical episode undercuts the entire family, suggesting Norbert to be insane and the family decadent. There are other events such as the occasion when Himmelfarb observes his father and his friend Goltz having sex with two prostitutes in public (p. 113), the debauchery inside Mrs Khalil’s brothel at Sarsparilla (pp. 272-275), Reverend Mr Calderon’s seduction of Alf Dubbo as a boy (p. 372), the gross sexual behaviour of Alf Dubbo and Mrs Spice at the Mungindribble Dump (pp. 331-334), Himmelfarb’s reception at the Rosetree’s (pp. 381-385), and there is, most outrageous of all, the mock-crucifixion of Himmelfarb (pp. 410-417).

One of the sharp transitions characteristic of Menippean satire this novel enacts is the decline of Xanadu from the embodiment of beauty to a ruins, but the most dramatic transition is that to which White subjects Himmelfarb. The prosperous and honoured Professor of English becomes a concentration camp prisoner, a refugee, a toilet cleaner, and a factory worker before he is finally subjected to a mock crucifixion. The novel also enacts four unusual mesalliances. These are the sometimes unspoken but empathetic relationships between Himmelfarb and Mary Hare, between Himmelfarb and Alf Dubbo, between Himmelfarb and Mrs Godbold, and between Mrs Godbold and her employer Mrs Chalmers-Robinson that develop in spite of the great gulf that exists between each of these parties in terms of intellect, social attainments, and cultural backgrounds.

The topical quality typical of Menippean satire is reflected in the novel’s engagement with the tendencies and currents of the times. This is evident in the novel’s concern with urbanisation and materialism and with the apparent rise of anti-Semitism in Australia in the 1950s (pp. 401-417). This topical
quality manifests itself more particularly in the archly playful but trivial attacks on Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack's faddish, plastic consumerism (p. 74); on the growing middle-class trend towards the serving of European *haute cuisine* (p. 245), and on Mrs Chalmers-Robinson naïve enthusiasm for Christian Science (p. 268). This topicality, however, is most profoundly evident in the much more serious and impressive attack on the matter of forced adoption of the Aboriginal boy, Alf Dubbo, by Reverend Calderon and Mrs Pask (p. 313).

White, through his satire, seems to have been the first novelist to have attempted to bring this now highly contentious practice to public attention.

While these elements and features connect White's satire to the tradition of satire initiated by Menippus, it is the strategy of sending a good man, a man of the idea, out into the world so as to enact a series of confrontations between good and evil that is most important. This not only structures the novel but it also produces a disjunction between what we might expect from a novel that seems to engage its idealists on visionary quests and what it delivers in the form of various satirical encounters with worldly vulgarity, baseness, depravity, and so on. This disjunction lends shock value to White's satire making it all the more alarming and — depending on one's point of view — offensive. The encounters that this novel depicts vary greatly in kind so that considerable disparity and disproportion develops between White's targets of attack. These targets, for example, range from the relatively harmless social pretensions of Mrs Jolley, to the base desires exhibited by Mr Hoggett at Mrs Khalil's brothel, and on to the greater evil of anti-Semitism exemplified in Himmelfarb's mock crucifixion. This disparity and disproportion adds further shock value to White's satire. I will now discuss the modern satire that irrupts in Part One of this novel.

The opening scenes of *Riders in the Chariot*, like those of *Voss*, are rich in irony. Eleanor Hare is implicitly superior to her husband Norbert because she is an Urquhart-Smith of that branch of the family at Mumblejug of whom 'Sir Dudley' served 'to represent the Queen'. Her marriage to Norbert is considered unorthodox and 'a terrible thing' (p. 13). Eleanor also has
aristocratic connections through her cousin, Mr Eustace Cleugh, but these are rather tenuous for Eustace’s mother’s brother had ‘married the Honourable Lavinia Lethbridge, a daughter of Lord Trumpington’ (p. 25). These ironies, like the playfully derisive ‘Mumblejug’, invite us to recognise that this is a satirical novel as does White’s Lord Trumpington who seems to hark back to Sir Digby Vaine-Trumpington, a figure of ridicule in Evelyn’s Waugh’s modern satire *Decline and Fall*[^17].

White, however, does not satirise the Hare family *per se* but rather the privileged class they represent. This indicates his satire is not restricted to ordinary people, to ‘the lower orders’, and that it is eclectic rather than elitist. His main weapons are the devices, tropes, and strategies of modern satire that I elicited from Greenblatt’s study of the modern satires of Waugh, Orwell and Huxley, and which I discussed in the Introduction to this study. White locks these privileged main characters, his satirical ‘heroes’, into an awful social drama as mere actors and into a circle of futility in which there are never any meaningful or lasting achievements, he shows them retreating into their own private worlds or choosing to play ultimately demeaning social roles, and he uses demonic imagery to underscore the ruin of their world[^18]. White uses these techniques in the conventional manner except in the case of demonic imagery — he uses this technique in a way that suggests he is aware of the possibility of being seduced by his own art. This is, early on, a rather self-conscious gesture from White.

Norbert Hare is locked into his own private world by his wildly self-indulgent obsession to develop Xanadu and his ‘Pleasure Dome’. He lavishly spends his fortune on realising his ambition for his mansion to suggest ‘the materialization of beauty, and the climax of his pleasure’[^19]. Such is the nature of Norbert and his obsession that he not only finances the development of Xanadu but he also takes control of the day-to-day operations. He advises on

[^18]: Greenblatt, pp. 107-108.

All future references to this edition.
the drenching of a cow or the blistering of a horse, he marshals the cinerarias in 'extra brilliant ranks', he interferes in his daughter’s education, he tears down a wall, he throws out a wing, or he runs upstairs to jot down 'some thought which had occurred invariably to someone else before him' (pp. 19-20). White ridicules Norbert for these myriad interventions, satirising him as a falsely proud know-it-all with an overweening desire for control. We have encountered White’s mockery of one of these kinds of obsessive behaviours before in *Voss* when Mrs Pringle and her daughters personally arrange the cinerarias at the ball for Belle Bonner. This repetition suggests that White’s satire simply irrupts because certain things — in this case the very idea of someone carefully attending to a flower arrangement — anger him.

It is Norbert’s wealth that allows him to realise his Romantic obsessions in his mansion and his Pleasure Dome. These constructions fall into serious disrepair within his daughter’s lifetime and so become mere wasted works, ruins but monuments to his folly in keeping with this trope of modern satire, but because it is his wealth that enables Norbert to indulge his Romantic obsessions in the first place it is this that constitutes the ultimate target of White’s satire. There are many descriptions of the wealthy, pastoralist world of White’s parents and family in his self-portrait, in his letters, and in Marr’s biography, that suggest the wealth of this world to be the source of Norbert’s wealth and the world of White’s parents more generally to be the source for White’s world of the Hares. In light of this, White’s satirical treatment of the Hare family may be exaggerated but it is socio-historically referential. It is also not a satire of suburbia, of the suburban way life, and so it further demonstrates the eclectic nature of White’s subversions.

White satirises the Hare family as representatives of this privileged class by locking them into a domestic drama from which there is no escape and in which there are no lasting achievements. The cornerstone of his technique is to present the relations between the Hare family members as abysmal. Mary Hare, for Norbert, is unbearable and she is for Eleanor ‘the one cataclysmic

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reality' to challenge her 'playing of the part' but also the cause of her recoiling from relating 'the presence of her daughter...to the play of life'. Mary's response to the unkindnesses of her parents is to cry 'in private' then to retreat into her own world, the natural world of 'animals, birds and plants'. She smashes in 'thoughtless games' all the 'beautiful things' she is given (pp. 21-22) and she leaves her father to drown when he falls into one of his own cisterns (p. 57).

All three members of the Hare family are locked into this drama and the circle of futility that is its chief characteristic but, while this strategy satirically undercuts all of them, it is Norbert who receives the severest treatment. This is most evident in White's brilliantly funny account of a dinner in which Norbert becomes enraged not because the family must make do with a cold fowl 'coated with an egg sauce', 'the best of intentions', and 'dead flying ants', but because Mary is indifferent to this sight. She munches a stick of celery 'rather loudly' and this provokes Norbert to hurl the fowl through the window where it falls into 'a display of perennial phlox' before it is quickly followed by a loaf of bread, a knife and a decanter of port. This causes him to feel 'freer', but it leads Eleanor to express concern about what the servants will think and then to cry, and it leads Mary to declare that she is to blame 'in case that was what they wanted'. This further enrages Norbert: he rushes upstairs and returns with two pistols that he discharges into a chandelier of 'exceptional loveliness', reducing it, an objet d'art and a symbol of his aesthetic-romantic commitment, to 'an excruciating crystal rain'. Norbert next tries to shoot himself, pointing the pistol at his head, firing, but, such is his ineptitude, missing. He collapses 'clumsily and ridiculously' into a chair but he does so 'because it had not been thought out properly'. He drags himself up and meets Mary on the stairs (Eleanor is still hiding in a small room) where he announces to her that "All human beings are decadent...The moment we are born, we start to degenerate. Only the unborn is whole, pure." Mary in her obtuseness and ugliness is, to her father's mind, an offence in the house that for him represents his materialization of beauty. It is a mark of the futility that reigns in the Hare
household that Norbert's declaration is as ineffective as his suicide attempt: Eleanor is terrified and Mary simply does not understand (pp. 33-35).

White's treatment of Eleanor is rather more gentle. He satirically undercuts her but he does so by way of measured, gentle irony rather than pointed ridicule: the novel observes that she 'seldom committed herself to positive opinions' because two positives in the relationship 'would have been intolerable'. She responds to Norbert's angry accusation that she is a 'mouthpiece of social cliché' calmly — "it is what people prefer...too much of what is unexpected is too upsetting". We learn that she tends to 'cough thinly, from behind an expression that invited inquiry into the state of her health, and visitors would take the hint' because 'it provided a useful topic to hack a way into the tangles of conversation' (p. 20). She also provides 'the perfect flat foil to her husband's fustian' and so is 'not ineffective against the peacock colours of the stage at Xanadu' (p. 21).

Eleanor chooses to play these rather vacuous social and domestic roles and this constitutes her retreat into her own private world but she does so as a victim of her insanely Romantic husband. The novel satirises Eleanor in terms reminiscent of the mildly ironic comedy of manners that envelops Laura Trevelyan when she first meets Voss. This is wildly disproportionate to White's satire of Norbert. Eleanor and Mary are innocents but Norbert is a fool whose suffering is self-inflicted so that his awful fate, in the manner of modern satire, is, in an ironic way, just. Norbert elicits little or no sympathy. The scale of this disproportion suggests that White's satire is very largely a product of his temperament, especially his anger. Its sudden appearance here not only suggests that we may expect it again but that it is a new weapon in his satiric armoury.

White does not restrict his attack to these family figures but extends it to Xanadu itself. Norbert's gardeners have trained wistaria around his 'lovely, languid house' but
In the spring its heavy, clovy scent invaded the great, greenish rooms, the marble staircase and the malachite urns dissolved beneath the onslaught, and the gilded mirrors led by subtle stages far beyond the bounds of vision. (p. 20)

This is the kind of demonic imagery that is typically used in modern satire to depict the collapse of order\textsuperscript{21}. White confers supernatural power on this scent — the invisible power to dissolve material objects that allows the gilded mirrors to lead by far beyond the bounds of vision — to diminish and threaten Xanadu in a way that prefigures its eventual collapse so to disvalue it as a self-indulgent extravagance. White experiments with his satirical devices for his use of this kind of imagery here serves to validate the reference to Coleridge’s poem, *Kubla Khan*, that is inherent in Xanadu. In *Kubla Khan*, the earlier Xanadu is garbed in imagery similar to that of Norbert’s Xanadu:

\begin{quote}
I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!  
And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread:  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of paradise\textsuperscript{22}.
\end{quote}

This last stanza is an affirmation of the power of art to create for it suggests that the poet takes considerable delight in this kind of rich Romanticism but it is also an acknowledgement of art’s rather more terrifying power to destroy — Coleridge’s Xanadu is threatened by the very force of nature that his own imagery represents. It is no exaggeration to say that Coleridge’s own ‘Xanadu’ is poetry, in this case, his exceedingly Romantic poem *Kubla Khan*. White’s reference to *Kubla Khan* is a refinement of this: it underscores his enactment of Norbert’s romantic and doomed attempt to monumentally realise beauty and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[21] Greenblatt, pp. 117-118.
\end{footnotes}
pleasure but there is a strong element of self-irony in this reference that invites us to recognise that White is aware of the danger of being seduced or consumed by his own art when he delights in it.

White, near the end of Part One, delivers a parody that significantly reinforces his satire of the Hare family as representatives of the privileged pastoralist class of his parents. Mrs Jolley leads Mary Hare on a wildly improper but comical parodic dance through the rooms of Xanadu. The housekeeper whirls and coughs in the dust, ‘sliding’ and ‘gliding’, and laughing ‘in solid lumps’ at her ‘employer’ while she waves Eleanor Hare’s ‘treasured’ fan of ‘broken tortoiseshell and tattered parchment’. She further mimics, mocks, and scorns the Hare family by singing “‘At the ball! At the ball’”, by chanting “‘All the young men were forever persisting...to dance with the daughter of Xanadu’”, and by shrieking “‘All the young men with moustaches and the smooth ones too...And the limp cousins!’” (pp. 85-86). This dance and Mrs Jolley’s utterances are particularly effective as parody because they invite us to recall the dance given many years earlier by Eleanor and Norbert Hare, ostensibly for their cousin Eustace Cleugh but actually because of their need to do ‘something for our poor Mary’ (p. 25). Their hopes are not realised because ‘everyone’ at this dance is ‘inclined to ignore’ Mary and because ‘Cousin Eustace’ is not interested in her or in women generally — he behaves ‘very oddly’ and ‘crumbles’ while dancing with Miss Antill, he ‘hates to be touched’ and so he returns to ‘the closed circle of himself’ (pp. 28-32). Mrs Jolley retrospectively satirises through her parody everyone at the dance and no one more so than the young men, ‘the limp cousins’, for their cruel indifference towards Mary. However, the ultimate object of the scorn White directs through her is the decadence of the privileged class of Australians that the people at the ball represent: the upper middle class pastoralists associated with Eleanor and Norbert Hare.

Mrs Jolley’s wild parodic dance also serves to confirm her earlier remarks to Mrs Flack regarding Mary Hare and her family — “‘All that lot’”, she says, “‘has had their day’” (p. 77). Mrs Jolley’s dance closes the circle of futility
that has existed within Xanadu and which has determined the lives of its occupants. Shortly after this dance Mrs Jolley leaves Xanadu to live with her friend Mrs Flack. This does not mean, however, that she or Mary are free from futility; on the contrary, Mrs Jolley and Mary are simply re-located within the realm of pointlessness that is the growing suburb of Sarsparilla.

White's story of the privileged world of the Hare family — a world that he knew and in which he had some emotional investment through his childhood and his parents — is insistently told in terms of modern satire and parody. Norbert Hare is a fool who attracts no sympathy, Mary and her mother are weak and passive; all three are locked in an awful, intra-familial social drama; they retreat into their own worlds; and Xanadu, Norbert's great pride, eventually dissolves in ruins. Like Paul Pennyfeather, the satirical hero of Evelyn Waugh's Decline and Fall, Norbert, Eleanor, and Mary Hare are fated to act out their meaningless lives and, moreover, on something that the novel suggests is no more than a stage, that is, Xanadu. That Norbert the principal actor has built the stage on which this meaninglessness unfolds is a further irony. These characters never quite escape Norbert's stage: he is left to drown in his own cistern, we learn, post event, that Eleanor simply dies, and when Mary eventually leaves Sarsparilla she is presumed drowned while crossing an unnamed river. The satire that follows upon this satire is not an attack upon the upper middle class in their apparently decadent, privileged world but an attack upon the working or lower middle class in their apparently apathetic, consumerist suburban world.

**At Home with Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack**

Mary Hare, in embodying the idea that divinity is immanent in nature, effectively embraces the values and spirit of the earth (Erdgeist) as opposed to the spirit or material values of her own times (Zeitgeist) and this places her in conflict with Mrs Jolley, her housekeeper, who embraces the material values and spirit of *her* times — "'a home, and a hoover, and kiddie's voices'" (p. 53).
This conflict is of instrumental importance because it underwrites and indeed enables the satire of suburban life that White mounts through Mrs Jolley and her friend Mrs Flack.

This satire begins as a personal, particularised attack upon Mrs Jolley, one that is only occasionally biting and more typically ironic and brilliantly comic, but it becomes more general when White attacks the inane but harmless pretensions, the faddish consumerism, and the suburban, lower middle-class material values of this quite evidently 'ordinary' woman, Mrs Jolley. White extends this attack by depicting both Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack as ordinary people, as representatives of suburbia, and it is this ordinariness that makes his attack upon them seem unfair and offensive.

White satirically undercuts Mrs Jolley as soon as she starts work at Xanadu by ascribing attitudes to her that reveal her to be, in contrast to the almost completely artless Mary Hare, pretentious and full of affectation. She is 'a lady' and one who 'never' tires of pointing it out, she will not 'touch an onion' but is 'partial to a fluffy sponge', or a 'butter sandwich, with non-parelles' and she knows 'a lady could never go wrong with pastel shades', or 'Iceland poppies', or 'chenille'. She likes a good yarn at the bus stop but it must be 'with another lady' and she likes a drive in the family car 'in a nice hat' so that she may look out at faces 'on a lower level'. Sometimes she moves her head 'ever so slightly, to convey her disbelief' (p. 44). This is relatively mild, low-key satire but White insists that snobbery is not restricted to the higher echelons of Australian society — Mrs Jolley does not represent the middle or upper classes of Australian society but the working class or lower middle-class world of suburban Sarsparilla.

White switches his point of attack to Mrs Jolley's sexuality when he goes on to describe her liking for motion pictures. She likes to sit 'sucking a lolly' while the world of the cinema produces intense associations and identifications is for her: 'the smell of a hot, moist caramel almost drives her 'nuts', that 'lean young fellow, in crow's feet and leather pants, might just have reached, and put his hand...' — we can only imagine — but 'it made her lolly stick'. This
sexualised imagery satirically undercuts Mrs Jolley by suggesting that her ladylike composure, self-belief, and apparent superiority mask sexual frustration and repression.

Mrs Jolley's suburban respectability is further undercut by White's attack on her religious pretensions. She is revealed as a rather dubious Christian by way of her response to Mary Hare's declaration that she believes in the natural world but does not believe in 'what is over it' (p. 58). Mrs Jolley responds to this by telling Mary, in spite of her professed commitment to Christianity, that she hopes Miss Hare 'might die' (p. 59). It is quite clear that a certain spiritual sense resides in Mary while any kind of genuine Christian sense of charity, toleration, or loving-kindness is notably absent from Mrs Jolley. That Mary Hare is uncommunicative and eccentric simply emphasizes Mrs Jolley's hypocrisy. As we shall see again, White does not satirise Mary but uses her in this way to underline the foibles and failings of those people apparently better equipped than her.

White goes on to mount a sustained comic attack upon Mrs Jolley's domesticity. This is a little more representative of his satirical treatment of her than the two sharp attacks I have referred to: Mrs Jolley turns away from Mary because 'all that was bright and solid, all that was known and vouched for must prevail'. However, what prevails is rather trivial: Mrs Jolley rushes 'at the oven, to bake a cake...although it was not a day of celebration...with non parelles, and something written on it'. This rush to the oven is sublimely ridiculous: for Mrs Jolley all that is 'bright and solid' is as light and soft as a cake. White deftly caricatures Mrs Jolley as a wildly enthusiastic, religiose, cook-mother who:

loved to sing the pinker hymns. She would even sing those of which she did not know the words. She sang and baked. And saw pink. She loved the Jesus Christ of long pink face and languid curls, in words and windows. All was right then. All the homes and the kiddies saved. All was sanctified by cake.
This personal attack on Mrs Jolley suddenly becomes a more general satirical attack upon what her wildly enthusiastic domesticity means in terms of her values:

Mrs Jolley sang and baked. Brick by brick her edifice rose, but a nice sandwich, of course. Round. Whereas it was the square brick homes she celebrated. And populated. With her mind she placed the ladies and the kiddies — not so many gentlemen — as if they had been sandwich flags: the little girls, with their lovely fresh frocks, and tiny rings and vanity bags; the lovely little boys, with freckles and quiffs and teeth that too much cake had destroyed.

The reference to the destruction wrought on healthy teeth by 'too much cake' suggests that Mrs Jolley's domestic activities are self-indulgent — she bakes even if to do so is to destroy — and this satirically undercuts the cosy complacency that lies at the heart of her value system. White next turns his satiric wit upon Mrs Jolley's love of suburbia, thus broadening the scope of his attack.

For Mrs Jolley, even to approach 'KARMA', the well-ordered but improbably named house owned by Mrs Flack in Sarsparilla, is to be massively but ridiculously uplifted. For her, 'the mere sight of a bus passing through a built up area restored a person's circulation, as rounds of beef and honeycombs of tripe fed the spirit, and ironmongery touched the heart.' KARMA provides a mundane but notably suburban contrast to the former splendours of Xanadu: it is located 'five minutes from the Cash-and-Carry, with a doctor handy on the corner', its brick 'looked best of all' and its tiles 'better, brighter glazed', Mrs Jolley loves the latch, the rustic picket gate, and 'the hedge of Orange Triumph'. These _petit bourgeois_ terms offer KARMA as a model suburban residence while at the same time they ironically undercut it by inviting an unfavourable comparison with Xanadu. Mrs Jolley is ridiculously and most comically undone by the absurdly vicarious effect of the house on her — 'to run her glove along the surface of Mrs Flack’s brick home gave her shivers' —
and by the risible emotion its toilet elicits from her — 'the sound of its convenience swept her head over heels into the caverns of envy' (pp. 72-73).

'KARMA' provides Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack with kinship and comfort because 'the catalyst of sympathy' they share destroys 'the envelopes of personality, leaving the two essential beings free to merge and float' (p. 74). The terms of this description are exaggerated and thus incongruent and ironic in a way that mocks the very idea of transcendence in the context of suburban material comfort and complacency. The house provides this excess of comfort by way of its material objects (the wall-to-wall Wilton carpet that elicits little sighs, the already 'impeccable veneer') and it allows the two ladies to merge and float *incommunicado*, in suspended animation as it were, with only their stomachs comically rumbling — 'liquidly' as White wittily puts it — to remind us that they are not dead but have merely entered a temporary vegetative state. It is Mrs Jolley who is usually the first to return from this state because 'certain images would refurnish the swept chamber of her mind'. It is her favourite among these images — 'she loved it best of all' — that refurnishes her mind but this is nothing more substantial than a piece of 1950s ephemera: 'the pastel-blue plastic dressing-table set in Mrs Flack's second bedroom'. White attacks these two women for their inertia and for the vacuity that seems to rule their lives but it is the consumerism and materialism of suburban life that produces these states that comprises his ultimate target — even his trivial attack on Mrs Flack's plastic dressing table set serves this purpose. This set is a consumer product and also a material object that stands as a metonym for the house's materiality, for the very materiality that provides the (apparent) excess of comfort that in turn produces, as White would have it, such a stultifying effects upon Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack. If we take this evident consumerism and materialism as characteristic of suburban life — certainly White's satire suggests as much — then there is something of the offensiveness that such critics as John Docker complain about in regard to these attacks on suburbia. These attacks are offensive not because they are exaggerated but because they are unjust and unfair — Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack may be rather unblinking
materialists but they are ordinary people who have, in any case, an inalienable right to subside into any state, including a state of torpor, in the comfort and security of their own home. Indeed, the provision of comfort and security would appear to be one of the primary objectives of suburban development.

A similar unfairness is apparent in White's mockery of the social activities of Mrs Jolley's daughter, Merle Apps. Mrs Jolley tells Mary Hare how Mr Apps is regarded at the Customs Service as "'indispensable'" (p. 70) so "'it is not uncommon for Merle to hobnob with the high-ups of the service and entertain them at a "'buffy" where she may serve "'Croaky de poison, Chipperlarters. All that.'" This is demotic speech and it is funny — Merle apparently serves poisonous croquettes to her husband's presumably esteemed colleagues — but as a satirical attack it seems unfair for it is an attack upon the speech of an ordinary, largely uneducated woman by an educated author who holds a degree in French Literature. As has been noted, Michael Wilding has found White's use of demotic speech to be offensive and, furthermore, as being concerned 'not to replicate pronunciation or intonation, but to mark off the vulgar from the respectable, the threatening mass from the privileged elite'\(^{23}\). It is not possible to completely reject this criticism — White's attack upon Mrs Jolley for her mispronunciations is unfair and therefore his use of the demotic is offensive — but it is possible to point out that Wilding's criticism is oblivious to White's satirical tone and it is worth reiterating that this demotic speech is funny. White has made an effort to make it amusing and comic and this in turn suggests that it is not his aim to delineate the mass from the élite but simply to entertain his readers.

White makes his satirical purposes quite clear when he casts Mary Hare in the role of first person satiric speaker. There is little justification for overlooking this satire for Mary asks a series of pointed, deliberately trivial and increasingly ludicrous questions that serve to recapitulate various emblematic aspects of White's comic satire of Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack. These dramatically ironic questions draw no answer from Mrs Jolley and need not for

\(^{23}\) Wilding, p. 229.
they are directed to readers, they invite us to recall their referents. Mary asks:

"'Tell me about the time, Mrs Jolley, that Merle gave the buffy for the high-up officials from Customs, and the white sauce got burnt.' "'You have never told me — does Mr Apps wear a moustache?'" "'I wonder if I should be afraid to meet a stoker?'" and "'Does Elma believe in plastic?'" (p. 83). Mary serves to reprise, by way of these questions that are naive and facetious from a reader’s perspective, White’s mockery of the superficial values that rule the lives of Mrs Jolley, Mr and Mrs Apps, and Mrs Flack. This temporary shift of voice to Mary enables White to further satirise the triviality and superficiality of suburban life. That this apparently mad woman (p. 74) should seriously pose such ludicrously trivial questions further satirises White’s suburbanites for their shallow material values.

White’s satire of Mrs Jolley’s enthusiastic domesticity may be exaggerated but it is also funny, comic, and entertaining. He extends his satire to a more general attack on suburbia through Mrs Jolley and her friend Mrs Flack but, because they are both patently ordinary women, his attack seems both misogynistic and unfair and is to this extent offensive although it too, is funny at times. This unfairness generates the offensiveness that in turn produces the severest critical responses to this novel. These are more or less outraged responses to the way White represents these ordinary working class or lower middle class people in their suburban environment but they typically overlook White’s satirical purposes. These responses imply that these subjects are sacred cows beyond criticism. White mounts a further and rather more pointed attack on suburbia when he sends Mrs Godbold to retrieve her husband, Tom, from Mrs Khalil’s brothel.

**An ‘errand of love’ and a suburban Brothel**

Mrs Godbold is not only an enthusiastic Christian who enjoys singing the ‘heartier hymns’ (p. 229) and is ‘happy’ singing about the redemption (p. 259) but she also embodies the idea of Christian loving-kindness so it is no surprise
that she sets out on her 'errand of love' to retrieve her husband from Mrs Khalil's brothel (pp. 272-275). Mrs Godbold's qualities suggest her to be an integral part of White's moral-religious-spiritual vision yet he sends her into the profane world, into a brothel that is not only located within a family home but also one whose prostitutes are Mrs Khalil's own teenage daughters, Lurleen and Janis. Mrs Godbold's attempt to save her husband is compatible with her loving-kindness but White's treatment of her inside the brothel is ironic so that even though she is one of his elect characters he does not quarantine her from his satire. White writes this episode with a kind of wildly theatrical exuberance that produces a scene that is chaotic, sad, gross, and violent, but also comical, satirical and outrageously funny. This militates against any sense of a moral-religious-spiritual vision.

The aptly named Mr Hoggett, whose wife has just died and who has designs on Janis, is notably prominent among the habitués of the brothel. This grotesque if not disgusting figure has 'opulent' thighs, expresses himself 'with his belly' (p. 276), runs with sweat (p. 278), and is 'convinced that young flesh must be the only nostrum' (p. 284). Sarsparilla's police constable can't attend to his duties because he is perennially engaged 'in the front room...with Lurleen'. Fixer Jensen, 'tall, thin, putty coloured', tends to pick his nose, and only visits because he finds the brothel amusing (p. 282). Alf Dubbo, an Aboriginal and a disbarred former client, bursts into the brothel, not in search of gratification, but to perform a song and dance routine (pp. 280-285). As he sings drunkenly, he stamps, and he stamps on 'a cat or two'. These yowl, several baskets of lingerie fall down, Mrs Khalil starts 'jumping' and her breasts 'appear to start boiling inside the floral gown'. Mr Hoggett refuses her frantic request to "'be a gentlemen'" and help restrain Dubbo because, as he says, he didn't come for "'a bloody rough-'ouse'". Janis coquettishly pokes the tip of her tongue into Mr Hoggett's ear and then playfully leaps into a chair that collapses 'rottenly under her'. This causes her to become 'screaming mad'. Dubbo's dancing, singing, and stamping continues for several verses and only comes to an end when he falls to the floor. Mrs Godbold, who has
remained primly silent throughout these events, takes Dubbo's collapse as her cue to ask him, as he lies bleeding, if he is a Christian (p. 285). He tells her that he "gave it away...early on" but Mrs Godbold continues to minister to him because this was 'her work of art, her act of devotion' (p. 285). While her action, and more particularly the terms in which White describes it, confirms her Christian loving-kindness, Mrs Godbold's question and her behaviour seem wildly incongruent to the circumstances. She and her idea of Christian loving-kindness are to this extent satirically undercut.

The gross comicality, the wild theatrical excess, and the sheer satirical exuberance with which White imbues his description of these events not only illustrates the way his satirical impulse irrupts but also how it subsumes his moral vision. He also takes a peculiar — perhaps perverse — pleasure in ridiculing the habitués of the brothel and this suggests that 'the body', is a particular object of his anger. The activities in the brothel seem to be the working class, suburban equivalent of the kind of upper middle class decadence that White attacks earlier by way of his satire on the Hare family. This attack on Mrs Khalil, her clients, and their gross behaviour is much more coruscating than the attack White mounts on his other suburbanites, Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack, for their cosy, complacent consumerism. There is thus considerable disparity at the level of attack in these satires. The net effect of this is to make White's satire on the brothel and its clients seem all the more extravagant but effective.

**Mordechai Himmelfarb, The Lady from Czernowitz, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust**

White's account of the pre-Sarsparilla life of Mordechai Himmelfarb is essentially historical-biographical but it is scored, from the outset, by irony, comedy, and satire. Moshe, Himmelfarb's father, is a man who attends the synagogue 'along with his shortcomings' (p. 96) and Frau Himmelfarb makes 'rather a sombre impression, stiff and given to surrounding herself with certain
dark, uncouth, fanatically orthodox Jews' (p. 99) and with 'certain pious ladies' who cling together 'like a ball of brown bees, driven by the instinct of their faith, intoxicated with the honey of their God' (p. 100). There is vulgar comedy and irreligious wit here too — when Mordechai drinks half a bottle of a tonic prescribed for him by his mother he then sleeps with 'a whore named Marianne' who is sufficiently generous 'not to charge' and who observes that "'the little bit they cut off only seems to make you hotter''' (p. 108) and when Moshe dies a priest 'with a stammer and an acolyte with a cold' give him a Christian burial (p. 129).

Mordechai becomes filled with 'the rage to live' and committed to 'the flesh' after his initiation: he tries the breasts of whores 'propped on cushions' and he develops an insatiable appetite for flesh of pale German girls 'pressed against stucco' or 'writhing in the undergrowth of parks beside stagnant water in a smell of green decay' (p. 110). These highly evocative but exaggerated terms constitute a denunciation of our fixation with the body and of our exploitation of it for the purposes of sexual gratification. White mocks Mordechai here for being unable to control his physical impulses in much the same way that Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell and Aldous Huxley ridicule their satirical heroes in their modern satires. This denunciation continues in White's account of Mordechai's father and an acquaintance having sex with two girls of 'unmistakable' occupation. This is event not only occurs in a public place but is also observed by Mordechai:

The action of the flickering light made the unnatural abandon of the elderly, respectable Jew appear quite maniacal. He, too, was flickering and fluctuating as he led the way through the hubbub of shouting and jerky music. His companions had reached the stage where only the conventions of revelry are obeyed. The clerk stopped for a moment and stuck his head inside a bush to vomit. The mouths of the other opened from habit in the dreadful dough of their faces to emit song or wind. (p. 113)

This not only reveals that Mordechai's inability to control his physical impulses runs in the family but also that it extends beyond the family — males
generally are satirised and indeed indicted for this failure. This scene reflects White's predilection for adopting a worm's-eye-view of the world and the puritanical strain in his psyche but the impetus behind his attack is anger — the gross picture that he paints here of human degradation and debauchery suggests that he has become angered by his own 'chosen' subject — indiscriminate, loveless sexuality. This produces a noticeable rise in the levels of intensity and aggression in his satire on this occasion. This sudden ratcheting up of intensity and aggression confirms the role temperament plays in White's satire while it also invites comparison with his initial ironic and comical attacks on Moshe and Mordechai. There is an evident disparity between these attacks that demonstrates the inconsistency of White's satire.

Mordechai Himmelfarb emerges more clearly as an historical figure — even though the satire continues — when his pre-Sarsparilla life begins to follow the trajectory prescribed by the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany in the 1930s. This is the 'decade of discrimination' (p. 139), a period in German history of which White had personal experience through staying with the Oertel family in Hanover during his holidays from Cambridge University and through his tour of Northern Europe during the period. It is probably this experience that gave him the confidence to write on anti-Semitism and the Holocaust itself. As it happens, White appears to be the first novelist anywhere to deal with the delicate subject of the Holocaust in prose fiction. What he produces, moreover, is a remarkably authentic account of the period, as one anonymous Jewish refugee has attested\(^{24}\). White deals with this subject in an historically accurate account while at the same he mounts mutually reinforcing attacks on naïveté, self-delusion, religious belief, materialism, and anti-Semitism throughout that account. The nature of these attacks, and the context in which they are made, suggests these 'issues' considerably arouse White's ire.

\(^{24}\) In Frederick W. Dillistone, *Patrick White's Riders in the Chariot*, New York, The Seabury Press, 1967, p. 20. An anonymous refugee is quoted as observing that White's account is 'the most authentic description known to her of what the Jews in Germany were feeling, fearing, and experiencing in those tragic years'.

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White initially identifies two groups — those Jews who remain in Germany and those who go into exile — and he carefully describes their dilemma. Of those who go into exile, many found themselves, after all, to be Jews. If parents, in the confidence of emancipation, had been able to construe the Galuth as a metaphysical idea, their children, it appeared, would have to accept exile as a hard fact. Some did, early enough. They left for the United States, and fell into a nylon dream, of which the transparent folds never quite concealed the evidence of circumcision. These were forever turning uneasily in their sleep. Some returned to Palestine — oh yes, returned, because how else is exile ended? — but were not vouchsafed that personal glimpse of the Shekinah which their sense of atavism demanded. These were perhaps the most deceived. (p. 143)

And of those who remain in Germany, there are many

in the aching villas, in the thin dwellings of congested alleys, beside the Gummibaum in tasteful, beige apartments, who, for a variety of reasons, could not detach themselves from the ganglion of Europe: their bones protested, or they loved their furniture, or they must surely be overlooked, or they were drunk with kisses, or transfixed by presentiments of immolation, or too diffident to believe they might take their destiny in hand, or of such faith they waited for divine direction. These remained. And the air was tightening.

These two excerpts demonstrate White’s ability to write as a committed but sensitive historian, but what may be noted here too, is the insistent ironic voice that courses through these excerpts. This voice satirises the Jews who go into exile for the inadequacy of their religious beliefs to their life circumstances. They are the ‘most deceived’ because they are doubly deceived. Firstly, they are deceived by the failure of the prospect of America — the material comforts and values of the United States are suggested to be insubstantial and false, as ephemeral as ‘a nylon dream’. Secondly, they are deceived by their religion for they are not afforded the glimpse of the Shekinah that ‘their atavism demanded’. In similar vein, White satirises the Jews who remain in Germany for their complacency in steadfastly maintaining their material values, for
remaining ‘in their tasteful beige apartments’ because ‘they loved their furniture’. At another level, he satirises these Jews for not doing what White had done when he returned to Australia, for not ‘detaching themselves from the ganglion of Europe’. This satire upon the Jews who remain in Germany provides a map, a kind of checklist or concordance to White’s work, for it indicates the targets of his satire and captures one of its chief qualities. White attacks the comparatively trivial subject of complacent materialism in this excerpt but he also attacks the much weightier subjects of the disabling qualities of love (drunk on kisses), religion (presentiments of immolation), and the inability of human beings to act as free agents (too diffident to believe they might take their destiny in hand). This excerpt thus demonstrates that White attacks targets that range from the trivial to the momentous and this militates against the notion that his satire is subject to a hierarchical order. His attacks are not directed by schematic principles or by an elitist perspective for they range from the trivial to the momentous, from the ordinary to the exceptional. The point is that White attacks whatever and whomever he pleases. This becomes quite apparent if we compare his satire upon Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack to his satire upon the Jews. White satirises both parties for their complacent materialism but there is a notable disjunction in terms of the nature of the satire in each case, in terms of the context in which that materialism is located, and in terms of the consequences of that complacency.

The irruption of satire in White’s historically accurate narrative account of the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany suggests a tension between his historic and satiric impulses. This tension is productively resolved in that White’s satirical attacks on such things as the debilitating complacency produced by materialism, on naïvete and our human capacity for self-delusion, on religious belief, and on anti-Semitism itself, are attacks upon the beliefs and practices that constitute the central problems and issues thrown up by the rise and practice of anti-Semitism. White’s satire, although it often satirises the victims of anti-Semitism, thus complements his historical account of the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany.
In a further indication of White’s distaste for complacency, Himmelfarb is one of the Jews who make the fateful decision to stay in Germany (p. 144). This has dire consequences: he is dismissed from his professorship; his German friends begin to reject him; his wife is arrested in his place and disappears; and, overwhelmed by guilt, he abjectly gives himself up and is placed on the first transport of Jews to Eastern Europe. It is on this transport that he meets ‘The Lady from Czernowitz’ who explains to him that her voice:

had received its training from only the best teachers in Vienna. Her Freischutz had been praised at Constanza, and as for her Fledermaus at Graz! Recently, she had agreed to accept pupils, but only a few, and those exceptional. She had accompanied a young princess to Bled, and spent an agreeable season, of pleasure and instruction. Ah, the charm and distinction of the Princess Elena Ghika! (p. 177)

White satirically undercuts The Lady from Czernowitz for her pretensions and he further mocks her when he tells us that she has ‘acquired a smattering of Polish’ but only ‘for amusement’s sake...or as an intellectual exercise’ (p. 179). This is sprightly social satire of a kind that occurs again and again in White’s novels but what is most remarkable about it here is its context: the Lady from Czernowitz, like Himmelfarb, is on a journey to a Nazi extermination camp.

This satire continues inside Friedensdorf Camp when The Lady from Czernowitz makes a number of mannered and trivial remarks that are wildly incongruent with her circumstances. Although the guards are ‘bristling’ and there are some ‘bestial moments’, she expresses her concern over the matter of her veil being torn in the great press of bodies. She nevertheless remains convinced “‘that we shall be treated with the greatest consideration’” and then, as if she were strolling on a pleasant summer’s day, she begins talking about “‘the forests of Bukhowina’” where the walks were “‘magnificent’” and where “‘we would pick the little wild strawberries, and eat them with the finest sugar and faintly sour cream’” (pp. 180-181).
White, in ascribing these remarks to the Lady from Czernowitz, evokes another world — the peaceful suburban world of Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack for example — in which such remarks could constitute a comic satire. But such an idyll, while it is a poignant example of the limitless capacity of humankind for self-delusion, is unbelievable in the context of the death camp. White’s satire, because its terms are incongruent to the extent that it is difficult to believe that he is continuing to use it, undercuts itself here. His satire thus constitutes a satire on satire. White’s use of satire here reveals that the mode can address itself by calling attention to what can be seen as its own chief defect, its own incongruence. Yet, on the other hand, this incongruence makes this satire all the more effective because shocking.

The Lady from Czernowitz’s idyll is abruptly shattered by the separation of the women from the men so that each group may be ‘disinfected’ in the bathhouse. What initially alarms her is the prospect of disrobing in public — “‘I cannot bear it!’” she shrieks. “‘I cannot bear it! Oh, no! No! No! No! No!’ This is an understandable protest but a futile one in the circumstances: she is stripped and ‘stuffed inside the bathhouse, in case her hysteria should inspire those who were obedient, duller, or of colder blood’ (p. 182). One of ‘a number of other individuals, all obviously of slave status’ explains to Himmelfarb that the women are going to be gassed and, when it is over, “‘we shall drag the bodies to the pits’”. It is a bitter irony that this man not only reveals the fate of the Jews to Himmelfarb in ‘faltering, faulty German’ — suggesting that he is a non-German and possibly a Jew himself — but also that he does so ‘in decent friendly tones’. As this man is speaking, the door of the ‘bathhouse’ bursts open ‘and there, for ever to haunt, staggered the Lady from Czernowitz’. In a cry that indicates she is well aware of Jewish history, particularly the Jewish history of persecution, The Lady from Czernowitz shrieks: “‘God show us! Just this once! At least!’”

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25 This was the Sonderkommando, a Special Commando selected from the prisoners who gained through their gruesome work a temporary reprieve from execution. Their activities have been recorded in historical works such as Martin Gilbert’s *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy*, London, Collins, 1986, pp. 308-309.
The tenor and terms of the picture White paints of The Lady from Czernowitz in the gas chamber simply do not allow readers to imagine she receives a sign from God after the door is re-closed. This picture is entirely in keeping with the bleakness that is typically inherent in both Menippean and modern satire:

Her scalp was grey stubble where the reddish hair had been. Her one dug hung down beside the ancient scar which represented the second. Her belly sloped away from the hillock of her navel. Her thighs were particularly poor. But it was her voice which lingered. Stripped. Calling to him from out of the dark of history, ageless, ageless, and interminable. (p. 184)

White presents The Lady from Czernowitz as being already beyond the edge of oblivion here: the loss of her clothes, her hair, of weight from her thighs and even the pre-existing loss of a breast are metonyms signifying not only her physical disintegration but also her psychic disintegration: constitutive elements of her personality and indeed her identity, we should remember, derive from these physical attributes and accoutrements. What has already begun then is the total destruction of the person and in this dehumanised condition, in the world of the gas chamber, there can be no sign from God. This passage concerning the end of The Lady from Czernowitz reflects the characteristic of Menippean satire identified by Anne Payne as being the absence of God or unquestionable authority. This is satire at its most fearless.

White’s treatment of The Lady from Czernowitz has been roundly criticised by Brian McFarlane who describes the term ‘dug’ as ‘sub-human’ and White’s use of it as ‘contemptuous’. MacFarlane also takes the description generally as evidence of what he calls White’s ‘obsessive need to underline the physical horror of the flesh’\(^26\). White’s work does reflect a certain distaste for the human body, or at least our fascination with it, but McFarlane’s interpretation misses the point of the passage: White paints this woman in these utterly abject terms to bring home to readers — in their relative comfort zones

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the utter banality and unblinking brutality of the Nazi system of mass murder. White uses this woman to mediate and to manage the horror that is entailed in what is a very difficult subject. In other words, satire is for White another way of dealing with history. His depiction of this woman owes a great deal to his heightened sense of the abject in the human condition — a sense born of his own wartime experience and one found in most satirists. If he actually had ‘an obsessive need to underline the horror of the flesh’ he would have taken the narrative into the gas chamber: he chose not to and presented instead a symptomatic account of The Lady from Czernowitz’s disintegration and destruction by way of the metonyms I have mentioned.

White, remarkably, provides something that transcends the end of the material body and its accoutrements and the general horror of this scene. This, however, has nothing to do with the divine for it is entirely secular. This ‘something’ is the human voice of the Lady from Czernowitz calling to Himmelfarb — ‘Calling to him from out of the dark of history, ageless, ageless, and interminable’ (p. 184). White describes Himmelfarb as ‘her counterpart’ and that it is his ‘human part’ — and arguably the reader’s — that is ‘falling, falling’ onto the stones where ‘the funnels of a thousand mouths were directed upon him, and poured out over his body a substance he failed to identify’. This is the voice that transcends the history of the fallen world to make its ceaseless appeal to the conscience of humankind rather than to deity. This, of course, is secularism and it leaves little room for the religious interpretation of this novel as indeed White’s refusal of a sign from God suggests.

There is a great disparity between the subjects of White’s satirical attacks in these passages. White initially attacks The Lady from Czernowitz for her personal faults and failings and so this satire is trivial whereas he attacks the Camp system for its brutality and horror and so this satire is deadly serious and indubitably momentous. This kind of disparity is also exists at the narrative level between The Lady from Czernowitz’s human faults and her inhuman fate. A similar disparity exists between the order of magnitude of White’s satire on
The Lady from Czernowitz and his refusal, in spite of her *cri de coeur*, to allow her to receive a sign from God before the doors of the bathhouse re-close. His satire of her is trivial but his refusal is momentous for it denies God even at the point of death. These disparities lend shock value to White's satire and his writing more generally, making both all the more idiosyncratically but strikingly complex and powerful.

The Lady from Czernowitz is one of White's most memorable figures for she is a woman made into a ridiculous clown by her pretensions and her genteel over-confidence but one who is, despite her overweening harmlessness, killed by the mass murder production machine. Even when she is killed The Lady from Czernowitz does not cease to be a vehicle for White's satire for as a minor figure in the scheme of the novel, and one who is the subject of satire herself, she serves to point up the hideous brutality of the Nazi system of mass murder. She is not a character but rather a figure who serves as a vehicle for White's chilling but devastating satire on the Nazi extermination camp system and for his satire on the human inability to believe that such a system could be set in place.

White's account of the pre-Sarsparilla history of Mordechai Himmelfarb not only demonstrates his commitment to history and historical accuracy but also the breadth and range of his satire. It confirms that different levels of anger produce his satire and that therefore his attacks may be moderate or intemperate, exaggerated or even-handed, but often disparate and disproportionate. These attacks may be internally disproportionate as when he mildly undercuts Moshe Himmelfarb's adherence to his faith and then rather more derisively mocks him for his sexual practices or they may be externally disproportionate as when he comically undercuts The Lady from Czernowitz for her social pretensions before he imbricates her in an extraordinarily bleak and much more momentous satire of the machinery of mass murder. This kind of disparity and disproportion plays a role in attracting the kind of adverse criticism I have referred to even though these critics do not necessarily recognise that it is satire that confronts them. This variation in the level of
attack makes White’s satire and his writing all the more indiscriminate and offensive but also all the more potent. It is entirely in keeping with his practice that White significantly lowers the level of his attack for his satire of Mrs Chalmers-Robinson and her social circle.

A Socialite and a Maid

This satire is co-extensive with White’s history of Ruth Joyner (Mrs Godbold) between her arrival in Sydney and her eventual marriage and move to Sarsparilla. Ruth embodies the idea of Christian loving-kindness, as has been noted, but this is not what she receives as Mrs Chalmers-Robinson’s maid. Indeed, she receives nothing from her ‘beyond her wages’ and ‘a few cast-off dresses’ her employer would have been ‘too embarrassed to wear’. Mrs Chalmers-Robinson, moreover, considers Ruth to be ‘a thing’ whose face is ‘about as flat as a marble tombstone’, one ‘waiting to be inscribed’ and she is so pleased with her judgement she determines she would ‘make an effort’ to ‘work it up as a remark for luncheon’ (p. 242).

Mrs Chalmers-Robinson is a socialite figure, as her own remarks suggest, who follows a line of descent from Mrs Bonner and Mrs Pringle in Voss to Thelma Forsdyke in The Tree of Man and to The Lady from Czernowitz. What White commonly ascribes to all these women is a certain vanity, vacuity, and pretentiousness that makes them ideal targets for his social satire. Ruth Joyner however, is stolid, she has a sense of duty, a faith, and good ideas, so she does not possess the ‘qualities’ of the socialite and therefore White does not subject her to the same kind of satire.

White initially attacks Mrs Chalmers-Robinson and her friends for introducing to their tables, as hostesses, haute cuisine in the form of ‘vol-au-vent, sole Veronique, beignets au fromage, and tournedos Lulu Wattier (p. 245). This was a growing trend in Australia, one that White deftly uses to mock these women and their husbands — the serving of this cuisine forces the husbands ‘into clubs, hotels, even railway stations, in their longing for the
stench of corn beef. This is a socio-historically referential attack but a mild one. Mrs Chalmers-Robinson however, is more drastically reduced when she learns of her husband's impending bankruptcy: she is so affected she faints and collapses to the floor in a 'bashing and scratching of jewellery' and a 'tangling of sympathy and fur fringes' (p. 250). She is revived 'after much advice' (implicitly useless) and 'a hard slap' (implicitly effective) and is assisted to her bed holding 'the ruins of her hair'. As she lies in bed recovering from her undignified collapse we learn that she has been dressed in a 'very touching, classic gown' and that she has not forgotten to 'frizz out the sides her hair beneath a bandeau embroidered with metal beads' (p. 251). White's presentation of Mrs Chalmers-Robinson as a pathetic almost abject figure suggests that his disdain for the wealthy, privileged, socialite class that she represents has not in any way subsided.

Mrs Chalmers-Robinson seems about to abandon her self-indulgent material comforts when she decides to 'settle down' to Christian Science. This religion quickly fills her empty spirit so that she is able to declare "'God is incorporeal...divine, supreme, infinite, Mind, Spirit, Principle, Life, Truth, Love'". She also reads and studies assiduously to 'transform "hard, unloving thoughts, and become a new creature"' (p. 268). Despite these affirmations and her commitment, Mrs Chalmers-Robinson soon reveals to Ruth that her newfound religion is "'something of a disappointment'". In a futile but comical demonstration, she begins 'to beat her chest with her remaining rings':

"I must have something personal. All this religion! Something I can touch. But nothing they can take away. Not pearls, oh dear no! Pearls get snapped up amongst the first. Or men. Men, Ruth, do not liked to be touched. Men must touch. That is not even a secret. Give me your hand dear."

These remarks confirm that Christian Science has failed Mrs Chalmers-Robinson while at the same time they suggest the extent to which she is locked into an endless circle of futility. Nothing, it seems, can sustain her — religion, pearls, men — so she again looms as a rather pathetic figure. White, however,
does not let the moment pass without humour: instead of offering her hand Ruth rather archly observes that her mistress would be “better off with an aspro and a cup of strong black coffee”.

White takes considerable pleasure in satirising Mrs Chalmers-Robinson because of his disdain for the social type she represents. He has her embrace the ‘currents of the times’, to use Bakhtin’s phrase, in the form of *haute cuisine* and Christian Science so as to ensure that the satire he directs towards her is socio-historically referential. This provides a measure of White’s disdain for her and of his determination to satirise her as a social type but he still presents a rather comical and relatively mild satire compared to the scene in Mrs Khalil’s brothel for example. White’s satirical attacks on Mrs Chalmers-Robinson and her predecessors indicate that he not only consistently attacks socialite women but he also consistently attacks them in the same relatively mild manner. This mildness suggests that the sources for these socialite women may very well have been White’s mother, Ruth, who was one of the leading Sydney socialites of her day, and her circle of friends. It is worth noting that White not only harboured ambivalent feelings towards his mother but also considered her social life to be extravagant27. White’s satire on Alf Dubbo’s experiences in Sydney certainly exhibits no such mildness.

**Alf Dubbo and Hannah and a ‘prinked and powdered’ piebald**

Alf Dubbo is taken as a child from his mother, ‘an old gin named Maggie’ by the Reverend Timothy Calderon and his widowed sister, Mrs Emily Pask, as part of what they call their ‘Great Experiment’ (p. 313). White thus not only underscores his account of Dubbo’s pre-Sarsparilla life with irony, as he does with that of Himmelfarb, but he is also rather more immediately casts Dubbo as an historical figure. Dubbo’s adoption reflects the then official policy and practice of taking Aboriginal children from their mother’s care into either the care of missions or of European foster parents. White was clearly aware of a

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practice that was not widely known at the time and not in fact brought to the attention of the Australian public until much later. How White became aware of the forcible adoption of Aboriginal children is a question that cannot now be answered but what can be said is that his satirical attack on this practice exemplifies his thoroughgoing engagement with Australian society and culture.

Timothy and Emily are well intentioned: they pay particular attention to the boy’s spiritual guidance and education and they draw out his artistic ability. However, the experiment fails miserably. The immediate cause of this failure is the Reverend Timothy’s seduction of Alf and Emily’s discovery of it. The seduction of a minor is a heinous offence that would appear to warrant, if it is to be the subject of satire at all, a stringent and serious attack. White does not deliver this but instead treats the subject with levity, with a good deal of wit and humour. He makes Dubbo and Calderon simply ridiculous — their shirt-tails flap ‘like wings’ and their shoes are ‘thunderous in coming off’. The Reverend stubs his toe on one of the castors of the bedstead; he is left with his nakedness, ‘always so foolish’, and ‘rather bent at the knee’; and even his lover derides him when he seizes his grey belly and tells him he looks like he was made out of ‘old witchetty grubs’ (pp. 330-331). Here, we again encounter the disjuncture that White brings into play between what we might reasonably expect and what he actually delivers. Such comic touches are not apparent in White’s satiric description of the evocatively named Mungindribble dump where Dubbo is forced to live in squalor with Mrs Spice, the resident scavenger from whom he contracts venereal disease, before he moves to Sydney.

White’s determination to present Alf Dubbo as an historical figure is evident in the pains he takes to establish the context to his life in Sydney. Dubbo, we learn, arrives during the years when ‘it was easy to stay in work’, indicating that this is the post-depression period, but he nevertheless sleeps in parks until he discovers ‘a house sufficiently dilapidated, a landlady sufficiently low, and hopeful, and predatory, to accept an abo’ (p. 342). This description suggests the hard times as well as the racism of the period. Dubbo is also later drafted to spray paint aeroplanes (p. 349) — a pointed irony since
Dubbo is a creative artist — and this implies WW2 has started. Dubbo's workmates neither reject him nor accept him — they buy him drinks because, when drunk, he amuses them — and this in turn suggests that they tend to patronise him as an Aborigine, he is perceived to be rather less a man and rather more a novelty (p. 350). This is the historical world in which White places his aspiring Aboriginal artist and it is in the context of this social history that his impulse to satirise emerges once again.

What Dubbo encounters in Sydney, in addition to discrimination, is degradation and decadence. Although he engages in some degrading and decadent behaviour himself, he remains committed to his art so that he suggests himself, in the Menippian Tradition, as another man of the idea who confronts evil in the world. The idea that he seems to embody is redemption through art. The prospect of apotheosis is a logical and desirable objective for Dubbo because he frequently engages in dissolute behaviour, particularly in his abuse of alcohol and in his frequent recourse to prostitutes. He is not aware of his idea but he is aware of his history and his present parlous condition for he sings about these in a song that he has 'made up':

Hi digger, hi digger,
My dad is bigger
Than hiss-self.
My uncle is the brother
Of my mother.
But the other
Is a bugger
No-ho-bodee,
And not my mother,
Knows. (p. 354)

In this darkly humorous parody, Dubbo mocks himself by ridiculing his own antecedents but he also delivers an indictment of European society — it is this society that has made him. His song calls attention to itself and indeed announces itself as important by intruding upon and disrupting the surface of the narrative by virtue of the fact that it is a 'foreign' genre. This parody in
song also suggests that White possesses a certain love of theatre and of comic excess.

This love of theatre and comic excess brings about a noticeable but temporary change in the nature of White’s satire — he suddenly treats the decadence and degradation that confronts Dubbo in Sydney with a good measure of comic levity. White’s account of ‘quean’s night’ at Hannah’s, the prostitute from whom Dubbo rents a room, is consequently a pointed but brilliantly funny and comical piece of satiric description (p. 356). The centrepiece of this night is a performance by Norman Fussell, Hannah’s ‘piebald’ friend, who makes his entrance ‘wearing a bunch of feathers on his head, and a bunch of feathers on his arse, and a kind of diamond G-string wherever else’. Norman has also painted on ‘a pair of formal nipples’, is ‘prinked and powdered’ but ‘otherwise fairly naked’ as he begins ‘what was intended as a ritual dance’. Norman is ‘assisted by gin’ and ‘obviously possessed’ by ‘the soul of the original chorus girl’. Norman’s bird, breathes ‘like a rasp’ and when White adds that this rasping ‘did not seem to matter; so do hens when chased around the yard in summer’ his satirical intentions become clear. White presents Norman’s performance as a carnivalesque masquerade that serves to mimic and ridicule by excess the behaviour of the other ‘queans’, transvestites, or cross-dressers present — they may be thought of as being chased ‘around the yard’ by the ‘roosters’ of wider society. White’s attitude to this kind of masquerade is confirmed when he archly observes that ‘if it ever got around that a bird of paradise had been in conjunction with a bush turkey, Norman Fussell could have provided evidence’. White’s comic satire of this particular sub-culture within Sydney society exemplifies, after his earlier satirical attacks upon that society, the disproportion and disparity that characterises his satire at the level of attack.

Shortly after this episode Hannah steals then sells some of Dubbo’s paintings to her friend Humphrey Mortimer. White does not treat this betrayal of friendship with comic exuberance but with a kind of artistically righteous, moral excess. He would have us believe that these paintings are Dubbo —
they comprise 'all goodness' in Dubbo's chest, 'all the solid forms that he could answer for', and 'all the brilliant colours that could lick across the field of vision' (p. 364). This is to highly value, in appropriately poetic terms, art and the idea of man as artist, but what follows and indeed ensues from it is violence — Dubbo tries to strangle Hannah because he now sees her as embodying 'all the bad that he had to kill' (p. 367). There is a profound disjunction here between White's idealised, romantic conception of the artist and this violence that is satirically powerful in that it reifies the distance between 'good' (art) and 'evil' (venality and ignorance of art).

This is a dark satire, one that is unlikely to elicit laughter, but it is leavened by White's wit and love of irony — Hannah is not killed but saved by the exhaustion of Dubbo and by the intervention of Norman Fussell who applies 'a hold' that he once learnt 'from a sailor' and which 'he had never known to work'. That these ironies should appear during these murderous moments provide a measure of White's irrepressibly dark sense of comedy. Hannah however, is bleeding and whining pathetically, her slip resembles 'bandages', and 'the tufts of her hair' have turned her not into a clown but perhaps the worst of all things, 'the imitation of a clown' (p. 368). She is thus ridiculously as well as severely reduced, if not to quite the same level as The Lady From Czernowitz, the level of woman at point zero, but to an extent that confirms that White has a heightened sense of the abject and that this, too, informs his satire. Although Hannah recovers sufficiently to lamely insist that 'we only done it for your own good' and that she only took 'a spot of commission', Dubbo abandons Sydney for the suburbs. This is in keeping with his experiences and with White's description of the city.

**Himmelfarb, Sydney, and the Promised Land**

The ironic parody of the Passover and the entry of the Jews into the Promised Land that White effects through Himmelfarb's return journey to Sarsparilla after his rejection by the Rosetrees has been thoroughly elaborated
by Andrew Riemer. However, the satire of Sydney that is co-extensive with this parody has escaped the attention of the White’s critics. This is a vivid, gross, sexualised, and highly exaggerated attack that well demonstrates the force of White’s satiric description and when it is compared to an approximate satire — such as that on Mrs Chalmers-Robinson and her social circle — it illustrates the disparity at the level of attack that is characteristic of White’s technique.

This attack on Sydney is an elaboration and an intensification of the satire that White suggests in his 1958 essay, *The Prodigal Son*. It is consequently highly exaggerated in that Sydney looms as exceedingly filthy, horrific, depraved, threatening, and its inhabitants mindless, but the satiric description is sharply comical and brilliantly funny. The train is easing through the city ‘which knives had sliced open to serve up with all the juices running — red, and green, and purple’. The ‘syrups of the sundaes’ ooze into the streets and the ‘neon syrup’ colours ‘the pools of vomit and the sailor’s piss’. The eyes of the younger, ‘gaberdine’ men are ‘a blinding, blinder blue, when not actually burnt out’. And the ‘blue-haired grannies’ have ‘purpled from their roots of their hair down to the angles of their pants, not from shame, but neon, as their breasts chafed to escape... or else roundly asserted themselves, like chamberpots in concrete’. As for the young women, ‘they were necessary’ as ‘the embodiment of thoughts and melons’ and there are ‘the kiddies, too’ who continue to suck at their slabs of neon, until they had learnt to tell the time, until it was time to mouth other sweets’ (pp. 391-392).

The city is evidently disgusting and its people are suggested to be subject to uncontrollable physical desires (the gaberdine men), or intent on meeting those desires (the ‘necessary’ young women, the embodiments of thoughts and melons), and even its children are depicted as mindless mimics — but White’s target is ‘the Great Australian Emptiness’. He violently attacks these behaviours because they are the effects of the great emptiness that he perceives

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to be at the heart of Australian culture and society. It is White’s anger at this emptiness that not only triggers his attack but also determines its tenor, tone, and intensity. For good measure, he delivers, by way of another genre, song, a further attack upon the city:

“'O city of elastic kisses and retracting dreams! (the psalmist sang);
'O rivers of vomit, O little hills of concupiscence, O immense plains of complacency!
'O great sprawling body, how will you atone, when your soul is a soft peanut with weevils in it?
'O city of der-ree…'

This vulgar if not gross song is the product of sheer satiric exuberance produced by unalloyed anger. White bursts into song, so to speak, not to introduce new satiric criticisms but to encapsulate, reiterate, and re-emphasize those that he has already registered. In addition, he neither interpolates this satiric song as narrator nor does he have it performed by a character, as is the case with Alf Dubbo’s self-parodic song, but it comes out of the ether, as it were — it is, fantastically given its contents, broadcast on ‘the radio’. Yet White is not done with Sydney for as Himmelfarb’s journey continues he writes that

Sodom had been softer, silkier at night than the sea gardens of Sydney. The streets of Nineveh had not clanged with such metal. The waters of Babylon had not sounded sadder than the sea, ending on a crumpled beach, in a scum of French letters. (pp. 391-392)

This excerpt comprises an admixture of spiritual overtones and biblical references as well as the hyperbolic description, irony, and black wit of White’s satire. It illustrates the conflict between White’s moral, spiritual, religious vision and his vulgar, profane but exuberant impulse to satirise. It also forces us to recall that Himmelfarb finds anything but the Promised Land when he visits Harry and Shirl Rosetree. What Himmelfarb finds there is the Great Emptiness and its products — the same vacuous consumerism and
mindless materialism that litters and punctuates his seemingly spiritual rail journey. This then, is no straightforward parody of the Passover but a sustained satire on the city of Sydney. That critics have largely ignored this devastating satire is a function of the preferred, orthodox religious reading of this novel.

The Crucifixion of Himmelfarb

Michael Wilding has severely criticised the episode in which Himmelfarb is ‘crucified’ when his workmates suspend him from a jacaranda tree in the yard of Rosetree’s factory. He writes that Himmelfarb is ‘a victim of a mock crucifixion on Good Friday...by his drunken, anti-Semitic, proletarian workmates’, that this is ‘grotesquely untypical of Australian social reality’, and that White’s ‘paralleled of his eccentric and grotesque episode...with the historically attested killing of six million Jews cannot but suggest that the Australian working-class shared a complicity in the holocaust’. Wilding considers that White ‘portrays the proletariat as murderously and destructively anti-Semitic’, that this ‘owes little to reality’ and much more to White’s ‘patrician fears of the unknown workers’, and that it leads him to ‘disseminate class myths as offensive and divisive and in their social effects evil, as any of the anti-Semitic propaganda of National Socialism’.

This criticism is not factually correct — the mock-crucifixion of Himmelfarb does not occur on Good Friday. The crucifixion follows directly upon the circus parade and the funeral procession that occur on ‘the eve of Good Friday’, quite obviously Thursday, a working day, and not on Good Friday itself (p. 401). This may seem a minor point but it weakens the premise of Wilding’s case against White for it suggests that he was not as out of touch with Australian social reality as the above criticism claims — the mock crucifixion may be untypical of Australian social reality but it is not so

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untypical as to occur on a religious, statutory holiday. There were also a number of anti-Semitic incidents reported in various parts of Australia in the period preceding the publication of *Riders in the Chariot*. White was well aware of these and sufficiently concerned to attend a large protest meeting in Sydney, in January 1960, against the rise of anti-Semitism in Australia\(^{30}\). This demonstrates that White was aware of and deeply engaged with Australian social reality. In addition, it indicates that the mock-crucifixion is socio-historically referential because it enacts — even though it exaggerates — the anti-Semitism of the day.

Professor Wilding describes the crucifixion of Himmelfarb as a mock-crucifixion but he does not see it as mockery, as a deliberate parody of the Christian event. He thus does not recognise that the mock crucifixion is a grotesque parody and, as such, part and parcel of what is a sustained satirical attack upon anti-Semitism. Wilding’s attention is instead drawn to Blue and the ‘Lucky Sevens’, the group of workers from Rosetree’s factory who conduct this crucifixion. These workers burn down Himmelfarb’s house, they cause him to die of a heart attack, and they are ridiculed in no uncertain terms — Blue, their leader, is described as an ‘Antinous of the suburbs’ with ‘beer running from his navel’ (p. 406) — but they are not the ultimate target of White’s satire. That target is the anti-Semitism that White ascribes to them and which he has them enact. The behaviour of these workers is grotesque, outrageous, and exaggerated but necessarily so for they are vehicles for another sustained attack upon the ugly subject of anti-Semitism. These workers do bear a relation to Australian social reality but they are not be taken as representative of it. It is White’s expressed fear that anti-Semitism is hidden in everyone\(^{31}\) that directs this exaggerated and perhaps extreme satire but his treatment is not inappropriate to his target.

It is perhaps all too obvious that Himmelfarb’s ordeal on the Jacaranda tree is a parody of the crucifixion of Jesus — he is hoisted onto a tree and not

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\(^{30}\) In Marr 1994, p. 163. White mentions attending this meeting in a letter dated 20-1-60 to Ben Huebsch and Marr reports these anti-Semitic outbreaks in a footnote to this letter.

\(^{31}\) In Marr 1994, p. 414. White mentions this fear in a letter to Geoffrey Dutton dated 9-6-73.
nailed to a cross, this has been at the instigation of a mob and not by gubernatorial authority, it takes place on the eve of good Friday and not Easter, and he is very shortly cut down and not left for seven days — but it is important to examine this parody as such because it is central to White’s satire, to his subversive enterprise. What is central to the force of this parody is Himmelfarb’s belief in himself as redeemer, as the chosen one who will deliver his people, the Jews, through suffering. This is the ‘good’ idea that Himmelfarb bodies forth into the world, the idea of redemption through suffering, and what finally confronts him in that world is the rank, violent anti-Semitism of Blue and the Lucky Sevens. The suffering entailed in this should provide the redemption that Himmelfarb seeks and so he unresistingly submits because he sees it as the fulfilment of his messianic role.

White represents Himmelfarb on the Jacaranda tree as knowing he has the strength for this role despite ‘all the cursing, and trampling, and laughter, and hoisting, and aching, and distortion’ but he also prays for and continues to expect ‘some sign’ that until now, ‘possibly’, would be given. He appears to receive this sign when he becomes ‘conscious of a stillness and a clarity of pure water, at the centre of which his God was reflected’ (p. 413). However, the role of redeemer is not granted to Himmelfarb: he does not die on his ‘cross’ but is cut down and he leaves the factory in which ‘it had not been accorded to him to expiate the sins of the world’ (p. 469). Himmelfarb survives but he does not survive the night of his ordeal — he dies from a heart attack as Mrs Godbold nurses him in her shed.

White describes Himmelfarb at the point of death in spiritual-holy-religious terms that suggest he is about to transcend the earthly world and enter the world of the spirit. He is again ‘the Man Kadmon, descending from the Tree of Light to take the bride’ who trembles ‘with white, holding the cup in her chapped hands’ as she advances to stand ‘beneath the Chuppah’. They are brought together in ‘the smell of all primordial velvets’. The cousins and the aunts explain this as ‘the Shechinnah, which you have carried all these years under your left breast’. As he receives her, she bends and kisses ‘the wound on
his hand' and 'they were one' (p. 430). These spiritual overtones and religious references suggest Himmelfarb to be moving beyond the material here and now world to a purely spiritual reality but all that he is doing is simply returning in his mind to the certainty and comfort of his earlier life. This description may be appropriate to a man at the point of death but White neither enters nor describes the spiritual world that he rather deceptively suggests the dying man is about to enter. The implication of this is that Himmelfarb is not going to be granted salvation, that his suffering has not redeemed him. The net effect of White's treatment of Himmelfarb's death in this way is to extend his parody of the crucifixion into a parody of the Judeo-Christian tradition itself — Himmelfarb's idea has failed in terms of collective and personal redemption. Redemption may be afforded to believers, or at least understood as being afforded to them, by the suffering of Jesus Christ on the Cross of Calvary, but White offers no such prospect here. It is difficult to reconcile this to the religious readings of this novel provided by such critics as R. F. Brissenden, Dorothy Green, or Peter Beatson. The mock crucifixion of Himmelfarb is a powerful parody in its own right but it is also important because Alf Dubbo witnesses it and then tries to render it in paint. White subjects Dubbo's attempt to render what he has witnessed to burlesque and so he satirically undercuts Dubbo's 'good' idea, the idea of redemption through art.

A 'cereal packet' Chariot, 'Four Living Creatures', a Cruci-fiction, and a Deposition

Alf Dubbo sees an image of all the suffering of the world in the crucifixion of Himmelfarb — all that he had suffered, 'all that he had ever failed to understand, rose to the surface' and, as he watches, 'the colour flowed through the veins of the cold, childhood Christ' so that the meaning of God's willing sacrifice of his son immediately becomes clear to him in terms of the event he is witnessing (p. 412). What Dubbo recognises is the prospect of salvation or redemption; that is, deliverance from the power and the penalty of sin. This
revelation makes a powerful appeal to him since he has, as White’s history of him reveals, been either the victim or the perpetrator of sin almost all his life. Dubbo thus no longer simply embodies the idea of art: in resolving to incorporate his revelation into his Deposition he embodies the idea of redemption through art.

White makes clear the difficulty that confronts Dubbo well before brush is put to canvas. He must convey that which he recognises in the crucified Himmelfarb — what Mark Williams aptly calls ‘the ideal’ of ‘detached, contemplative suffering’ (p. 413). White thus assigns to Dubbo the task of expressing the infinite in the limited medium of paint and in so doing he sets a standard against which the character and his performance may be measured. This practice is central to burlesque and while the setting of this extremely high standard suggests high as opposed to low burlesque, both forms comprise, as David Worcester points out, ‘satire by comparison’. The difference between high and low burlesque is that where low burlesque ‘creates a standard below its victim and makes the reader measure him against that standard’, high burlesque places a standard above the victim so that ‘his shortcomings stand out sharply’. Both forms of burlesque are thus capable of carrying a series of comparisons between ‘the ideal and the real’. These enable a reader to see ‘how a man’s deeds compare with his words’ or ‘how far a would-be hero falls short of true greatness’. Burlesque is consequently ‘a kind of extended simile’ in which the author asks the reader to look ‘upon this picture, and on this’ and then ‘decide for himself whether the mirrored image faithfully reproduces the object’. Pope’s Rape of the Lock (1705) provides a classic example of high burlesque for it imitates the high form and style of the epic genre but applies it to the trivial matter of the theft of a lady’s snippet or curl of hair. Samuel Butler’s Hudibras (1663) provides an example of low burlesque through the adventures of its Puritan knight Sir Hudibras who does not experience the noble deeds or reflect the dignified style of the gallant Knights of the tradition

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32 Mark Williams, 1993, p. 87.  
of the Chivalric Romance but instead, like Don Quixote, experiences the low, mundane and humiliating adventures of the common man, all of which are described, moreover, in doggerel and colloquial idiom.

The key question, then, in respect of White's burlesque upon Dubbo's struggle is one of comparison: how does the Deposition measure up to the standard set for it and its creator, Dubbo? Is it a painting that realises its objective of conveying the ideal of detached, contemplative suffering in particular or the infinite in general? A number of descriptions and observations show that Dubbo falls well short of his task. When his attempt to paint Mrs Godbold as the First Mary takes on the form of a romantic picture he slashes and hacks at the paint 'to humble it' (p. 454). This leaves him 'trembling and sweating' and thinking he 'might not be able to continue' but he resumes his painting by depicting Mary Hare, rather conveniently, as the Second Mary. He is so pleased by 'his version of this Second Servant of our Lord' that 'his vanity is flattered' but, such is his vanity, 'the risk of spoiling' does not prevent him from 'touching and touching, as he wrapped the bristled creature closer and closer in the almost too skilful paint, or visual rendering of wind' (p. 455). This is a moving expression of his love for Mary but the description also suggests that she, ironically, as the object of that love, is in danger of being subsumed in the wrappings and trappings of the medium.

Later, Dubbo adds other details to his painting 'for his own pleasure' or 'from the exigencies of composition'. One of these details are the workers: these are undercut by irony for they are not only 'armed with their rights' but also 'with doubts' and, more comically, with 'oranges'. Dubbo paints Himmelfarb as Christ but he does not realise the ideal of detached, contemplative suffering: White only asserts that this is realised — 'Much was omitted, which, in its absence, conveyed' (pp. 455-456). The same passage mocks Dubbo and his Deposition in other ways: it suggests that as an artist he is depicting his own suffering rather than that of his subject — 'It could have been that the observer himself contributed the hieroglyphs of his own fears' — and that the subject of the picture, Himmelfarb-Christ, is a 'flat, almost
skimped figure' and one, moreover, that is too much an effect of art: the face is a 'divided, canvas face'. Dubbo abandons his depiction of the Himmelfarb-Christ for a sojourn in bed in which he lies 'shivering and whinging' and rather comically 'sucking his finger-joints' (p. 456). He eventually rises to 'restate his conception of the Chariot' but as he transfers 'the effulgence of his spirit' to the canvas there are difficulties: he cheats 'a little' over the Chariot's form 'just as he had not dared to completely realise the body of Christ' (pp. 457-459). His depiction of the Chariot is, moreover, 'shyly offered', a statement that strongly suggests that White wishes to underscore the sense of the difficulties, imperfections, and limitations that he has already conveyed.

Dubbo finally paints the Four Living Creatures — his three fellow elect and himself — sitting facing one another in the Chariot. Here their souls 'were illuminating their bodies, in various colours'. Dubbo, we learn, has painted their hands open in a sign that they had surrendered their sufferings but they had 'not yet received beatitude'. What we do not learn is whether these four elect, these embodiments of ideas and virtue, go. All that White tells us, lamely but comically and pointedly, is that 'they were carried on, along the oblique trajectory, towards the top left corner'. Dubbo's Deposition is finally complete when he signs his name to this last painting and then sinks on to his bed where he dies.

This burlesque of Dubbo's attempt to paint the infinite is clearly a product of White's satirical impulse for, while he experiments with this time-honoured form, what he produces, as Worcester describes it, is satire by comparison, White's purpose is thus inherently subversive and this is confirmed in the way he closes his account of Dubbo's life and work by reverting to modern satire of a notably bitter nature. The artist is found lying on his bed 'twisted round...like some animal, some bird that had experienced the necessity of dying'. There is a good deal of dried blood on his hands and on the pillow 'with the result that he could have been lying in the midst of a papier-mâché joke' (p. 460). When Mrs Noonan, Dubbo's landlady, catches sight of Dubbo's pictures she is 'flabbergasted' and 'laughed or choked behind her
handkerchief’ and when she asks the doctor what he makes of them he glances over his shoulder ‘but only to frown formally. He certainly had no intention of looking’ (p. 461). These responses are to the work of a painter whose Deposition blazes ‘across the sky, or into the eye of the beholder’ but who is going to go unrecognised and unappreciated: Mrs Noonan finds the pictures laughable or sick-making and the doctor refuses to even look at them. Dubbo’s paintings are ‘a source of embarrassment’ to Mrs Noonan and it is their fate to be sent to auction where they fetch ‘a few shillings’ and cause ‘a certain ribaldry’. This is the final, bitter indignity heaped on the life’s work of the man who has died as he has lived — in the midst of nothing more substantial, valuable, or bitter, than a papier-mâché joke. Dubbo, moreover, is to reach no one through his paintings for they disappear and, ‘if not destroyed when they ceased to give the buyers a laugh, have still to be discovered’.

When White assigns the task of rendering the infinite in paint to his Aboriginal artist, he also assigns to him a problem that he himself shares with all creative artists. Dubbo’s struggle to convey the infinite is as much White’s struggle as his own even though they work in different mediums. White can no more describe the infinite in words than Dubbo can depict it in paint because Dubbo’s difficulties and limitations are White’s own difficulties and limitations. White can describe Dubbo’s struggle because it is his own struggle but he cannot convey the infinite, the object of that struggle. His account of Dubbo’s Deposition is thus not only a burlesque upon his character’s struggle to render the infinite in paint but also a parody of his own to describe the same thing in words. This parody is evident in many of the comical asides and observations that White delivers throughout his burlesque but it is perhaps most evident in his funny, ironic, and deliberately ‘lameduck’ explanation for where the Four Living Creatures are actually going — ‘to the top left hand corner’. Dubbo’s struggle is thus enacted in the form of a burlesque that also serves to mock, mimic, and parody White’s similar struggle. That he should parody his own artistic struggle in this way is an expression of his concern about the artist’s role and the reception of art in Australia. This concern
eventually finds its expression in White's ninth and longest novel, *The Vivisector* (1970) but it also underwrites the parody of the artist that he produces in the next novel that concerns this study, *The Eye of the Storm*.

White's satiric treatment of his Aboriginal painter, Alf Dubbo, recalls another artist figure, V. S. Naipaul's B. Wordsworth, the black poet of the streets in his novel *Miguel Street* (1959). Both artists not only die unrecognised but the value and the survival of their art is also severely curtailed. Dubbo's paintings are ridiculed after his death and likely to be destroyed when they cease to give buyers a laugh and, in similar vein, no one is prepared to buy the greatest poem that B. Wordsworth has ever written, not even for four cents. Where Alf Dubbo simply dies and his paintings become objects of dismay and derision before they are destroyed, B. Wordsworth at least leaves the boy who so admires him a remnant of his art — a single line of poetry — and the certain knowledge that an artist once lived in Miguel Street. B. Wordsworth also realizes that his "'is the poet's tragedy'"34, as Satendra Nandan points out35, but Alf Dubbo does not realize that his is the painter's tragedy — he dies unheralded, unknown, and unknowingly. White's treatment of Dubbo, his artist figure, confirms that he shares a burgeoning concern, with Naipaul, in the creation and the reception of art.

**In the End there is no End**

All White's characters in *Riders in the Chariot*, especially the four elect, are locked into circles of futility from which there is no escape. These characters are, with the possible exception of Mrs Godbold, mere instruments of forces they cannot control. They thus appear as figures serving as vehicles for satire as much as characters. Himmelfarb, for example, is driven by his experience of sin to attempt to redeem his people and while this self-sacrifice is of a high moral order and while his consequent suffering on the jacaranda tree

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is horrific, his aspiration to redemption is presumptuous and his attempt to attain it is pathetic rather than memorable: his is truly a cruci-fiction, a parody of the crucifixion.

Those characters who choose to play social roles such as Eleanor Hare, Mrs Chalmers-Robinson, and Shirl Rosetree, are inevitably diminished by them. Other characters are shown to be incapable of controlling various physical impulses and needs. The Reverend Timothy Calderon, Mr Hoggett, and Tom Godbold, minor characters, fall into this category but so too, does Alf Dubbo, an elect character. Dubbo is not personally ridiculed but is presented as a victim of society so that he, like the other three elect, is one of the vehicles of satire by which the author pours scorn on the society that afflicts them. White's satire extends to the socio-historical context: Sydney looms as a city of despair, debauchery and filth, and Sarsparilla as a torpor-producing and soul-destroying suburb. These remain so throughout the novel. Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack complacently continue 'with their lives' in their 'brick box' politely sharing tea and 'soft, blue chenille' (pp. 469-473). Mrs Chalmers-Robinson and her luncheon set — which finally includes such ladies as 'the Satin Bonbon', 'the Crab-shell' and 'the Volcano' — simply continue to continue and then only as comfortably as 'their clothes and ailments' will allow' (p. 480). Mrs Godbold, the only surviving elect character, does not change even though it is given to her to realise that 'all converged finally upon the Risen Christ' — she remains 'a plodding simpleton' (p. 491). There is no change in Sarsparilla after the crucifixion of Himmelfarb and death of Dubbo — Xanadu is levelled but this only brings more of the same in the form of 'the fibro homes' which appear after 'two or three days' and 'the rotary clothes lines' that begin to rise along with 'the Iceland poppies' (p. 486).

White's satire in Riders in the Chariot enacts an extremely despairing view of Australian society rather than a vision of a moral, spiritual, or religious universe. It demonstrates that he is indeed obsessed with pain and loneliness and the inability of human beings ever to know one another or to establish and sustain a satisfying relationship. This is the philosophy of pain and loneliness
that Marjorie Barnard first identified as underlying his first four novels, this is the philosophy that expresses Thomas Woolfe’s conviction, cited in the Introduction to this study (p. 23), that ‘solitariness is the inescapable, central fact of human existence’. This is however, not so much an underlying philosophy in *Riders in the Chariot* as one borne and produced, sometimes extravagantly, by White’s satire. Satire voices White’s philosophy and this makes *Riders in the Chariot* fundamentally important to the development of his oeuvre.

What White’s satire in *Riders in the Chariot* does not do is propose the solution that Barnard found in the earlier novels to the bleak assessment of the human condition that his philosophy reflects. His philosophy is not resolved in this novel because his satire does not — nor can it — propose such a resolution. We may be given ineffable moments and we may catch glimpses of the eternal but there are no personal revelations, no apotheoses, and no positive gains in *Riders in the Chariot*. This novel’s focus upon religion and painting, which replicates the earlier novels’ accent upon religion, music and poetry, neither alleviates the central problem of man’s earthbound loneliness nor does it propose art and religion to be the paths that the soul may take out of its solitary condition. White’s satire mocks religion and religious belief in Himmelfarb’s ludicrous attempt to become redeemer of his people and through its parody of the crucifixion and it mocks art and the idea of redemption through art by way of its burlesque of Dubbo’s Deposition. This satire and the philosophy that it produces mark the end of White’s adherence to the idea of a better future through education. White abandons the idea of teaching us more about ourselves and our history so that he emerges as a committed satirist in this novel, as a subversive critic concerned with the human foibles, faults, and failings as well as the problems and issues of this world rather than the possibilities of the future or those of another world.

White’s satire is the product of the anger that ensues from his intense critical engagement with what he saw as the problems and issues besetting contemporary Australian society and culture. Since these problems and issues
provokes different levels of anger, his satire may be mild and controlled or uneven, unfair, exaggerated and downright offensive, and it tends to vary greatly in terms of tenor and tone. But because this anger is itself the product of his engagement with Australian culture and society, his satire is, to a variable degree, socio-historically referential. The criticism that is implicit in this satire is therefore valid even if it is exaggerated. This does not mean that his satire is necessarily intended to serve curative or corrective purposes. Indeed, the role played by anger in White's satire and the volatility that it produces, suggests that White writes his satire to relieve, as Greenblatt puts it, the pressure in his breast. A further consequence of the role played by anger in producing White's satire is that his attacks are sometimes disproportionate to their targets, that there is sometimes a disjunction between what we might expect and what he delivers, and that considerable disparity typically exists between the targets of his attacks.

White's chief strategy is to embody a 'good' idea in each of his elect and then send them out to confront a more or less vulgar, base, degenerate, violent, bigoted, material world. This strategy enables him to satirically attack this vulgarity, baseness, and so on, as his anger directs him, or simply as he sees fit, but it also produces the division between the elect and the mass that makes for the kind of 'too schematic' novel that critics such as Macfarlane have complained about. A further consequence of this strategy is that it produces four novellas within the novel but this composition, in turn, adds to the novel's medley quality, to the sheer creative exuberance that ensures that it adds up to more than the sum of its parts.

I do not dispute the criticism that points out that this novel is at times unfair, exaggerated, gross, or downright offensive, but I point out that these critics do not seem to be aware that what confronts them is satire and so they make their judgements as if White were writing in a purely narrative literal mode. They consequently apprehend and consider these qualities free of their literary context. Nevertheless, this adverse criticism invites the consideration of two ethical questions associated with satire. Are all subjects fit for satire?
and, if so, to what extent may the satirist exaggerate the problem? The short answer is that any subject is fit for satire and that the satirist may treat his subject as exaggeratedly as he likes. Satire depends upon freedom of choice in terms of subject material and manner of treatment and more generally on freedom of expression — it cannot and should not be governed, except by its own nature. The only exception is if slanderous or libellous satire is directed towards an actual person. This is rarely the case in prose fiction as White’s satire of Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack demonstrates. His attack on these two ordinary women in the comfort of their suburban home is exaggerated and unfair but they do not resemble any identifiable person. They are figures that represent a social class and are thus abstractions. White as a satirist has as much right to attack these or any other individuals or classes as any conceivable ‘Mrs Jolley’ or ‘Mrs Flack’ have a right to enter into a state of torpor in the material comfort of their suburban home. The issue is not whether or not or to what the extent his satire is unfair or offensive but whether or not it is energetic and entertaining, witty and intelligent, funny and comical. Satire need not serve curative or corrective purposes but it may, as in the case of White’s attack on Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack, serve to draw the attention of some readers to the potentially adverse effects that complacent consumerism and the materialism of suburbia may have on individuals. If it does so well and good, but this is not the satirist’s purpose — whether or not satire beneficially draws a reader’s attention to any problem or issue is a function of readership not of authorship.

*Riders in the Chariot* is composed of an extraordinary mixture of tones, attitudes, points of view, of high and low aspirations, of characters who would be divine and of characters who are all too human. White further sets the seal, as it were, on his evident disregard for the decorum of consistency by mixing modern and classical Menippean satire with comedy, parody, and high burlesque. This admixture, this medley of ingredients, produces an exuberance of satire and its related forms so that this novel conforms to the pattern of the lanx satura of antiquity — it is a very full dish. Although White writes his next
two novels, *The Solid Mandala* (1966) and *The Vivisector* (1970), in largely narrative mode, this medley quality re-emerges with renewed force in *The Eye of the Storm* (1973). That it should do so with a different mix of ingredients indicates the importance of *Riders in the Chariot* to White’s *oeuvre*: this novel marks the emergence of his mature, subversive, and essentially protean style for dealing with what he perceives to be the contradictions, conflicts, and chaos of his time.

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Chapter Three

Parody and Satire, Art and Artifice
in *The Eye of the Storm*

The two novels that immediately follow *Riders in the Chariot* explore, in narrative mode, subjects and themes that were of considerable personal and professional interest to Patrick White, particularly as a repatriate writer. *The Solid Mandala* (1966) considers sibling, familial, and social relations, and *The Vivisector* (1970) the relation of a great painter, as an artist, to society. These subjects and themes suggest White to be an increasingly self-reflective novelist, one who draws on his own life experience for his art but who is also concerned with that art, with his relation to it, particularly his role in its production, and with his and its relation to the society and culture from which it is drawn.

White revisits these subjects and themes in *The Eye of the Storm* but he treats them altogether differently by resuming his satire in this novel. This satire still works through the narrative as it did in *Riders in the Chariot* but it reflects new qualities and it assumes new forms. This return to satire exemplifies the extraordinary mutability that is characteristic of White’s writing, the *oeuvre*-extensive mutability that the dominant critical approaches to his novels tend to overlook. This chapter focuses upon the satire itself to demonstrate that it is diverse, multi-targeted, artistically self-reflective and consequently much more complex and sophisticated than the satire of the earlier novels. Moreover, as a turn within a return, so to speak, it further exemplifies the mutability I have referred to.

White’s satire in *The Eye of the Storm* is complex in that it is intricately bound up with and indeed derives from the various parodies that he has his
characters enact. He produces what may be described as parodic satire that consists of two basic types — literary parodic satire and theatrical parodic satire — while at the same time he also produces non-parodic satire. These forms are mutually reinforcing although the parodic forms play the dominant role. White’s use of parody is unconventional in that his targets are not an art form, a genre, or a particular text. The targets of the satire that these enacted parodies produce are manifold. They consist of White’s characters as representatives of social types and classes but also his own recourse to the texts that inform these parodies, his characters’ understanding of the texts they enact, and his reader-critic’s understanding of the literary allusions entailed in these parodies. White’s satire thus emanates from the web of assumptions and associations that his parodies invite. His deft melding of parody and satire in a novel of such proportions and wide-ranging thematic concerns as *The Eye of the Storm* not only suggests that he is experimenting with his subversive method but also that his attitude and consequently his approach to his writing is undergoing radical change.

White’s use of parody has not completely eluded critical attention. Veronica Brady, for example, identifies Dorothy Hunter’s undoing of her brother Sir Basil’s buttons and her uprooting of his penis as ‘an obscene parody of the unbuttoning of Lear’. She goes on to observe that this is intended to emphasize the ‘absurdity’ of the comparison between Shakespeare’s Lear and White’s Sir Basil but she does not elaborate the implications of her observation1. The invited comparison Brady refers to is inherently self-conscious and self-critical to the extent that it suggests White is reflecting upon his own activity, that he has adopted a meta-fictional position in relation to it that enables him to consider the processes and the problems involved in both the production and reception of art. This chapter contends that White disposes such parodies so as to invite the absurd comparison Brady mentions but that he does so in order to play with and indeed mock his readership in general and his academic readership in particular. White produces parodies that invite these all too obvious and absurd comparisons as if he is setting a trap for his critics. Brady’s response suggests as

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much — she is led to make the comparison to Lear but because she realises it is absurd she does not pursue the matter, she does not elaborate the implications of this parody. The novel thus subversively enacts the reception of art by imbricating its own readers in what it sets up as a flawed process. This chapter elaborates such parodies to demonstrate that White writes parody for manifold satiric purposes and that one of his chief weapons is the kind of referential incongruity that Brady’s own observation implies.

The objects of attack for White’s parodic satire are the human foibles, faults, and failings involved in both the production and the reception of art, particularly literary art. White opens up some of the processes and problems associated with the creation of fictional worlds, especially the tendency of art to subsume the life of artists, for their art to become their life; the tendency of readers to conflate art with life, reading the unreal, art, as if it provided a mirror image of the real, life; and the tendency of critics not to pursue that which is distasteful, absurd, ambiguous, hypercritical, or otherwise objectionable to them. These representations remind us of the contrivance and artifice of art and of its capacity to subsume life so that this novel, among other things, enacts, mimics, mocks, parodies, and satirises that of which it is composed, art itself. What this constitutes is an inward turn — White’s art in this novel turns in upon art itself to expose, as it were, the problems and processes associated with its own production and reception — and it is in respect of this turn that The Eye of the Storm becomes of fundamental importance to our understanding of the development of White’s subversive writing and consequently of his oeuvre.

This inward turn is important because it demonstrates that White’s satire is not static but experimental, exploratory, and evolutionary. While this further exemplifies the mutability that characterises White’s work, this mutability in turn suggests that he is the kind of satirist described by Dustin Griffin as ‘a figure struggling for notice in a particular kind of socio-political context’². White’s satire changes because his perception of this context changes — his

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struggle consists of his response to the changing socio-cultural and socio-political conditions of the period. The context to which this novel primarily responds is that context of Australian literary culture in which aspects of White's preceding novels were sometimes severely criticised but more generally lavishly praised, sometimes in terms of 'The Great Australian Novel'. *The Eye of the Storm* is in part White's response to the critical reception of his earlier work for, while it addresses such subjects as the city of Sydney and such commonly explored themes as sibling, familial, and social relations, and the relation of an artist to society, it is, among other things, a subversive novel about Australian literary art, its production and its reception.

This response constitutes an inward turn that produces a great efflorescence of literary satire, allusiveness and play in *The Eye of the Storm*. The turn allows White to exercise his wit and intelligence by drawing upon his wide reading of literature and upon a theatrical vision born of the love of performance and of theatre that produced his early satirical play scripts for the English stage and such episodes as the funeral procession, the circus parade, and Himmelfarb's crucifixion in *Riders in the Chariot*. His satire is, consequently, more complex but less declamatory and vituperative than it is in the earlier novel. His subversive writing, and the novel itself, is more playful but no less pointed in its attacks. This chapter will also demonstrate that the inwards turn to parodic satire that White effects in *The Eye of the Storm* is also important because it encompasses some major changes in his aesthetic and philosophic positions.

These aesthetic and philosophic changes are interrelated and will be elaborated at the end of this chapter but, in summary, the inwards turn and the mimicry, mockery, parody, and satire of which it is composed can be seen to devalue art — here White's art, even though it demonstrates its capacity to represent itself and to imply truth, deliberately reveals its own defects, weaknesses and failings — and so it can hardly be said to conform to the norms of beauty or of good taste. White's opening up of art to this kind of scrutiny suggests the diminution if not the abandonment of any pretence to an art of traditional formal aesthetics. This abandonment effectively rejects the claim that
White’s art is simply art for art’s sake because, although the subject of *The Eye of the Storm* is art, White’s art in this novel is a self-mocking art of excess, of exposure, of play, and of subversion. This devaluation is the product of a significant weakening of White’s faith in art, particularly his commitment to the idea of redemption through art, and as such it represents a significant change in his philosophy.

This chapter will exemplify both the conventional non-parodic as well as the parodic satire I have referred to. It will demonstrate, as a measure of the complex change that White effects in his satire in this novel, that both forms are character-borne and that most of these characters, although they predominately serve to produce literary parodic or theatrical parodic satire, also produce non-parodic satire. This chapter, however, pays rather more attention to these variant literary parodic and theatrical parodic forms because of the greater extent to which they inhabit this novel. It will discuss these parodic satires in terms of their effects, showing that this satire enables White to attack more than one target simultaneously. It will demonstrate that White, in developing these parodies, is not only playing with art, his own activity, but also with his readers and more particularly with his critics. It will demonstrate that these effects are the products of White’s realisation of his theatrical vision in this novel. It will show that this vision is essentially subversive, that Sir Basil is the embodiment of this vision, and that he serves to break down literary art’s pretence to reality, because he is, as an actor, a well of artfulness, artifice, and contrivance within an apparently realistic art form. In addition, this chapter recognises that Basil is an obvious analogue for White as the repatriate scion of a wealthy pastoral family and an acclaimed artist. It argues that Basil, as an analogue who also embodies and enacts artifice and contrivance in his author’s novel, serves to raise the question of White’s role in the production of his literary art. White’s novel contains and indeed embraces Basil’s artifice and contrivance and so he serves to expose his author’s artfulness, suggesting that White participates in art’s big lie,

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its pretence to re-present reality. Basil and his performances are thus central to the inwards turn that White takes in this novel.

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Since *The Eye of the Storm* is a long, complex novel, it is worth recalling its basic structure. The novel revolves around a plot that seems deceptively simple: the aged but still beautiful, still wealthy, and still commanding Elizabeth Hunter lies dying in her Sydney mansion. There she receives twenty four hour care from her three nurses, Sisters Mary de Santis, Flora Manhood, and Mrs Badgery, and is doted upon by her housekeeper, Lotte Lippman, and her solicitor, Arnold Wyburd. Such is the force of Elizabeth Hunter’s personality she still commands the admiration and respect of all these attendants but her two children, Basil and Dorothy, are rather grudging in their respect for their mother when they return from Europe to share her last few days. They both exhibit much more interest in the preservation of her estate than in her health or happiness. The stories of the Hunter family and those of Elizabeth’s attendants unfold in a series of flashbacks. These family members and attendants are the principal characters in a domestic drama and, although they operate within the confines of a well-tried plot involving the division of a kingdom or estate — as the novel acknowledges in its references to *King Lear* and to John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* — they exceed the conventional bounds for characters in this type of drama. These are not discrete, rounded characters enclosed within conventional roles: they also play extramural roles in which they refer to, mimic, parody, satirise, and represent a range of social types, behaviour, and phenomena beyond their apparent narrative or dramatic selves and, consequently, beyond the novel. The keynote to this novel is that nothing and no-one are simply as they first seem. Such leading characters as Sir Basil, Dorothy, and Elizabeth Hunter often seem like characters from a novel or a play but we also soon discover that they are more than they first appear, they are always more than the sum of their dramatic parts.
‘St Mary de Kleenex’, ‘the white-robed priestess’, and ‘Sister Flora Pudenda’, ‘a most unregenerate non-nun’

White heaps a great deal of ridicule on Sister Mary de Santis and Sister Flora Manhood. Sister Mary initially takes the job of nursing Elizabeth Hunter because she recognises that she was ‘also a soul’ — like her dying father whom she previously nursed— ‘about to leave the body it had worn, and already able to emancipate itself so completely from human emotions it became at times as redemptive as water, as clear as morning light’ (p. 154). There is an essential goodness in Mary that confirms Elizabeth Hunter’s description of her as St Mary. The characters generally confirm Mary’s saintly virtues but there is some irony in their remarks: Elizabeth describes her as ‘too pure’ (p. 162), Flora observes that ‘St Mary should never set foot on earth’ (p. 320), Basil describes her as a ‘pale nun’ (p. 344), and Sister Badgery remarks that ‘she had the smooth, washed look of some of the more simple-minded nuns’ (p. 582).

Yet Mary is not as pure or as saintly as these observations would have it. She is committed to assisting Elizabeth realise her spiritual aspirations while at the same time she herself engages in some worldly behaviour that reflects her rather earthly desires. Her view of love is appropriate to her selfless image — ‘love is a kind of supernatural state to which I must give myself entirely, and be used up, particularly my imperfections — till I am nothing’ (p. 157) but she is still ‘weak, sensual enough, to crave intermittently for the luxury and refreshment of physical beauty’ (p. 160).

This worldliness emerges rather comically during the lunch she shares with Sir Basil Hunter at Watson’s Bay. Mary plays to the crowd, raising her voice to ‘the level of the occasion’ to ask Sir Basil about his ‘favourite part’. White has her mock the saintliness that Elizabeth Hunter has conferred on her thus, in a sense, regaining control of his character. She emerges as a ridiculous *faux* sophisticate — pronouncing part as “port” — who, when Sir Basil declares “‘There’s Lear’”, makes her reply —“Oh yes — Lear!” — sound ‘warm and
bright' as if 'Lear might have been a cousin she hadn't met for years'. Mary also admits, in a voice 'too high for a contralto, and aggressive', that she has 'never seen it'. And when a businessman falls through the seat of his 'rickety chair', Mary, despite being 'appalled by the unlikelihood of her own behaviour', laughs uproariously and wonders 'whether she should feel sorry for the purple man flopping around and scratching his wreckage against the concrete' (pp. 336-338). The comic element in this satire on saintliness almost completely disappears when we learn of the extent of the physical attraction that Basil exerts over Mary.

Mary accuses herself 'of her own fall from grace' and considers that this 'had begun with the arrival of Mrs Hunter's son':

She would scarcely have believed she had given way to lust, if she had not found as proof, those tears in her clothes, scratches in her flesh; there were times when her breasts, becoming snouted, were still pointed at her, when all desire for this man was dead. She would have liked to substitute pity, which is one aspect of pure love. But between Basil and her soul's eye, hovered the face of her pitiful father. Whom she had desired to love in some way never made clear to her during her lifetime, only recently in the line of Basil Hunter's jaw, the veins in his temples, the bones of a silken ankle. Her whole vocation of selflessness was threatened if she offered this man her pity, grown as it was on decomposed lust. (p. 339)

White's satire takes a sharp, dark turn here for what this meditation reveals is that Mary's desire to love was originally incestuous: she cannot offer her pity — which she understands as 'one aspect of pure love' — to Basil because she realises it has grown on the now decomposed lust she once felt for her father. This invites us to recall the circumstances of her father's death: Mary 'had obeyed his wishes to the extent of breaking her vows' during the final stages of his life when he would 'beg her for the needle' (p. 154). It seems 'St Mary' has either mercifully killed her father or murdered him depending on one's point of view. The nature of Basil's attraction for Mary suggests that she murdered her father for Mary sees her father in Basil — 'It was Papa: an elderly, distinguished, but weak man, asking for love and understanding' (p. 327) — and
aspects of his physical presence such as 'the veins in his temple' resonate with her so that Mary's despatch of her father may be seen as a brutal attempt to suppress her desire for him.

Mary de Santis is clearly much more worldly and more subject to earthly desires than Elizabeth Hunter's humorous description of her as 'St Mary de Kleenex' implies (p. 190). White seems to have his characters create Mary in a way that backlights his dark, parodic satire of her as a selfless, saintly nurse. The murder of her father deeply undercuts the good, saintly Mary. This Mary, through her apparent saintliness, invites us to recall another, earlier exceedingly 'good' character, Mrs Godbold of Riders in the Chariot, while at the same time the earthly, desiring, perhaps murderous Mary behind her veil of virtue pointedly mocks her. It is very difficult in the context of this tangled web of dark, notably irreligious satire to conceive of White as a religious novelist.

Elizabeth Hunter's other young nurse, Flora Manhood, serves as a vehicle for both non-parodic and parodic satire. She appears to Dorothy Hunter to be 'too young, too radiant' and 'smiling out of bland lips' on which are pasted 'a delicately aggressive pink suggesting ointment rather than lipstick' (p. 77). Her Perspex earrings 'cunningly' gyrate as she stands in her 'pretence' of a dress 'swinging her orange plastic handbag' (p. 78). There is little of substance behind Flora's gaudy exterior: Col Pardoe, her boyfriend, makes her 'feel empty' and so does 'knowing what Noamurra means' along with 'the paperbacks' and 'the records' (p. 110). Music only causes Flora 'to think of other things' and she believes she has little to offer Col 'except her body, and her unborn children'. Flora has lost her Catholic faith (p. 530) and Elizabeth archly but comically describes her as Flora Pudenda (p. 190). This is conventional non-parodic social satire — Flora satirises the social stereotype that she represents, the sexually active but vacuous modern girl produced by material and godless popular culture. Flora is a younger version of Mrs Jolley and Mrs Flack: she is, like them, a product of material culture.

Flora also serves to deliver a more complex parodic satire of religious worship. Despite all her faults and flaws, she entertains her own spiritual
aspirations (p. 116), she gains a sense of the state of transcendence that Elizabeth Hunter and Mary de Santis seem to reflect (p. 427), and she retains a measure of religious sensibility that is evident in the persistence of the language and imagery of her Catholic childhood (p. 110, p. 531). These remnants of religious sensibility make it possible for Flora to become one of the most important ‘members of the order’ of Elizabeth Hunter (p. 115). Flora parodies the devotee or sacristan by becoming ‘the white-robed priestess’ (p. 114), the cosmetician who makes up Elizabeth and who attends a course ‘in the upkeep of wigs’, who becomes the ‘guardian of the wigs’ (p. 116) and, finally, the ‘custodian of the sacred image’ (p. 521). Flora ‘reverently’ fits Elizabeth in her lilac wig and so typically assists in her ‘resurrection’ (p. 116), but when she prepares her for the last time she does not resurrect Elizabeth as the goddess of life as she expects but transforms her cosmetically into a false, painted idol. Flora dusts and pastes on ‘the shimmering greens of all fiends’ so that ‘the idol’s brutal mouth would scarcely overflow after she had contained its crimson with a thick wall of black’. Flora also adds a green wig with ‘lifeless hair’ that had previously been rejected by Elizabeth because it didn’t ‘come off’ (p. 522). She garbs and adorns her mistress, reducing her to this grotesque figure, so that when Elizabeth dies, on this same night, she does so ensconced on her ridiculous ‘throne’, her commode, ludicrously costumed in this most bizarre fashion.

Flora, by presenting Elizabeth in this way, serves to mock Elizabeth as her mistress, White’s *faux* Queen Lear, but also her own ‘worshipful’ activity in the order of Elizabeth. In addition, she participates in the mockery of religious worship that White produces through his Queen — although Elizabeth’s soul appears about to undertake a journey towards infinitude or eternity, she not only sits bedecked, bejewelled, and becalmed on her ‘throne’ but her decrepit and wildly ornamented body remains, pathetically and ridiculously looking back, as Mark Williams points out, towards earthly life\(^4\). Flora plays the active and Elizabeth the passive role in this parodic satire of religious worship and the sacred more generally.

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There is another skein in the tangled web of satire with which White composes the relationship between Elizabeth and Flora. The satire of religious worship that these two characters serve to enact invites us to again recall White’s earlier novels, particularly the religion with which they are variously imbued and which he declared, in 1969, to be ‘behind all my books’\(^5\). Where this invitation exemplifies the meta-fictional posture that White tends to adopt in this novel, the satire of religious worship that extends it, in being contrary to White’s earlier use of religion, suggests that he is also using Flora, and Elizabeth again, to play with the expectations of his too earnest, religiously-minded critics. It is part of the complexity of White’s satire that these characters thus not only mock religious worship in this novel but also the religion with which the earlier novels appear to be imbued while at the same time this mockery in turn calls into question the conception of White as a religious writer. This satire thus ultimately mocks White’s religious critics.

**Elizabeth Hunter and Queen Lear**

This section focuses upon the various subversive functions served by Elizabeth in *The Eye of the Storm*. It considers, in terms of its satiric ramifications, the rather obvious parody of *King Lear* that White has Elizabeth enact throughout the novel. It pays particular attention to the epiphany granted to Elizabeth during the storm on Brumby Island in light of White’s subsequent representation of her. This section demonstrates that Elizabeth effectively learns nothing from her epiphany, certainly nothing that White shows her capable or willing to put into practice, so that finally she serves to subvert the epiphany that is granted to her. This section consequently argues that this is a false epiphany because it proves useless to Elizabeth. This is an epiphany that is designed for White’s readers, one that invites recognition but one that they elicit and indeed construct. It is therefore an epiphany that White uses in order to play with and

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mock his more earnest reader-critics, the kind of reader-critics who acclaimed other, earlier epiphanies — such as Stan's Parker's apparent discovery of the immanence of God in a gob of spittle — in their determination to demonstrate White to be a great spiritual, religious, transcendental or otherwise metaphysical writer. This section also draws out the satiric ramifications of the parody of White in his role as artist-creator that he has Elizabeth enact when she 'creates', to a greater or lesser extent, the other major characters in this novel according to the whims of her imagination or the dictates of her self-conception. Elizabeth serves to mimic, parody, and satirise White's own creative role, in the process becoming a self-parodical, meta-fictional vehicle that calls attention to the processes and problems involved in the creation of fictional worlds. This section draws out these parodic satires as a measure of the playfulness and complexity as well as the mutability that characterises White's subversive writing. These subversive functions are interrelated but it is convenient to consider them separately.

White's use of *King Lear* as a parody text is most obvious in the parallels that he effects between Shakespeare's king and Elizabeth Hunter: he consistently depicts Elizabeth as a monarch running her household as if it were a Royal Court with various attendants and a court jester, he describes her as an 'ancient queen' (p. 184), he depicts Elizabeth anointing herself and moulding her hair into a crown like 'a queen adorned for her triumph' (p. 405) and he subjects her to the force of the storm on Brumby Island, like Lear exposed to the tempest on the heath, referring to her as a 'Queen Lear' who has suffered 'the highest pitch of awfulness' during her experience (p. 409). These parallels are quite obvious but the discrepancy upon which parody also depends is rather less obvious.

White produces this discrepancy by ingeniously involving Elizabeth in a life-threatening storm that he presents as an intensely spiritual, illuminating experience, one altogether different in this respect from that to which Shakespeare subjects Lear. The discrepant force of this parody thus derives from White's moral/spiritual/religious vision: where Lear rages against the
storm and never gains a sense of his own responsibility as his declaration "I am a man/More sinned against than sinning"⁶, Elizabeth reflects upon her life and examines her conscience with a degree of objectivity not previously available to her. She not only admits to herself that she may be 'responsible for the worst in people' (p. 408) but humbly submits when the storm returns with renewed violence:

She lay and submitted to someone to whom she had never been introduced. Somebody is always tinkering with something. It is the linesman testing for the highest pitch of awfulness the human spirit can endure.

Elizabeth not only learns humility during her experience but also that she is alone and yet not alone, that she is not a completely individual, independent, free subject:

She only positively believed in what she saw and was and what she was too real too diverse composed of everyone she had known and lived and not always altogether loved it is better than nothing and given birth to and for God's sake. (pp. 308-309)

Elizabeth thus gains a heightened awareness of her own vulnerability and of her relation to the world around her from her exposure and submission to the storm. This is the key element in what Annegret Maack aptly calls her 'experience of a reduction to her quintessential self'⁷. In this process the self is stripped, as Elizabeth recalls in one of her waking dreams, 'of its human imperfections' (p. 29). The extent of this reduction to her 'quintessential self' is evident in her illumination:

she was no longer a body, least of all a woman: the myth of her womanhood had been exploded by the storm. She was instead a being, or more likely a

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flaw at the centre of this jewel of light: the jewel itself, blinding and tremulous at the same time, existed, flaw and all, only by grace; for the storm was still visibly spinning and boiling at a distance, in columns of cloud, its walls hung with vaporous balconies, continually shifted and distorted. (p. 409)

Elizabeth, in being drained of her passions, imperfections and even ego, is reduced to a self that is beyond gender and matter; that is, to a core of spiritual being. This is a cataclysmic reduction that exceeds and thus parodies the reduction undergone by Lear. The storm strips and reduces Lear to the extent that he asks "'Is man no more than this?'" (3. 4. 96-97) and declares, as he tears his clothes off, "thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art./ Off, off, you lendings!'" (3. 4. 100-102), but it does not reduce him to a quintessential self that equates to a state of spiritual being. Lear is not illuminated: he remains a madman disposed to tyranny. We may think of his imprecation against the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany whom he wrongly considers to be the instigators behind the treachery of his daughters: "'And when I have stol'n upon these sons-in-law, Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!"' (4.5.182-183). White produces the discrepancy parody requires, by reducing his Queen Lear, Elizabeth, to the sublime, to her quintessential self, the opposite of Shakespeare's raging madman.

White produces further discrepancy by going on to portray Elizabeth — in contrast to Lear — as being granted a vision:

She did not feel she could endure further trial by what is referred to as nature, still less by that unnaturally swollen, not to say diseased conscience which had taken over during the night from her defector will. She would lie down rather, and accept to become part of the shambles she saw on looking behind her: no worse than any she had caused in life in her relationships with human beings. In fact, to be received into the sand along with the other deliquescent flesh, strewn horsehair, knotted iron, the broken chassis of an upturned car, and last echoes of a hamstrung piano, is the most natural conclusion. (p. 410)
Andrew Riemer describes this vision as a 'general sense of illumination' or 'ecstasy in the strict sense of the term' and observes that for Elizabeth it becomes 'an annihilation of the self' and 'yet, because her conscience is newly born (as we have seen), the self undergoes a rebirth, one in terms of its connections with the past, and everything that has entered into the past'. This is, as Riemer suggests, a magnificent vision, one that connects Elizabeth's rebirth and her renewal to the past through her newborn conscience. Her experience of the storm on the island thus expands her moral universe: she learns, unlike King Lear, of her own responsibility for the worst in other people, of the need for humility, of her inseparable relation to the universe around her, and she learns to accept life in all its components. Her experience is transcendent, as she herself describes it (p. 186), and transformative in a way that suggests that what she learns from it will not only enable her to surmount the vagaries and chaos of life, to accept her role in that life, and ultimately to affirm life, but will make her a more understanding, tolerant, and complete human being.

This, however, simply does not happen for, despite her illumination, her ecstasy, and what should have been a transformative experience, White presents Elizabeth Hunter throughout the balance of the text as a cruel, prideful, and self-centred woman who retains and exercises power over people in a way that is far from benevolent. Elizabeth, by acting in this manner continues to parody King Lear — even though she is no tyrannical madwoman — but in doing so she also serves to subvert the illumination that is granted to her. Lear, in other words, is consistent with his experience, while Elizabeth is not consistent with her experience. White's presentation of Elizabeth in this way reveals that his purposes are satiric rather than parodic. He draws a number of parallels and discrepancies between Elizabeth and King Lear so as to have her enact a parody of the latter but the object of attack is not King Lear or Shakespeare's text. Elizabeth does not serve to mimic and mock Lear — White presents her as a domestic tyrant who runs her household as if it were a Royal court and she a

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8 Andrew Riemer, 'The Eye of the Needle: Patrick White's Recent Novels', Southerly, vol 34 no 1, 1974, p. 257.
monarch but he has her do so in order to have her mock and satirise herself as a socio-cultural type, as a matriarch of the pastoralist upper middle class.

White also plays an archly subtle joke on his reader-critics when he presents Elizabeth Hunter as Queen Lear. Because the parallels between Elizabeth and Lear are obvious — at times the novel bespeaks them — but the discrepancies less obvious, readers are invited to recognise what appears to be a straightforward but insistent parody of King Lear. The joke arises because readers are led to accept comparability between an historical 12th century feudal King and a ‘faux’ 20th century suburban Queen when it is, upon reflection, patently absurd. The play is that this absurdity masks White’s satire because it deters his reader-critics from considering the satirical ramifications of his rather obvious and absurd parody. The novel thus seems to enact and indeed mock the tendency of White’s critics to overlook his satire. White thus mocks his critics in advance for overlooking his satire, in this instance, for overlooking the parodic satire of the social type that Elizabeth Hunter represents. Elizabeth is an exaggerated version of the wealthy, self-indulgent socialite figure perennially satirised in White’s fiction. This figure too, seems to owe a great deal to Ruth, White’s socialite mother. It is indicative of the increasing complexity of White’s subversions in this novel that he ascribes this additional subversive role to a woman whom he casts as Queen Lear. Yet this is not the limit of the satire that White mounts through Elizabeth: her post-epiphany self-centredness, pride, cruelty, and faux regal behaviour, especially in the mundane context of her suburban household, deeply undercuts the pretentiousness and the portentousness of the epiphany that White ascribes to her on Brumby Island.

Elizabeth, the ‘ravaged queen’, as creator

This section shows how Elizabeth Hunter mimics and parodies her author’s creative activity and thus serves as an analogue for White. White accords extraordinary power to Elizabeth over her family and attendants. The exercise of this power reinforces Elizabeth’s presence in the novel as Queen Lear.
Dorothy Hunter, for example, recalls that Mother ‘had quelled rebellious maids with tears, so that they stayed on worse enslaved than ever’ (p. 414) and that she is ‘one of those who generates in their slaves the flattery they’re hungry for’ (p. 449). Such views are not limited to Dorothy: Flora Manhood, one of Elizabeth’s nurses, considers that she has a ‘gift for scenting weakness in others’ and that she could ‘laugh in your face and tear your intentions to shreds’ (p. 533).

Part of this power may be attributed to Elizabeth’s wealth and beauty, and to her status as matriarch, but it directly derives from her ability to perceive the strengths and weaknesses of other people and her willingness to forthrightly express them. These perceptions are acute and have a ring of truth about them so that the people around her accept her conceptions of them. Flora, for example, accepts Elizabeth’s harshly reductive view of her as a ‘breeder’ (p. 430) when she declares that Elizabeth “understood me better than anybody ever. I only always didn’t like what she dug up out of me...I am nothing”’ (p. 554). Elizabeth’s practice of exposing people to their ‘real’ selves inevitably changes their attitudes and behaviours and in this sense she creates or invents the people around her.

Elizabeth Hunter creates both Flora Manhood and Mary de Santis in terms of her own self-conception; that is, as the two poles of the opposition that she recognises in her own personality. Mary de Santis represents her aspiring soul and Flora Manhood her sexualised physicality. It is a measure of Elizabeth’s power that both of these women, to a variable degree, fit themselves to the roles she ascribes to them. It is White who pointedly names Mary de Santis and describes her as ‘the votary of life’ who is aware of ‘the many others she must save for it’ in the flashback that details the tragic history of her family as refugees in Australia (p. 154), but it is Elizabeth who effectively calls her into being as ‘St Mary’. Elizabeth casts Mary in the role of saint directly by declaration and indirectly by eliciting her virtuous qualities in response to her own frank revelations. Elizabeth, at their first meeting, creates in Mary the desire ‘to believe’ simply through her ‘studied earnestness’ (p. 155), later she creates a sense of exaltation in Mary when she cries in her hands (p. 157), and
later again she creates the ‘desperate need to worship’ (p. 162). Elizabeth tells Mary that she is ‘too pure...to follow fashion’ (p. 162), that she ‘wouldn’t want to expose someone of your worth and dedication... to a flawed character like mine’ (p. 165), and declares that ‘you are religious’ (p. 165).

Similarly, Elizabeth creates Flora Manhood as the ‘animal presence’ (p. 82) in the novel and in the mind of readers. Elizabeth’s creation is justified by Flora’s bearing when she enters the narrative — she stands ‘legs apart, thighs radiating light and strength’ (p. 77-78) — and by her sensual appetites — she likes ‘rich, yummy food; sleep, cosmetics; making love; not making love’ (p. 81) but Elizabeth constructs her nurse beyond anything that could be considered normal animal presence: during a ‘rub’, she ‘encounters’ Flora’s throat and decides to feel it so that ‘for a moment her hands had contained this strong vessel of flesh and muscle, inside which, it seemed, the whole of life was palpitating’ (p. 81). Flora is not unaware of the implications of this: she pretends to be ‘embarrassed; but that didn’t deceive’. Elizabeth also decides Flora smells of sexuality and likens it to ‘a doe after she’s been to the buck’ (p. 84) and demands of her ‘“isn’t it our instinct to love — or try to? Surely you must understand that? By instinct!”’ (p. 102). Elizabeth also takes pleasure in Flora as a breeder because she is permanently ‘in season’ (p. 515). It is in these ways that Elizabeth creates Flora as the other pole of her being — as the naturally sensual and fertile lover that she herself once was.

Elizabeth thus exercises the power to create in manifold but perverse ways. She even, by her own admission, invents her children: ‘“But I made them into mine. That is what they resent”’ (p. 511). The behaviour of Dorothy and Basil during Elizabeth’s last days shows just how perversely successful she has been in this regard: on many occasions the figure of Elizabeth enters the consciousness of Basil and Dorothy as an irresistible presence that causes both of them appear as if they are still dependent children. Elizabeth, for example, bursts into Dorothy’s consciousness as soon as it appears that she is going to recall her experience of the cyclone on Brumby Island. Dorothy, who had fled the island in jealous pique over what she perceived to be her mother’s
impending seduction of Edvard Pehl, is completely consumed by this presence and is, consequently, shown to be still in awe of her mother:

Mother was daring you not to have known. She was standing at the head of the stairs, one arm outstretched, pointing, in a dress of blinding white such as had suited her best: cold and perfect in its way. And now a mere daughter, in spite of trial by marriage, the exorcism of doubts, and arrival at perhaps a few mature conclusions, was frightened to the edge of panic by whatever revelation this vision of earthly authority might be threatening her with. (p. 70)

Elizabeth also springs to Basil’s consciousness with great facility as he is being driven across Sydney:

So he was determined to relax and enjoy this whizzing vision of a city which had grown out of his childhood recollections: of a Pitt Street peopled only by acquaintances, all of them converging on the Civil Service stores. Though he had played no active part in his city’s transformation, though he had rejected it in fact, he accepted some of the credit for it. He had to share his recovered self-respect with this self-important metropolis. However, late in the piece, he offered his love to its plate glass and neo-brutal towers; at the heart of it, his old mother. He would forget the horror of the lilac wig, the deliquescent flesh: these dismissed, he could love the whole idea of mothers, as of Sydney. (Recall the horrors later if you are short on ruthlessness.) (pp. 244-245)

Basil’s dismissal of his mother in terms of his own actor’s conceit is not only cynical but also palpably infantile. It is, however, also measure of his inadequacy as man: he, and Dorothy, are deeply flawed in this way as adults because their development has been continually constrained by Elizabeth’s negative conception of them. During both her pregnancies Elizabeth thinks of Dorothy and Basil as ‘barbs he (her husband) had planted in her womb’ (p. 34). Her children also appear to Elizabeth in a dream to be ‘jostling, elbowing, fighting each other to be the first out of the womb’ (p. 416) and later as if they “‘wanted to be twins’” (p. 511). Elizabeth tells her nurse on this occasion that she could “‘hear them calling from inside me — blaming me because I prevented them from loving each other’”. These dreams suggest that Elizabeth
encouraged her children to compete for her attention and love and, as a consequence, set them against each other. During the storm on Brumby Island it also occurs to Elizabeth that Basil, instead of milk, ‘must have drawn off the pus from everything begrudged withheld to fester inside the breast he was cruelly offered’ (p. 408). These horrible thoughts and dreams constitute a satirical attack upon Elizabeth, deeply undercutting her, but as a mother-creator rather than as a socialite. The harsh terms of this attack indicate that it is essentially misogynistic and this in turn suggests that White, as a homosexual, may harbour some resentment or bitterness in regard to his own rather constrained real life role as creator even if that constraint is a consequence of his sexual preference.

Elizabeth Hunter creates her two children and her two nurses in a way that plays a major role in producing their constitutive, characteristic behaviour but she also sanctions these figures as characters by making their often ridiculous behaviour narratively feasible. Elizabeth thus mimics and parodies her author’s creative activity. This constitutes her other subversive role: she operates as a kind of default author, an analogue for White, the creator and ‘actual’ author of her and all the other characters. It is thus through Elizabeth that White as the omnipotent author is able to mount an ironic pretence at self-emulation. This ironic pretence satirically undercuts White in his role as author-creator while at the same time it holds up a mirror to fiction that sheds light on the problems and processes of creating fictional worlds and the related problem of the reception of texts by the reader. In so doing it suggests a change in the nature of White’s concerns from the epistemological concerns of modernism to the ontological concerns of the post-modernism. White’s ‘handing over’ of his creative authority to one of his own characters is an expression, an enactment, of his burgeoning ontological concerns. The two contrasting and almost mutually exclusive images of Elizabeth Hunter that White presents us with — that of an intelligent and beautiful illuminate and that of a cruel and blinkered mother — are so disparate that they not only invite us to consider which of them is ‘true’ but also whether or not our perception of them is ‘valid’ and whether or not or to what extent the images are contingent upon each other. The questioning of ‘the
text' in this way from within 'the text' is a further expression of White's ontological concerns for it raises the question of his role in the creation of this ambivalent text.

**Dorothy Hunter, 'notre petite Australienne' (p. 53)**

White's knowledge of literature produces a veritable host of references and signposts of varying levels of parodic allusiveness that extend the frame of reference and the meaning of his novel while at the same time they shatter its pretense, as fiction, to reality by drawing our attention to the artifice and contrivance of art. This host of references and signposts extends from page 15 where there is an echo of John Donne's line 'No Man is an iland, intire of it selfe...' to page 585 where there is a reference to Dante Alighieri that appears to connect literature and life. In between, there are numerous references to *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Richard the Second*, and *Cymbeline*; to other plays such as Henry de Montherlant's *The Master of Santiago*, William Wycherly's *The Country Wife*, and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, and to Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*. Many of these references are brief, singular, and incidental — as when Sir Basil alludes to Webster's play by describing himself as a Bosola — but those to Shakespeare's *King Lear* and to Stendhal's novel and are extensive, recurrent, and episodic. These works are particularly important because *The Eye of the Storm* does not simply allude to them but offers more or less comprehensive parodies of aspects of them from which emanates a great deal of pointed literary satire. Dorothy Hunter is one of the vehicles for this parodic literary satire.

Dorothy follows a line of literary descent from White's 'Madame' Rapallo of *The Aunt's Story*, a woman 'put together painfully, rashly, ritually, crimson

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10 *Riders In The Chariot* incorporates 113 discrete, more or less complex literary references, allusions, or signposts.
over purple\textsuperscript{11} to the other socialite figures already considered here, Mrs Bonner and Mrs Pringle of \textit{Voss}, Thelma Forsdyke of \textit{The Tree of Man} and Mrs Chalmers-Robinson of \textit{Riders in the Chariot}. Dorothy exceeds these figures for White depicts her as a Princesse much given to ‘her faithful old Chanel’ (p. 46), to her ‘precious \textit{Chartreuse de Parme}’, to her ‘classic Pinet shoes’ (p. 262) and, after the ‘ghastliness’ (p. 453) of her experience in Australia, ‘the perennial \textit{veuve}, the discreetly expensive Frenchwoman’ (p. 500) who looks forward to resuming ‘Odilon Redon’, a ‘bottle of ‘Chassagne-Montrachet’ (p. 569), and a ‘new Balenciaga habit’ (p. 570). In a pointed reference to Joseph Furphy’s \textit{Such is Life}, Dorothy is not only ‘our little Australian’\textsuperscript{12} but also the culminating figure in White’s long line of socialite figures. That White casts Dorothy as an ‘actual’ Princesse, even if by marriage, is appropriate — and deeply ironic — given that he casts her mother, Elizabeth, as a \textit{faux} Queen.

Dorothy, as the Princesse de Lascabanes, embraces, enacts, and epitomises the Euro-centric aspirations of the Australian socialite but, because these are revealed to comprise nothing more than a thin veneer of sophistication, she serves to satirise this figure as a social type and, by extension, the Australian upper middle class that she represents. We may set Dorothy’s various resentments against her high cultural preferences and her air of sophistication to elaborate this. Dorothy resents, for example, the attention her mother attracts from ‘several elderly Frenchman’ (p. 65), her mother’s experience of the eye of the cyclone because her own experience of this was incomparably ‘paltry’ (pp. 70-71), she clearly resents having to love a mother whom she considers to be ‘a jewelled scabbard in which a sword was hidden, which would clatter out …to slash off your ears’ (p. 71), and she resents ‘the unnatural bronze attitude’ imposed on her father, ‘the most grotesque idea mother ever conceived!’ (p. 466). Dorothy fulfils her most obvious subversive function in being the prime vehicle for this well-tried, rather conventional social satire.

\textsuperscript{12} Joseph Furphy, \textit{Such is Life}, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1969 Reprint, p. 180.
Dorothy is centrally involved in the parody of Stendhal’s *Charterhouse of Parma* that this novel enacts so that she also serves as the prime vehicle for the satire that emanates from that literary parody. Dorothy experiences an adult life made arid by a childless, loveless and despairing marriage. Her response is to turn her back on the reality of this life by immersing herself in the fictional world of literature to the extent that she often feels she only exists ‘in the novels of Balzac and Stendhal and Flaubert’ (p. 53) and that she knows the *Charterhouse of Parma* ‘too well’ (p. 208). Stendhal’s romantic novel not only provides Dorothy, as Anne McCulloch points out, ‘with a world of intelligence and sensibility into which she can escape’ but also engenders such identification that this, her ‘precious’ novel, also enters the fantasy world of her dreams. This retreat into literary unreality not only underscores the satire of the social type Dorothy’s represents but it also enables White to engage Dorothy in a number of darker, more pointed subversions.

White has Dorothy experience a kind of ‘literary’ dream on the first night of her and Basil’s revisiting of Kudgeri, their childhood home. She first assumes the persona of her mother — ‘under the sheets she crossed her still estimable legs, an involuntary legacy from Elizabeth Hunter, and thought of how she would enslave others’ (p. 467) — and then ‘her Sanseverina wandered after the deeper velvet’:

Love which has been imprisoned a lifetime in this tower which is also incidentally a body can only be the purest noblest occurring with a delicacy Stendhal cannot realize till Fabrizio breaks open his bronze and there is the knuckle with this one ugly scab oh Basil Bas ber Bazzurl *tu es le seul a me comprendre*. (p. 468)

The reference to Sanseverina is to the Duchess of Sanseverina, Fabrizio’s aunt, a beautiful, sensuous, and sexually active woman in Stendhal’s 19th century romantic novel. Dorothy’s dream suggests Basil to be the object of her own sexual fantasy but this is not precisely the case. White seems to be engaging in

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some rather arch play with these references for we need to remember that Dorothy first assumes the persona of her mother then that of Sanseverina: Basil therefore is the object of the sexual fantasy of Dorothy as her mother as the Duchess of Sanseverina. White confirms when he writes 'Dorothy Sanseverina woke' before he tells us that she is 'relieved Basil continued sleeping' because she could not have explained such an exquisitely elusive pleasure to her brother, or any of the others who came to mind: that monument to her father; the disgusting man with shirt open to his navel; less perhaps to Mrs Macrory; least of all to a vengeful Elizabeth Hunter, whose bed it was.

The reason Dorothy cannot explain the pleasure she derives from her fantasy is not because it is outrageous because incestuous but because it is essentially and embarrassingly perverse. As a daughter who thoroughly resents her mother, it is Dorothy’s pleasure to experience the sexual ecstasy the passage describes — it reads as if she reaches orgasm — not as herself but as her mother whom she becomes/represents through her adoption of the role of Sanseverina.

Dorothy, in this role, exceeds and thus parodies the relationship between the Duchess Sanseverina and Fabrizio in Stendhal’s novel: the Duchess — who is, to Dorothy’s dismay, as lovely, intelligent, and unscrupulous as Elizabeth Hunter (p. 218) — is the patron but not the lover of Fabrizio. She desires Fabrizio but she does not have actual sex with him even though she harbours, as Margaret Shaw succinctly puts it, ‘a more than lawful passion for her nephew’. Dorothy — who knows The Charterhouse of Parma too well — in acting her part in accordance with her own ‘actual’ desires instead of the text also seems to enact a ‘misreading’ of the novel and thus serves to draw attention to the uncertainty of meaning, to the possibilities of other, alternative meanings, interpretations, and readings. She thus serves to ironically imitate the reception of art from within art. This seems to be confirmed when it occurs to Dorothy in

the morning that Fabrizio — not the Duchess — ‘is a character she saw differently at successive readings’ and one ‘who offered the greatest difficulties because substantially affected by the climate of waking’ (p. 469). The complexity of this literary play, the diverse purposes to which White puts Dorothy, suggests that he is not only playfully and mockingly engaging with his source material but also with his readership.

Dorothy later ‘escapes’ into the study with her father’s copy of *The Charterhouse of Parma* and there makes an ‘extra effort to concentrate upon her book’ as if she has, as I have suggested, previously misread the novel (p. 482). The first line Dorothy encounters is ‘*She did not want Count Mosca to see her talking to Fabrizio*’ which causes her to reflect that it is ‘Unfortunate that the English language should transform a great work of French Literature into a mock-Italian novelette’. There is satire in this observation — Dorothy is undercut for a certain literary snobbishness — and a pointed irony that further satirises her — the English language translation reduces the novel to some extent but it does not reduce it to the stature of an Italian novelette, let alone a mock Italian novelette, for it retains its epic sweep, its historical *gravitas*, its romance, and its profound emotional insights. It is, moreover, Dorothy herself who reduces the novel by way of her incestuous dream, it is Dorothy who serves to transform, reduce, and thus satirise the ‘great work of French Literature’. Dorothy also mocks herself as a social type through her behaviour while at the same time she also serves to draw our attention to the problem of the reception of texts by readers, particularly the problem of how some readers not only interpret but also enact their lives in response to fictional models.

As if this satire is not complex and dark enough, White engages in further subversive play with his readers and with Dorothy when he has her have ‘actual’ sex with her brother Basil in their parent’s former bed at Kudgeri (p. 508). White plays with his readers by denying their expectations — to have Dorothy realise her dream even though it involves incest is to deny the expectations of the vast majority of readers for whom the prohibition on incest constitutes an important normative family value. Dorothy, however, does not serve to satirise
Australian family life generally. Dorothy is a member of the pastoralist upper middle class Hunter family who has sex with her brother in their parents' former bed, she has sex with her brother on location so to speak, and so she satirises this privileged social class. However, what must be noted is that because Dorothy does not participate in this sex with her brother as the Duchess of Sanseverina as her mother or as her mother per se, but as herself, the former Dorothy Hunter but now the ultimate socialite figure in her incarnation as the Princesse de Lascabanes, further satirises, most darkly and pointedly, the Australian socialite figure.

White’s writing exhibits a particular scorn for Dorothy that seems driven by a notable antipathy towards the class she represents. Dorothy not only springs from the same class from which White himself sprang but the course of her life as White represents it broadly follows that of his own sister, Suzanne, that of his mother, Ruth, and even, in some respects, that of White himself. All three Whites, in a sense, abandoned Australia by spending long periods in Europe in which they absorbed its culture. Only Patrick White ever permanently returned to Australia. In these circumstances, it seems reasonable to see the origins of White’s antipathy in the history of his family. This history charts the decline of a great pastoral dynasty — White’s father sells his share in the family properties to become a racehorse owner, he never works again and dies at a relatively young age, White’s mother leaves Australia for London where she adopts an expensive lifestyle, Suzanne’s husband dies young from illness and she is later killed in a car accident, White’s relationship with his partner Manoly Lascaris is homosexual and therefore he cannot produce offspring from it, and all the family properties fall into other hands. The genesis of this satire is thus White’s sense of his family’s decline but this does not mean that he or his satire of the Hunter family laments the decline of the White family or the class they represent. There is simply far too much familial and self-criticism embedded in White’s satire to suggest this — Elizabeth and Dorothy are mocked mercilessly, Basil, as well as Dorothy, is involved in incest and, as we shall see, Basil consistently looms as a gifted actor but an exceedingly ridiculous man. White’s
satire of the Hunter family thus does not serve to lament the decline of his family as individuals or the decline of the privileged class they represent. Rather, it is a satire on the causes of that decline: it mocks that family and that class for their ineptitude, indolence, and for what *The Eye of the Storm* suggests to be their descent into decadence and irrelevance. It is as much this metaphoric storm, this descent into decadence and irrelevance, as opposed to the ‘actual’ storm on Brumby Island that the title of the novel refers to. This too, is an example of White’s love of literary play.

**Lotte Lippman, ‘a serious person and a satirist’**

Lotte Lippman, Elizabeth Hunter’s cook, is one of the two characters, along with Sir Basil Hunter, who is a particularly artful product of White’s love of theatre and performance. She, again with Sir Basil, delivers the theatrical parodic satire I have referred to, illustrating the crucially enabling role that White’s theatrical vision plays in the subversive work of *The Eye of the Storm*. Lotte, at an elemental level, parodies *King Lear* by serving as ‘fool’ in the ‘court’ that is Elizabeth’s, Queen Lear’s, household. She knows and speaks the truth in the manner of all Shakespearean fools, and sometimes enacts it, mimicking and parodying Lear’s fool. Lotte points out to Sir Basil, for example, that his mother ‘understands more of the truth than most others’ (p. 146), to Mr Wyburd that ‘Mrs Hunter has her ways of knowing’ (p. 267), and she identifies Basil and Dorothy Hunter as murderers before anyone else (p. 433). Lotte, as the knowing fool, serves to satirically undercut her listeners, in the traditional Shakespearean manner, for their unknowingness. Whether or not this constitutes theatrical or literary parodic satire is a matter of perspective but, since, as we shall see, all the satire that emanates from Lotte is contingent upon performance, it seems the former is more appropriate.

Lotte is not only a cook and a fool but also a performer, a soubrette who once performed song and dance routines in Berlin cabaret and who continues to perform these for Elizabeth Hunter. White ridicules Lotte and these
performances, adding further layers of complexity to the satire that she serves to produce. She is ‘foreign and out of running’ (p. 321), ‘a golliwog moneybox on a mantelpiece’ (p. 429), her cane wobbles ‘for the human being in her’ and when she performs her routines, her face is split by ‘a patent leather smile, the more deathly for clenched jawbones and one or two gaps somewhere earwards’, and her voice ‘unfurls like a raucous favour from way back around the uvula...out of the gaps and the gold in her crimson slot of a mouth’ (p. 428). White also has Lotte mock herself — she tells Sir Basil, a fellow performer, that she was “‘never more than a compelled firework’” who “‘fizzed — bang — and went out’” until “‘at the end I hardly fizzed. My firework was a sodden one’” (p.142). These satiric descriptions of Lotte and her performances heighten our sense of her as a court fool, but, because her song and dance routines are performed in an extremely bizarre fashion and are incongruent through having been transposed across time and hemispheres, she also serves to satirise her art.

Lotte’s performances, despite her and their apparent faults and failings, have profound effects on Elizabeth Hunter. This adds further complexity to the web of satire that issues from Lotte. Her first routine resonates to the extent it produces another epiphany for Elizabeth — she sees in her mind’s eye an image of herself as ‘light slithering off the long legs, men’s eyes not to be detached from the stockings’ and she imagines everyone joining in until ‘there at the apex stood Elizabeth Hunter’ tall and supple, ‘flinging her offerings’ of ‘white petals’ ‘over the men’s smarmed heads and those of their jealous tight-permed women’ to ‘a storm of applause’. Elizabeth takes this as a sign that she will shortly make her re-entrance into the ‘eye’ of the storm that she experienced on Brumby Island fifteen years earlier: ‘I have only to learn to re-enter and I shall be accepted’ (pp. 430-431). Lotte’s second routine does prepare Elizabeth for this re-entry in that causes her to relive all the suffering of her life — ‘the lashing, the slashes, and near murder’. It becomes a ‘ceremony of exorcism’ that leads Elizabeth to accept all the vagaries and vicissitudes of her life and to believe that she will be shown ‘the inconceivable something’ she has ‘always’ been looking for. This inconceivable something appears to be granted:
Now that her other self had been released from their lover’s attempts to express tenderness in terms of flesh (no less touching, tragic even, for being clumsy and impotent) their movements became more fluid. They were dancing amongst what must have been trees the light at first audibly flickering between trunks or was it trains roaring rushing you towards incurable illness old age death corruption no it was the dying away you must be hearing through moss-padded doors a bird’s glistening call then the gulls scraping colour out of the sky.

What this suggests is that Elizabeth is about to re-enter the “endlessness” that she first experienced during the storm on Brumby Island and to which she continued to aspire as a mode of transcendence beyond death. We cannot be certain that this is granted — her last words are “don’t oh Don’t my dark birds of light let us rather — enfold. Till I am no longer filling the void with this mock substance: myself is this endlessness’ — but we can be certain that it is Lotte who has got Elizabeth to the point where it seems she has at last achieved transcendence (pp. 527-532). It is no mean feat.

The effects that Lotte’s routines have on Elizabeth are profound but wildly exaggerated. This invites us to consider Lotte’s performances more closely to determine what it is they consist of and what purposes they ultimately serve. These effects are produced by Lotte’s singing rather than her dancing — Elizabeth cannot see her dancing because she is near blind — but Lotte sings nonsense songs about how the world is comprised of a ‘circus of trained monkeys’ and of schools that teach ‘nonsense’ (p. 429). Anne McCulloch rightly points out that Lotte mocks all that is absurd and ridiculous in life because she is able, ‘in having been drawn so close to death in her own life, to see more clearly the absurdities of existence’15. This is one of Lotte’s more fundamental subversive functions. Lotte however, sings in her native German — a language unknown to those present, Mrs Cush, Flora Manhood and Elizabeth, and to the vast majority of White’s readers — so that she does not simply serve as a vehicle for a satire upon the absurdity of the world or, for that

15 McCulloch, p. 132.
matter, as a vehicle for a parodic satire of her own activity as a soubrette. Lotte sings in a language that is unintelligible to her ‘audience’ and thus her singing in German is ironic and she serves to mock her audience, primarily Elizabeth for demanding that she perform dances that she cannot see and songs she cannot understand. At another level, Lotte, by singing in a language that is also generally unintelligible to White’s readers, enacts the non-understanding of art, in this case White’s own subversive art, so from the standpoint of White as author, Lotte’s performances can be seen to be self-reflexive and self-parodic. White is playing with and mocking his readers in that the novel contains material — songs and dances — that they cannot understand. In addition, by having the novel contain this unintelligible material, White makes his novel mock itself. It is through the figure of Lotte the soubrette that White is able to adopt a meta-fictional posture towards art, thus to use her to cast light on the reception of art from within art but also to satirise art from within art. This is her ultimate subversive function.

After the death of Elizabeth, Lotte follows her beloved mistress to her grave by suiciding in her bath. White engages in some further, rather dark play with his readers by infusing what is a literal account of her suicide with some alluring symbolism. This seems designed to seduce his too earnest or too religiously minded readers into believing that Lotte has somehow gained or been granted illumination in death. One of the critics who falls into this trap on the basis of this symbolic content is Veronica Brady who sees Lotte’s suicide as ‘paradoxically’ registering ‘the end of her nihilism’ because ‘she dies in love, not in hatred or fear’\(^\text{16}\). Brady’s justification for this is her conception of the dying Lotte ‘offering roses, to those others pressed always more suffocatingly close around her’ (p. 588). Brady’s interpretation of this image is difficult to sustain for this is not an allusion to the symbolic roses of love, forgiveness, and redemption, but an ironic metaphor for the spreading circlets of blood that are issuing into the bathwater from Lotte’s wrists: she has cut ‘each knot of veins with care’.

\(^{16}\) Brady, p. 68.
Lotte is made to work very hard as a subversive figure but White delights in her. It is a sign of his delight that he finally ameliorates her tragedy by suggesting how we should understand her life and death, how much seriousness we should attach to it, by writing that the pulses in her wrists 'were winking at her'. He thus figures her death in a playful way for as the author of this he is almost certainly winking at his more earnest, religiously minded reader-critics.

White creates in Lotte a tragic but wonderfully eccentric, comical, hugely energised, and highly theatrical cook-fool-soubrette who, through her performances, undercuts her official role as cook, offers a parody of King Lear, reduces her employer's household to the level of cabaret, sheds light on the reception of subversive art, and causes the novel to mock itself. These performances occur within and are constitutive of the novel but disturb it by generating an atmosphere and indeed a sense of theatrical unreality, thus undermining its pretence, as a work of fiction, to reality. It is small wonder that White describes Lotte as 'a serious person and a satirist' (p. 526). These are all functions of White's theatrical vision, his sense of theatre, of all not being what it seems.

Sir Basil Hunter: 'an ageing man and a precariously insted actor' (p. 472)

Patrick White's love of theatre and performance and his theatrical vision are even more evident in the figure of Sir Basil, his Shakespearean actor. The delight he takes in describing Sir Basil's return to his mother's sickbed is almost palpable. There is 'the crackle of excitement in the hall', Sister Manhood and Elizabeth Hunter are threatened 'by an imminence', and when Mr Wyburd announces Sir Basil he is not only nervous but also frightened until 'what was inevitable, for everybody, happened: Sir Basil Hunter entered'. Basil hesitates when he catches sight of his mother in her wheelchair — as if 'he had found an understudy waiting on the spot where his leading lady should have been' — but this is only for 'the tick of a second' because he realizes, as an actor, that 'your performance is what matters; curse the management only after the curtain calls'.
His entrance is sealed by his dramatic, practiced art: when he exclaims "'Darling — what a homecoming!'" — Sister Manhood thrills 'to the riches in the voice' and his mother recovers 'her technique, her rings reaching up to clutch at her lover, his shoulder if she could get there, as soon as he arrived at her side' (pp. 117-118). Although White describes this scene in comic, dramatic, and theatrical terms, confirming his love of theatre and performance, his voice is insistently ironic, mocking Basil and all the other characters in this scene as the 'actors'. White's theatrical vision is essentially subversive.

This is soon confirmed when Elizabeth's bedside becomes a 'theatre of reunion' and Basil its leading man (p. 120). White presents Basil as a capable actor but mocks him for being one who performs off as well as on stage. His theatrical vision, however, not only informs the action that unfolds in this theatre but it also enables White to treat a rather vexing if not tragic subject — old age — comically. Basil the great actor successfully disguises the shock of finding 'the Lilac Fairy standing in as his rehearsed-for mother' while his right knee, which is 'having one of its bad spells', reminds him that, in throwing himself 'at her feet', he was 'now paying the penalty for giving too much too soon'. He considers however, that 'he owed it to her — to them' and so continues to perform as dutiful son: he kisses his mother's hand despite it looming as 'the claw'. He next notices 'out of the corner of his eye' that the nurse is 'quite a dish' but, before he gets up, in a delicious irony, he winces 'for his age'. Basil notices 'the audience hadn't noticed; at least the nurse hadn't: she was too much like a rapturous youth at her first play'. We learn in the jargon of stagecraft that Basil moves 'towards left centre' and thus momentarily cedes the spotlight to his mother who asks "'Why are you limping? Isn't your health in order?'" Basil not only shrugs this off as "'nothing — a twinge'" because it impinges upon his vanity but because it is 'not in the script'. This bedside theatre of reunion does not consist of pure comedy but rather comedy with an overlay of satire. Basil, in being an actor who not only translates scripted experience into art on a stage but also one who responds to his life-world as if he were in a play and as if it were a stage, serves to mimic, mock,
and satirise the art of acting, the activity of the conventional actor, while at the
same time he serves to mock and satirise himself for conflating his art with his
life.

White's theatrical vision casts Sir Basil as an acclaimed actor who has not
only 'excelled as Macbeth' (p. 123) but also as one who can 'ferret out the last
refinement of lust in a Bosola' (p. 126). Basil is well aware of his abilities for
he considers, seemingly unaware of the irony, that he "made Guildenstern a
real presence" (p. 128). Basil however, despite or because of his theatrical
achievements, is ruled by an obsession to have 'another go at Lear', to produce
'Hunter's monolithic, weather- and emotion-haunted king' (p. 228). White's
theatrical vision is most subversively productive in respect of this obsession.

Basil's obsession with Lear is, as Anne McCulloch points out,
'synonymous with his obsession to emulate or "be" his mother'17. One of the
reasons for Basil wanting to emulate or be his mother is because he sees her as
"an incredibly beautiful woman" and he sees himself 'as a youth deriving from
this radiance' (p. 240). Another is that Basil, as an actor, wants to be able to see
'clearly, right down to the root of the matter' as he once did 'before his
perception had retired behind a legerdemain of technique' and he believes his
mother has this kind of ability: she can see 'by flashes of lightning' and it occurs
to him that she has perhaps 'inherited a lost art' (p. 264). Basil is convinced that
'if he could return upstairs and winkle experience out of the blind eyes and half-
gelled responses of the Lilac Oracle', his mother, he 'might eventually present
the Lear who had so far evaded almost everybody' (p. 123). When he later tells
Flora Manhood that he doesn't think Lear 'can be played by an actor — only by
a gnarled authentic man, as much a storm tossed tree as flesh' (p. 339) — he
suggests that what he needs from his mother is experience in order to overcome
his own lack of it; in other words, his own lack of authenticity. Elizabeth
Hunter, as her experience of the storm on Brumby Island demonstrates, is very
much akin to the storm tossed tree that Basil prescribes. Basil clearly wants to
be his mother, not only for professional but also for aesthetic reasons, and thus

17 McCulloch, p. 135.
he appears as a pale shadow, a mockery of a son and man. This mockery contributes to White's satire of upper middle class family life.

Basil is one of the prime vehicles, with his sister, Dorothy, for this familial satire. In a comical but pointed irony, he is unable to have sex with his theatrical colleague Janie Carson in Bangkok because of 'his limpness' (p. 138), but he is able to have sex with his sister, Dorothy, even though he considers her to be 'a shrew' (p. 478) and 'a solemn bore' (p. 480). This satire on family life becomes rather more deliciously or grotesquely dark — it depends on one's point of view — when we learn that it is just before Basil has sex with Dorothy at Kudgeri that he first recognizes her as beautiful — 'She looked beautiful, he thought; almost not his sister' (p. 479). He does not, however, recognize his sister as a beauty in her own right but because of her striking resemblance to their mother (p. 503). It seems doubly incestuous and darkly subversive that Basil should have sex with his sister because she resembles his mother. Basil, in emerging here as a very poor brother, son, and man, serves to mock these male categories as integral parts of family life. The novel anticipates this mockery when it reveals, early on, that Basil has not done well in two other male categories, those of husband and father. We learn that the rather comically named Len Bottomley is not only the man his former wife took as 'her stud' but that he is also the father of Imogen, whom Basil believes to be his daughter (p. 133).

It is because Basil stands at the very centre of Patrick White's theatrical vision that other satires, some theatrical parodic, some conventional non-parodic, swirl around him. Basil is not only an accomplished and acclaimed Shakespearean actor, a man of sophistication and culture, but also an expatriate Australian recently returned to his homeland. White, however, engages Basil in a great deal of ridiculous and gross behaviour despite his sophistication and his achievements and so he serves to satirize the repatriate Australian man of culture. Basil, besides having sex with his sister, 'gorges' himself on prawns in the Botanic Gardens because he considers that he is 'illustrious enough and foreign enough to make a pig of himself in public' (p. 262). On the trip to
Kudgeri, he so ‘stuffs’ his mouth with a ‘greasy’ meat pie that the gravy trickles down his chin and he reminds Dorothy, rather comically, of a ‘boyish, slightly sweaty commercial traveller in a train’ (p. 452). At Kudgeri, Basil gropes Dorothy in the kitchen before he tucks into a ‘mountainous’ plateful of ‘primitive’ food, ‘devouring with particular appetite the charred fat around the edges of the chops and those bits of fried up veg which had stuck to the pan’ (pp. 471-472).

White also has Basil engage in various gross behaviours despite his status as man of high culture while at the same time he shows him to be received and celebrated, both privately and publicly, as a prodigal son. Dorothy, for example, considers him ‘a genius’ (p. 63) and a ‘cultivated man’ with ‘Shakespeare in his pocket’ (p. 504); Flora Manhood knows Sir Basil ‘from the legend of his career’ and is ‘dazzled’ by his ‘aura of charm and brilliantine’ (p. 118); and Mr Wyburd observes that “‘You actors — of intellectual integrity, must find it immensely rewarding — to immerse yourself in the great classical roles’” (p. 125). Basil’s public reception culminates in his being interviewed by two icons of Australian culture, the ABC and the Sydney Morning Herald, on the same day (p. 244). Basil elicits from these Australians and their institutions the kind of extravagant, essentially sycophantic reception that invokes the (in)famous Australian ‘cultural cringe’ identified by A. A. Phillips and thus he serves to satirise this aspect of Australian culture.

The extent to which Basil is consumed by his art, by his tendency to perform, and the implications of these performances, emerge very clearly when he revisits, during his stay at his family’s former property at Kudgeri, the dam in which he caught yabbies as a boy. At the dam, White initially depicts the here and now world, the world of Basil’s childhood memories, as recommending itself to him: he wants to ‘feel the mud between his toes’ and so takes his shoes off in preparation for entering the dam (p. 475). However, when he notices his ‘soft, white feet’, White has Basil’s other world, the world of Shakespearean theatre, immediately supervene. A rather obvious parody of King Lear ensues in which Basil appears to engage on his own journey to Dover — it occurs to
him that his feet are 'useless, except to stride imagined miles around a stage; incapable of trudging the actual miles to Dover' and that perhaps 'this was why he had failed to play Lear'. As he trudges across the hard baked clay to the edge of the dam, the pain in his feet becomes intense but the relief offered to him by the mud of the dam is palpable: it is 'softer than soft', the kind of mud of which 'flesh is never so kind, nor as voluptuous' and to which 'certain phrases, lines, can become its equal when delivered by a practiced tongue into darkness on a propitious night'.

Basil clearly believes this to be a propitious night — even though he is firmly located in 'the Australian daylight' — for he is moved to deliver a Shakespearean speech. Ever the actor, Basil conjures up the 'ritual dark' he needs in his mind:

'In such a night,
Stood Dido with willow in her hand
Upon the wild seahanks, and waw'd her love
To come again to Carthage...'

Veronica Brady has described Basil at this point as 'posturing as Lear on the heath' and takes the scene to be 'the crowning absurdity' of his 'illusion of himself as Lear'. Brady's interpretation is sound insofar as Basil mimics Lear's behaviour on the heath but she does not elaborate the intricate web of satire that his patently absurd posturing produces. The speech White has Basil deliver is not even from King Lear. As a Shakespearean actor and one who has 'had a go' at Lear, Basil would know this and he would know that the lines he chooses to speak are those spoken by a minor character, Lorenzo, to his lover, Jessica, near the end of The Comical History of The Merchant of Venice. This 'posturing' in the mud of the dam and these 'inappropriate' lines thus do not so much parody Lear or King Lear but satirise Basil as the great repatriate Australian Shakespearean actor. Basil the would-be Lear mocks, parodies, and

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satirises himself and his aspirations — real and theatrical — by standing, a ludicrous and forlorn figure, in the mud of the dam in the bright, broad Australian daylight, reciting the inappropriate lines of a minor character from Shakespeare’s *The Comical History of The Merchant of Venice* to no-one at all.

These lines, however, can only be considered inappropriate if one accepts the invitation extended early on in this episode, to recognise the parody of Lear that Basil enacts. White’s use of these ‘inappropriate’ lines concerning the love of Lorenzo and Jessica is ingenious but deceptive in a way that suggests that he is again playing with and mocking his readers. Because these lines are clearly Shakespearean and spoken by a Shakespearean actor in the context of a parody of King Lear, they invite readers to assume that the speech is appropriate, that it is from *King Lear*. These lines contribute ironically to the parody Basil enacts because they are not appropriate while at the same time they serve to mock readers for not recognising them. However, the speech, as an allusion to *The Merchant of Venice*, is appropriate to Basil personally because his life, as depicted by White, is a comical history — he conflates his art with his life, his love is ludicrously thwarted, he is the celebrated harlequin who wants to be someone else, his mother, and he is the brother who has sex with his sister because she resembles his mother. Basil’s speech from *The Merchant of Venice* thus reinforces White’s satire of him while it also further satirises those readers who don’t recognise it and don’t therefore attend to its subversive implications.

White’s theatrical vision and his knowledge of literature underwrite Basil’s highly dramatic but ridiculous performances in this episode. These performances are ridiculous in the context of the Australian mud, dam, and daylight, and referentially incongruent in terms of White’s depiction of him as King Lear. Basil mimics Lear but mocks White’s readership and serves to satirise himself as a rather confused artist, one who adopts but also switches roles, thus confirming that he does not know and therefore cannot be ‘himself’, that is, Sir Basil Hunter, the man who would be his mother so that he might become the one true Lear. Basil enacts this lack of self-knowledge in this episode when White has him comparing himself to Lorenzo and Jessica as if he
were attempting to rationalise his own parlous emotional condition. Basil’s performance, which is to say his art, is full of this kind of artifice and contrivance and thus he serves to question the composition of literary art by making artifice and contrivance integral parts of this novel. Basil enacts the falseness and the doubleness, the artifice and the contrivance of the theatre by way of this and his other performances but, because the novel contains this artifice and contrivance, because it is part and parcel of it, it seems to acknowledge that it participates in fiction’s big lie, in its pretence to reality. White employs Basil in some further complex parodic satire of this kind in the episode concerning his flight back to Europe after Elizabeth Hunter’s death. White’s theatrical vision reaches its apogee here for it reaches new heights of performance, theatricality, and artistic self-reflectivity. At the same time, the satire that emanates from this produces significant changes in White’s aesthetic and philosophic dispositions.

**This is Your Life or ‘Year by Year with Lear’ (p. 574)**

It is typical of the way White presents Basil that it occurs to him on his flight to Europe that he is mature enough to have another ‘go’ at Lear because ‘he had suffered...not least’ at his mother’s hands and those of his sister Dorothy (p. 573). He convinces himself of his newfound maturity, ‘tries out’ his voice, and begins to enact in his mind Mitty Jacka’s play about the whole of his life, a play in which he must play himself because Mitty believes it will be ‘the finest thing for the living theatre’ if such a man of the theatre as Basil can face the public with ‘his very own version of the naked truth’.

What unfolds in this episode is not a play but a farce, a dark, outrageously comical pantomime in which the characters play stock roles and enact topical jokes. These roles are stock and the jokes topical in terms of what we know of the narrative in which this pantomime is located. Basil makes his entry as himself — that is, as Lear — but he feels he is not the ‘soundest fish’ and is fearful of exposing his psyche with ‘only a fool audience to grovel for the bits’.

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His crown is made of Plasticine and 'will suffer more on the road to Dover'. The courtiers laugh when Basil enters, Gloster seems to be a baby because 'that's how they want it today', and there are 'fanfares of juvenile laughter with a pizzicato on the testicles'. Dorothy Hunter debuts as 'DOROTHY CORNWALL' and Mitty Jacka appears as herself to declare that 'everybody's in it and everyone is everyone that is the absurd point doesn't life outpanto panto'.

Elizabeth Hunter also appears in her stock role — as 'A BEARDLESS KING in real crown' and 'lilac wig' — and threatens Basil, causing him to fear that she has 'come to bury a leading man'. She 'buries' Basil but in a pointedly ironic way for, although he experiences liberation from her through rebirth:

Lilac King opens her legs go on Bas on all fours natch it's the womb stint you've got to expect in living theatre well it happens doesn't it they pull you through the lilac pubics...(pp. 574-575)

He is not reborn as Lear but as Lear's fool — 'well folks here I am this is my real role your fool'. Basil proves to be an adept in this role — he considers the fool to have 'all the plums' and is so pleased he announces that '(I) 'll go to bed a noonlight with my sister' even though he knows Dorothy will kill him for this 'to say nothing of Enid Histryl Shiely Moan and all the others'. Basil still aspires to play Lear — he asks his sister to 'undo his button' because 'oh Dorothy yours is the kindness which exchanges cap for crown'. She undoes his button — to a 'great roaring of participation' on the part of the audience — but uproots his penis so that he is exposed as the 'PLASTICINE KING' who must lose his tongue and 'perhaps his uvula for good measure' and so be 'no more an actor' (p. 575) if he is to be a man. The scene ends with a stage direction that insists the audience and the cast shut Basil the 'would-be' Lear into a coffin with Elizabeth, his dead mother, and the 'actual' Lear.

Basil, by playing himself in this 'play' about his whole life, enacts and confirms the 'facts' of his life as they have been revealed to readers, thus he too plays his stock role. As an actor, Basil also interprets those facts in terms of his egocentric understanding of his ambivalent, at times antipathetic, relation to the
significant others in his life — his mother, his sister, Mitty Jacka and even the theatre itself. Basil, because of this relation, plays his stock role in a mocking, highly exaggerated, ridiculous manner and he has his significant others play their stock roles similarly. Because Basil is a creative artist like his author and since his creative activity in this pantomime occurs within the confines of his author’s novel, he mimics, mocks, parodies and satirises his author’s own creative activity. Basil’s creative activity however, is essentially re-creative from the perspective of White as author-creator and thus he serves to provide a grossly comical, self-satirising concordance to the novel. At the same time, this pantomime-concordance is meta-fictional from the perspective of the novel because the objects of the mimicry, parody, and satire that constitute Basil’s activity — White’s actual creative endeavours — are ‘outside’ the novel.

Basil, in performing and producing this meta-fictional pantomime-concordance, operates as a default author or analogue for White, confirming all the other parallels that the novel suggests between author and figure. More importantly, he enables White to provide a self-parodic, meta-critical, meta-fictional commentary on the creation of the fictional world of which Basil and the other actor-characters, as well as the audience-readership, are vital parts. Basil, because of his relation to his author as a fellow creative artist and because his pantomime is located within the wider fictional world of his author’s novel, serves to shed light on the processes and the problems associated with the creation of fictional worlds and with the production and reception of art.

Basil’s role in this novel is complex, particularly in the passages concerning his pantomime. White has him enact and produce a dark and grossly comical performance, albeit in the theatre of his mind. All the participants in this bizarre theatre — the actors and the audience — serve to mock and satirise themselves, typically as social types or categories. At the same they provide, by playing but exaggerating their stock roles in Basil’s pantomime, a derisively comical concordance to the novel. Basil’s pantomime serves as concordance to the novel by mocking, exaggerating, and thus confirming the ridiculous lives of Basil and his significant others but in so doing it exposes and mocks that which
it composes, the novel itself, because these lives as well as this mimicry, mockery, and ridicule are integral to it. White uses Basil to open up the novel from within by having him and most of the other main characters re-appear in this pantomime, seemingly at Basil's behest, thus calling our attention to that which would otherwise have remained inward or hidden — the contrivance, artifice, and artfulness of art. Basil, like Lotte Lippman and Dorothy Hunter, to a lesser extent, undermines the novel's pretence to reality by drawing our attention these issues. White's use of characters in this way signals a radical change in both his aesthetic and philosophic dispositions.

**A radical Aesthetic, a new Philosophy**

This chapter has demonstrated that the parodies that produce White's satire in this novel are not so much borne by the narrative as enacted by the characters. They are directly performed most notably by Flora Manhood through her bizarre costuming of Elizabeth Hunter, by Lotte Lippman in her song and dance routines, by Basil through his absurd theatrical posturing generally and his pantomime in particular, by Basil and Dorothy through their incestuous activity, and by Elizabeth in her creation of her children and her nurses. These performances, or, more accurately, the enactment of these performances within White's text, inevitably and beneficially place White at a distance to his text so that he effectively looks back on it. The art that he produces from this standpoint turns inwards upon itself to expose its contents and its processes.

This inward turn is the product of a change in White's concerns in regard to his own professional activity, the creation of literary art. The satirical episodes considered here, most evidently Basil's pantomime, demonstrate that White is concerned with such non-traditional issues as the composition, production, and reception of art, and his own role in his art, rather than the traditional aesthetic values of satire or of literature. This change in concerns mirrors the change that Weisenburger identifies in American subversive literature - the change from a modernist epistemological dominant to a postmodernist ontological dominant.
This attitudinal change produces a new radical aesthetics of satire and, to a lesser extent, of fiction. White, in developing this new aesthetic, casts aside some of the traditional aesthetic values of satire and of fiction and thus he writes a new kind of subversive novel. As a consequence, The Eye of the Storm produces a sea change in White's philosophy of art and of history. This final section first elaborates the aesthetic then these philosophic changes.

The parodies of King Lear and The Charterhouse of Parma that this novel effects are conventional insofar as they refer to and mimic aspects of these works. They are however, unconventional in that they are exclusively character borne and not targeted to either the play or the novel as individual works or as examples of their author's work as an example of a genre. The characters who enact these parodies typically do so to deliver a satire of the social types they represent or of their author's creative activity. White transforms these otherwise conventional parodies into parodic satires by drawing upon and indulging his love of performance, of theatre, of theatrical excess, and of creative activity generally in this novel. In this process, he takes pleasure in and acknowledges the art of fabrication by producing a cast of 'characters' who are so bound up with contrivance and artifice they appear as figures, as subversive vehicles rather than characters in any traditional sense. White's characters in his novel are thus radically different from the conventional characters so popular with White's religious and metaphysical critics such as the transparently stolid and honest Stan and Amy Parker or Voss or the four Riders in the Chariot.

White's 'characters' in The Eye of the Storm are in a sense duplicitous, they exceed their apparent, narrative selves: they invariably operate at two or more levels by referring to, mimicking, parodying, and satirising, other characters, figures, and social types outside the novel. White effectively goes beyond representative symbolism with his characters in this novel and in doing so he abandons two of fiction's most time-honoured aesthetic values. First, his characters are not characters per se, they are not full or rounded, conceivably representative incarnations of human beings, but highly exaggerated figures who serve a variety of subversive functions. Second, these figures, by exceeding
their apparent selves, by performing other roles, by singing, dancing, speechmaking, by referring readers elsewhere so to enact the contrivance and artifice of the theatre and of art, shatter the novel’s pretence, as a work of fiction, to represent reality. These two representational literary aesthetic values are thus subsumed by what may be called a functionalist literary aesthetic — White’s characters become figures who perform roles to serve functions in his grand subversive design.

A similarly radical aesthetic also subsumes three of the traditional aesthetics of satire. The first traditional aesthetic that White does not adhere to is that of laughter. His satire is incidentally witty, amusing, entertaining, comical, and funny, but it is not consistently laughter-producing because the most powerful satiric episodes are not just obscene, obnoxious, or otherwise offensive, as was the case in a great deal of the satire of antiquity and the early modern period, but, given our 20th century sensibilities, wildly and excessively so. The episodes that constitute this satire such as Basil’s public rebirth or his and Dorothy’s incest or even Lotte’s death, produce dismay or revulsion so that this satire does not induce laughter. Few readers indeed are led to take the long journey to genuine laughter — as opposed to wry amusement — by White’s satire. Satire’s laughter-producing aesthetic has been subsumed by one of attack, of determined, relentless aggression.

The second traditional aesthetic that White does not adhere to is the principle that satirical figures must bear a recognisable relation to the society they represent if the satire is to ‘work’. His characters bear something of a recognisable relation to the society they represent, the pastoralist upper middle class, but this is vitiated by the fact that this is not a world that is familiar, except perhaps in terms of the popular imagination, to the vast majority of readers. This majority thus does not read the excessive, bizarre, or gross behaviours of White’s characters as elements in a satire but as part of a perhaps exaggerated but generally factual account of Australian upper middle class life. White, in attacking this unfamiliar social class, attacks a world that is largely unknown to his readers and thus he does so irrespective of whether or not his
satire is recognised. He attacks this unknown class because he wants to, because he is deeply antipathetic towards it, and thus he abandons the principle of recognisability for one of unfettered attack.

The third aesthetic that White abandons is the curative or corrective intention traditionally associated with satire. The aesthetic of unfettered attack obscures White's satire by not adhering to recognisability as a principle. This obscurity is increased by White's practice of generating his satire from the various parodies that he has his characters enact. This obscurity is part and parcel of his play with his readership but it also confirms that he does not care if his satire is recognised or not. If White does not care about this obscurity, if he chooses to offend his readers, if he does not care if his satire is rejected for its offensiveness, if he does not care whether or not his satire is recognised at all, then he clearly does not entertain any ameliorative, corrective, or curative intentions for it. The most time-honoured aesthetic of satire — that of corrective intentions — is thus also subsumed by White's radical aesthetic of unfettered attack, of unrestrained aggression.

This new radical satiric aesthetic has significant philosophic consequences. White's art in this novel, by turning in upon itself, suggests itself to be the kind of modernist 'pure' art in which, as Michael Wilding points out in respect of the novels that precede The Eye of the Storm, 'nothing other than art itself is seen as worthy of representation', the kind of modernist art in which 'it is not the ideas but the patterns, the forms, the "art" itself that are the work's concern'\(^\text{20}\). This criticism is no longer sustainable for although White's art is concerned with art in The Eye of the Storm, it is not a 'pure' art concerned with the traditional aesthetics of form and manner — literary or satiric — but an implicitly self-critical art of exposure, excess, and subversion. The characters mimic, mock, parody, and satirise the creation of art from within the very art form of which they are constitutive. White's art in this novel is thus partly self-mocking in that it embraces and enacts the downside and the failings of art. It is an art concerned with ideas, particularly the idea of art itself, its composition, the

\(^{20}\) Wilding 1997, p. 231.
author's role in its production, and the reader's role in its reception, but it is not an art that seeks to celebrate or value art for art's sake in the manner that Wilding's criticism suggests.

White's art simply cannot value art when it exposes, mimics, and mocks itself and the processes by which it is created. Basil's gross pantomime not only mocks his life but it mocks the art that creates his life in the novel. When Mitty Jacka asks during Basil's pantomime if life *outpantos* pantom she not only suggests that life is a pantomime but also that it is a pantomime superior to Basil's theatrical pantomime. White's art, by turning in upon itself in this way, becomes self-mocking degenerative and so it abandons the corrective function traditionally ascribed to satire. The abandonment of this corrective function brings about the fundamental change in White's philosophical disposition that I have referred to. *The Eye of the Storm* cannot hold up art as an educative force for progress because that art is degenerative and so it cannot propose a better future, as did such earlier novels as *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*. White thus finally relinquishes the teacher role that he assumed in these earlier novels. This in turn suggests that he no longer believes that his Australian readers can learn about their history and culture and future from his art. The novel thus devalues art and so it appears that White has abandoned the idea of redemption through art. The inward turn that White negotiates in this novel, the radical satiric aesthetic that issues from this, the change from a modernist epistemological dominant to a postmodernist ontological dominant that this encompasses, and the consequent changes in White's philosophy that emerge from these changes, demonstrate that *The Eye of the Storm* is a crucial novel, a milestone in the development of White's oeuvre. It is a novel that leads to *The Twyborn Affair* and the further radicalisation of White's satire.

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Chapter Four

Going Back to go Forward:
Degenerative, Grotesque Satire in *The Twyborn Affair*

*A Fringe of Leaves* appears in the chronology of Patrick White’s work immediately after *The Eye of the Storm* and immediately before the subject of this chapter, *The Twyborn Affair* (1979). I focus upon the latter novel even though there is a fair measure of satire in *A Fringe of Leaves*. This satire is most evident in the highly irreligious parody of the Eucharist that Ellen Roxburgh enacts when she partakes ‘of a sacrament’ but suffers, risibly, ‘of a headache, and the first signs of indigestion’ by eating the flesh of a young girl during her captivity\(^1\) and in White’s attack on the establishment at Moreton Bay for their piety, passivity, and unblinking acceptance of the convict system of which they are the beneficiaries\(^2\). These subversions complement *A Fringe of Leaves*, adding another dimension to it, but it remains a predominately historical novel.

In a letter to Frederick Glover dated 15-9-67, White reveals that he began *A Fringe of Leaves* ‘years ago’, spent ‘almost a year’ on it, then set it aside as ‘two-thirds of a novel’\(^3\). This novel consequently follows upon *Voss*, its immediate predecessor, both narratively and satirically, so that it is much more akin to *Voss* than the novels that appear immediately before or after it in the chronology of White’s published work. It is for these reasons that this study does not formally consider *A Fringe of Leaves* but moves on to *The Twyborn Affair* (1979). White quite radically reforms his satire in this novel and he

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\(^2\) *A Fringe of Leaves*, pp. 346-350.

\(^3\) In Marr 1994, p. 307.

This chapter investigates how White reforms his satire in *The Twyborn Affair* to demonstrate that the devices, tropes, and strategies that constitute these reforms come to comprise the principal elements and features of his work. In *The Twyborn Affair*, White’s satire becomes increasingly grotesque and degenerative and so he produces a bleak but intelligent, witty, and acidly funny satirical work. This novel reflects his love of literary play and his mordant sense of humour and it does not make even a pretence to correction or cure. These developments have attracted scant attention from White’s critics.

I first consider the extraordinary recursive quality of White’s work. I elaborate the way this novel revisits and reprises aspects of his earlier novels and the way it refers to other novels and to itself. This novel revisits and invites us to recall, for example, the Romanticism and the rustic comedy of *The Tree of Man*, the mannered comedy of *Voss*, the rather more pointed, exaggerated social satire that we encounter in *Riders in the Chariot*; as well as the literariness and satire by parody that permeates *The Eye of the Storm*. I argue that these revisitations are not to be taken merely as evidence of a tendency on the part of White to engage in self-reflexive literary play. These revisitations do exemplify his love of play but in this novel that play is deliberate, teasingly or archly calculated in that it not only challenges us to recognise what are sometimes obscure or elusive signposts, references, and allusions, but also to recognise that these effects are those of an author very much concerned with his own activity, with his role in the creation of fictional worlds, and with the reception of his art. These recursive effects then are not to be understood as evidence of an apparent tendency to mock certain targets again and again but rather as evidence of the author re-viewing, re-considering, and in some instances reconfiguring aspects of his earlier work. This recursive play, in referring us back, or elsewhere, means that this novel ‘exceeds’ itself — it is more than its apparent self. This recursive referentiality draws our attention to and complements the contrastive referentiality that is inherent in
the vast battery of grotesque tropes that White deploys in this novel. In addition, this recursive referentiality in particular, by way of its nature, invites us to reconsider the earlier critical responses to White's work.

I also consider the radical change that occurs in the nature of White's satire in this novel. I consequently pay particular attention to the three features of degenerative satire discussed in the introduction to this study: the tropology of grotesque similes and metaphors with which White encircles his main characters, his location of them within a carnivalesque setting that comprises the *topos* of that grotesque figuration, and the regressive plotting that plays such a determinative role in degenerative satirical novels. I am thus able to show the extent to which this novel embraces and exhibits the chief features of early American post-modern degenerative satire and, consequently, how and to what extent White transforms his formerly rather conventional, seemingly generative satire into post-modern, degenerative, grotesque satire. I demonstrate that White realises his mature subversive style in this novel, that it consists of a rich, recursive, but radically transformed medley of literary effects and that the significance of this novel to White's *oeuvre* is as the ultimate expression of his subversive art.

This chapter finally considers the changes in White's aesthetic and philosophic dispositions that this novel manifests as a function of the radical change that occurs in the nature of his satire. I argue that these changes are the product of the consolidation of the kind of ontological concerns that first emerged in and indeed underwrite *The Eye of the Storm*. I demonstrate that the vision of humankind behind White's art is secular and bleak, but that there is nevertheless much to celebrate in this novel.

**White's Recursive Literary Play in Part One**

*The Twyborn Affair* opens in the period immediately prior to WW1. St Mayeul is a fictitious town on the Cote d'Azur, but in territory familiar to White who had lived in the South of France at St Jean de Luz for some
months during 1938 while he worked on *Nightside*, a novel that he abandoned on the advice of friends who variously ‘hated it’ or found it ‘beastly’⁴. It is indicative of White’s increasing interest in literary art that he returned the region in 1976 in order to visit Edith Wharton’s château above Hyères and Katherine Mansfield’s villa at Menton⁵. He did not succeed in visiting Wharton’s château because the ‘surly’ local taxi-drivers refused to take him but he did succeed in visiting Katherine Mansfield’s villa where he told the resident New Zealand writer, Michael King, that he had come ‘in search of KM’⁶. The novel not only revisits this Old World milieu but in doing so it also recalls the extended *Jardin Exotique* section of *The Aunt’s Story* (1948), set immediately after the same war and in the same region. These actual and novelistic revisitations suggest a novel that embraces considerable measures of literariness, recursion, and historicality.

The opening scenes of the novel are rich in subversion. This consists of conventional indirect satire in which the characters make themselves ridiculous by what they say, think, and do or are made ridiculous by White’s ironic voice, his observations, and his narrative style. White injects into St Mayeul’s Old World of privilege, sophistication, and decadence the New World figure of ‘Joanie’ Golson, a woman rich ‘in her own right’ through having inherited Sewell’s Sweat-free Felt Hats from ‘poor Daddy’. Joanie is the wife of E. Boyd (‘Curly’) Golson, the wealthy proprietor of Golson’s Emporium, Sydney⁷. Joanie however, is not simply Joanie, a foolish, gauche, nouveau riche expatriate, but a character designed to recall such earlier, similarly ridiculed socialite figures as Mrs Rapallo, the wealthy American heiress in *The Aunt’s Story*, as well as such Australian socialite figures as Mrs Bonner and Mrs Pringle of *Voss*, Thelma Forsdyke of *The Tree of Man*, and Elizabeth and Dorothy Hunter of *The Eye of the Storm*.

⁵ See Marr 1992, pp. 567-568.

All references are to this edition.
Joanie, through this line of descent, serves to recall the subversive nature of White's earlier writing but more particularly the failure of critics to pay adequate attention to it. White gestures towards this when he satirises Joanie for he not only ridicules her foibles, faults, and failings but he presents them as constituting a typically Australian colonial cringe. Thus he generalizes these defects to his Australian reader-critics. Joanie, for example, is not only superficial and exceedingly impressionable but she feels 'inferior'. She admires her driver, Teakle, because he is 'so English' and 'so discreet' even though she suspects 'English servants were given to taking liberties in the service of Colonials' (p. 11). She is understandably intimidated by Lady Tewkes — she is a 'formidable personage' who has 'rings growing out of the bone itself' — but is so captivated by her ladyship and her 'casually incorrect version' of English that she accepts her recommendation of the Grand Hotel Splendide des Ligures by assuring her 'mentor' that it 'sounds charming'. The point is underscored by Eudoxia Vatatzes, another Australian expatriate, when she refers to the hotel as 'that pretentious Hôtel des Splendeurs et Misères des Golsons Internationals' (pp. 59-60). Joanie, in suggesting that her characteristics are not hers alone but also those of our colonial antecedents, serves to invite us to reconsider White's earlier subversive work.

White, in keeping with Joanie's sense of cultural inferiority, presents her as aspiring to the manners and mores of the expatriate English community of St Mayeul. Brian Kiernan sees this as extending an invitation to us to recognise the mode of the novel in these opening scenes as that of a 'comedy of manners à la Edith Wharton'\(^8\). A number of points need be made in respect of Kiernan's interpretation. White's treatment of Joanie does indeed invoke Wharton's fiction — the novel directly refers to the American novelist — and it does suggest a comedy of manners but in so doing it also invites us to recall the similarly mannered scenes with which White opens *Voss*. In other words, there is a peculiarly recursive quality about these scenes that

seems designed to predispose or at least invite us to reflect more deeply upon White’s novels, particularly the links between them.

White also ingeniously plays with his references to Wharton to add the bite of satire to what otherwise would have remained an amusing but rather conventional comedy of manners. When Joanie tries to obtain an unspecified book by Wharton from the ‘English Tearoom and Library’, Miss Clitheroe, the ‘assured’ Englishwoman who speaks fluent French in the ‘timbre of a struck gong’, tells her that ‘Edith is out. More probably stolen’ and that ‘She means so much to us at St Mayeul’ (p. 46). There follows a reference to Wharton that seems critical of her work but which is directed towards White’s readership, to the kind of faux readers who don’t read novels — let alone comprehend — but rather treat them as if they were fashion accessories and they themselves bibliophiles. Instead of Wharton’s book, Joanie accepts Thomas Hardy’s The Hand of Ethelberta ‘rather glumly’ — even though it is a comic novel — while at the same time she tries ‘to console herself with the thought that some considered Mrs Wharton ‘sarcastic’. Moreover, when Joanie finally obtains the Wharton book, she does not read it for she is ‘intimidated by what she saw at a glance between its covers’. She simply feels, pitifully but ridiculously, that ‘she would be proud to sit with it in public places’ (p. 81).

White’s references to Wharton are more subversive than Kiernan’s reading would suggest for they not only enable him to satirise Joanie Golson and his own readers but also the English expatriate community of St Mayeul through Miss Clitheroe. The expatriate community to which Joanie aspires is ridiculed for the importance they attach to a book written by an American author, Wharton, and one that is, moreover, ironic, comic, and satirical, in the manner characteristic of much of her fiction. These subversions are reinforced by the fact that White omits the name of the Wharton book but not the name of the book Joanie does not want — Hardy’s The Hand of Ethelberta. This ‘omission’ emphatically backlights the subversive nature of these passages.
At another level, readers generally are mocked for considering Wharton’s work to be simply ‘sarcastic’ instead of recognising it as mannered, ironic, more or less subversive social comedy. The mis-recognition of literature is one of the targets of White’s satire here and it is the product of his awareness of the way his own subversive fiction had been received throughout his career. The opening scenes of this novel thus invite us to read them as constituting a comedy of manners, as Kiernan points out, but what White produces through his representation of Joanie and his references to Wharton in particular is a playful but pointed satire upon readership generally. White revisits the Cote d’Azur, he invites us to recall his earlier novels, and refers us to Edith Wharton’s fiction to mount a satire that is, ultimately, an expression of his concern about the reception of literary art.

Revisiting the Romantic Impulse

White does not restrict satire to the expatriate community but also extends it to the local, French community of St Mayeul. Celeste, the daughter of Madame Réboa, may be ‘ma plus belle fille’ but she also has a ‘matelot in gaol at Marseille for some offence that is never spoken of’ (p. 26) and Josephine, Madame’s other daughter, ‘may or may not be a whore’ (p. 60). Madame herself is comical but vulgar: she ‘loves to roll down her stocking’ to show ‘her victim’ her ‘by no means pretty’ leg ulcer (p. 26). More importantly, Madame, ‘through a former relationship inspired by lust on either side’, leads us to a certain M. Pelletier (p. 75). White revisits his own earlier Romantic impulse through Pelletier while at the same time he uses this figure to intensify his attack on the French community of St Mayeul.

White’s attack on Pelletier resembles a kind of literary mise en scène that locates Pelletier in what is an exceedingly gross way of life. This stage setting recalls White’s love of theatre, further exemplifying the recursiveness of his work in this novel, while the terms in which it is cast drastically reduce Pelletier from the outset. White introduces Pelletier by describing his beach
kiosk at St Mayeul as being cluttered with ‘damp newspapers and mildewed cigarettes’, a place where he exchanges ‘the smells of tortured sheets and sleeping bodies, a full pot de chambre and the dregs of a tisane’ for ‘a raison d’être he had never achieved in marriage, parenthood, vice, or any form of civic responsibility’ (p. 71). This satirical attack on the vulgarity of Pelletier’s existence immediately serves to dispel any remaining expectations that European culture will be presented in the ironically comical but rather respectable manner of Edith Wharton.

Having set the stage, White sharpens his attack on Pelletier, reducing him to an absurd, grotesque figure. A naked stranger, ‘a man or a woman’, disrobes then enters the water in front of the Frenchman’s kiosk. This figure captures Pelletier’s imagination in the Romantic terms of classical antiquity:

Monsieur Pelletier saw the naked flesh as white marble, or perhaps ivory overlaid with the palest gold leaf, before the straight figure raised its arms, composed its hands in the shape of a spire or an arrow, and plunged into the disquieted and disquieting sea. (p. 73)

This produces a radical disjunction between the terms in which Pelletier leads his imaginative and actual lives. White underscores this when he shatters the force of this Romantic image — he has a breaking wave comically drench Pelletier so that he stands ‘groaning and grinning...all trickling water, grey stubble, mauve gums, and a few prongs of decalcified teeth’. White thus summarily returns Pelletier to his gross condition but he continues to represent him as a committed Romantic, as a man who is able to ‘recite whole yards of Victor Hugo and Chateaubriand’. Pelletier discerns ‘a certain poetry of movement, a softness of light surrounding the swimmer’ and he decides ‘it could only be a woman’. It is Pelletier himself who creates and continues to create this Romantic imagery —‘so strong yet so poetic, so hopeful yet so suicidal’ — but the emotional force of it is too much for him. Pelletier is ‘seduced’, and satirically reduced, for he is so moved as to masturbate.
Susan Lever writes that Pelletier at this point ‘finds relief from the burden of gender in the landscape’9. Perhaps, but is it the landscape or the swimmer or his own perservid Romantic imagination that stimulates Pelletier? Pelletier certainly finds sexual release — he ‘thrashes at himself’, there is mention of his ‘throbbing penis’, ‘cooling sperm’, and a ‘single gob’ that strikes him ‘cold’ and ‘disgusting’ on his kneecap — but the object of this auto-erotic activity is to satirise by ridicule the Romantic disposition that he embraces and embodies. He makes a mockery of the Romantic style that he evokes to the extent that he enacts a gross parody of the Romantic creative impulse. White’s representation of Pelletier at this point takes on the recursive quality that I referred to regarding his treatment of Joanie Golson — Pelletier invites us to recall those earlier occasions when White responded to this impulse in such passages as those concerning Stan Parker’s response to the force of the natural world or Voss’s extraordinary interactions with the Australian landscape. Pelletier, in serving to mock the Romantic creative impulse in this gross way, suggests that impulse to be self-indulgent, self-centred, and self-delusory. That White responded to this impulse in his earlier novels means that there is an element of parodical self-criticism embedded in this satire.

The full extent of White’s determination to revisit his earlier work becomes apparent when he appears to ascribe to M. Pelletier one of those epiphanic moments, one of those glimpses of transcendence that many critics identified as being characteristic of his earlier novels:

As the swimmer, as the light, as the colour returned, what could have remained a sordid ejaculation became a triumphant leap into the world of light and colour such as he craved from the landscape he knew, the poetry he had never written, but silently spoke, the love he had not experienced with Simone or Violette — or Mireille Fernande Zizi Jacques Louise Jeanne Jacques Jacques Jeanne — a love he knew by heart and instinct, but might never summon up the courage to express, unless perhaps at the point of death. (p. 76)

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Yet how seriously can this be taken as an epiphany when the passage is clouded by ambiguity, when ironies encircle Pelletier, and when nothing that can be considered truly transcendental is granted to him? Pelletier’s leap is not triumphant but merely a metaphorical leap into the worlds of light and colour, poetry, and love. These are the worlds he craves but does not attain. The ironies that circle around Pelletier such as the poetry that he had never written but silently spoke, the love he knows but lacks the courage to express, and the dramatic irony of the maleness of one of the objects of his desire (the list of lovers gestures to this via the inclusion of one, thrice-mentioned male) subvert Pelletier, indicating him to be a pale shadow of a man, one whom White does not even allow to imagine this as his moment of transcendence.

Two points need be made regarding the inclusion of one, thrice-mentioned male name in Pelletier’s list of lovers. First, this male name contributes to the ambiguity that swirls around Pelletier — it appears that he is not necessarily heterosexual or homosexual and is he recalling a single male lover named Jacques three times or is he recalling three different male lovers of the same name? Second, the inclusion of one male name in the list of lovers of Pelletier as a committed Romantic may very well be a repudiation of the heterosexual imperative of Romantic love as it has developed in the modern era and thus an affirmation of the homosexual imperative of Romantic love in antiquity.

Even if we take Pelletier’s epiphanic moment on trust, clearly nothing of a transcendental nature is granted to him for the worlds he aspires to simply consist of those things that he lacks. They thus ‘consist’ of absences so nothing is vouchsafed to Pelletier other than that which he and we already know: that is, the sad, earthbound knowledge that his life is empty, loveless, and futile. This apparent epiphany is a parody of those earlier epiphanies such as those granted to Stan Parker in *The Tree of Man* or to Elizabeth Hunter in *The Eye of the Storm*. Pelletier’s single gob of cooling sperm not only bids forth but also most pointedly mimics and mocks the gob of spittle upon which Stan Parker’s final epiphany in *The Tree of Man* turns (pp. 476-193).
The critical difference between these events is that no religious or other insight, illumination, or significance is granted to Pelletier, a narrative 'fact' that is, moreover, confirmed by his immediate disappearance from the novel. In satirising by parody this much remarked upon aspect of his earlier work, White is once again subverting the expectations of his religious or too earnestly minded reader-critics. These expectations, and the orthodox religious reading of White’s work from which they spring, are further subverted by his elevation of buggery to the status of theme in *The Twyborn Affair*.

The Obscure and the Obscene: Religion and Buggery

It is typical of White’s love of literary play that he draws the obscure and the obscene — religion and buggery — together in Part One. He couches buggery in terms of the historical phenomenon of 'Bogomilism' which is to make most of the references and allusions to the practice of buggery obscure since few Australians, it seems reasonable to assume, would have knowledge of this religious sect. The O.E.D derives the term bugger from the Latin 'Bulgarus Bulgarian, a name given to a group of heretics who came from Bulgaria...to whom abominable practices were ascribed'. Andrew Riemer, in an insightful essay concerning the role of 'Bogomilism' in *The Twyborn Affair*, explains that the heresy arose among the Bulgarian people of eastern Europe, in a sect known as the Bogomils that prospered during the middle ages and who were considered 'to have practiced all manner of sexual perversions'. Mark Williams points out that the adherents to this creed were 'sexual libertarians who believed that procreation was evil and their solution to this dilemma was to practice sodomy'.

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12 Williams, p. 145.
The connection to the Bogomils comes through Angelos Vatatzes, 'consort' to Eudoxia Vatatzes/Eddie Twyborn. Angelos believes himself to be descended from and the successor to the Byzantine Emperors who ruled over the Bogomils. Angelos is himself a sodomite — as shown by his concern for his abandoned enema and his certain knowledge of Eudoxia's true gender — so that the antipathy that lies behind his perfervid re-enactments of the slaughter of the Bogomils and Bulgars is not simply hypocritical but ludicrously ironic. White draws on the myths, legends, and history of the Bogomils and the Byzantines to play what is an elaborate and esoteric joke on buggers, buggery, and his readers. In this process, all three subjects are mocked.

It is also typical of White that Bogomilism serves a rather more important function in Part One of The Twyborn Affair than this joke would suggest. Riemer writes that the references to the heresy 'reveal a design that includes an elaborate fantasia on dualism', that is, the kind of dualism that is inherent in the sect's belief that matter is evil but that whatever the body does is unimportant because the soul is separate from the body. In addition, the complex of references to Byzantine affairs and the counterpoint account of the more quotidian vices of Sydney such as Joanie Golson and Eadie Twyborn's scandalous behaviour at the Australia Hotel are central to this fantasia for they form a succession of 'bewildering mirror images, reflections of the human condition, wherein nothing is but what it is not'. Appearance and reality are thus blurred, so that Part One offers a world of ambivalences, changing perspectives, and shadows, 'while it highlights the absurdity of humankind and its affairs'. The references to the Bogomils become an exploration of the basic tenet of all dualist creeds, of the unbridgeable gulf between the soul and the created matter it must inhabit. What began as a joke burgeons into an account of the initiate's battle with or against the flesh. In this process, dualism assumes the status of theme in Part One.

The point I would make in relation to this is that when White elevates the dualism of the Bogomils as another form of religious belief to the level of
theme, he elevates the practice of buggery that is central to the creed to the same level. An important effect of this is to direct the levity and irreverence that encompasses such activity towards deflating the portentousness that accrues to such earlier novels as *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* from their consideration of other religious or metaphysical subjects and themes. White's play with buggery and Bogomilism in Part One is, moreover, self-subversive in terms of his oeuvre. At another level, because buggery is a sexual act that absolutely denies the possibility of the renewal of life, White's play with it and with Bogomilism not only serves to highlight the absurdity of humankind and human affairs, as Riemer mentions, but it also rejects the worth of the human body. In these circumstances, White's recourse to and ingenious play with buggery and Bogomilism is a satiric expression of what is his increasingly bleak vision of humanity.

**The Feverels**

White's love of literary play is not restricted to imaginative, subversive play with his historical sources. This emerges in Part Three when we learn of the Bellasis sisters' decision to abandon their intention to launch a petition against the 'overt immorality' at Eighty-Four, the site of Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith Twyborn's fashionable London brothel. It seems to the sisters that a kindly neighbour, Colonel Bewlay, might be patronising 'the house in question', other neighbours like the Creeses are 'too common' or, like the Feverels 'too much abroad'; and it seems the support of the local shopkeepers is unlikely since 'the drink orders alone are too profitable' (p. 306). The ladies and the locals are conventionally ridiculed but the reference to 'the Feverels' is rather more complex. This reference is to George Meredith's *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859), a Victorian novel that is supremely ironic and one that reflects Meredith's comic-satiric sense, his social concerns, and psychological insights into his character's states of mind. This is, however, not simply an inter-textual literary reference but an intra-
textual literary reference for it harks back to Part Two of *The Twyborn Affair* itself where it is revealed that Meredith’s satires comprise Don Prowse’s favourite reading (p. 201).

Prowse’s appreciation of Meredith would appear to be a function of the fundamental qualities of his work: the comedy, the psychological insights, and the social concerns that are embedded and expressed in Meredith’s satires give Prowse a sense, an insight into himself and his life at Bogong. Meredith has made Prowse aware of his own predicament as a man irretrievably locked into what is the aggressively male yet sterile world of Bogong but, because his appreciation of Meredith is for his satire and because this insight has in any case come to him through this satire, Prowse also suggests his own subversive role as a figure, as another vehicle for White’s satire of Bogong and bush life. Prowse, through the references to Meredith’s satire, points to the subversive nature of *The Twyborn Affair*. White, by this stratagem, invites us to read *The Twyborn Affair* as Meredith’s novel has been read, that is, as a pointedly ironic work, comic, satiric, rich in psychological insights and expressive of its author’s social concerns. If we read White’s novel in this way, then Don Prowse — the character to whom these references gesture — no longer seems merely a gross, sexually repressed man given to violence, a victim of Bogong, but a more complex man, one who possesses a greater degree of intelligence and self-awareness than appears at first glance. The inter-textual and an intra-textual reference to Meredith’s novel not only exemplifies White’s love of literary play but it also invites us to reconsider how we understand his work.

White’s allusions and references are often obscure or esoteric and this suggests that he takes some pleasure in playing with and indeed mocking his readership for their lack of knowledge and understanding. However, these allusions and references, in suggesting the existence of something else, something other, something more, even though they do not refer to bodies of knowledge or texts with which every reader is acquainted, more importantly create a climate of doubt, of uncertainty, in which very little is simply as it
seems. The novel thus exceeds its apparent self and when it does so it disturbs its own representational foundations. The grotesque similes and metaphors that White disposes throughout this novel produce a rather similar disturbance. These tropes comprise one of the principal features of grotesque degenerative satire.

The Gross and the Grotesque

White, early on in *The Twyborn Affair*, conventionally undercuts Angelos Vatatzes, 'husband' to Eddie Twyborn/Eudoxia Vatatzes, by subjecting him to satire by ridicule. Angelos thinks that he is 'Emperor of All Byzantium' and he consequently sees Eudoxia as his consort and Empress (p. 32). As pretender to the Imperial Throne, he habitually relives the Macedonian and Thracian military campaigns of the Byzantines in which the Bulgars are slaughtered, squealing and bleeding 'like pigs' (p. 65). In addition, the house he rents is 'threatened by the press of cavalry returning from the wars', its 'salon filled with the clash of metal, a stench of leather', and 'hairy, black, bloodshot men swaying in their saddles' and it is little wonder that Eudoxia feels she is living a novelette and 'growing as mad as Angelos'. The Vatatze's household resembles a madhouse rather than anything that could be mistaken for a royal court.

White reduces Angelos by ridicule in the conventional manner but he most dramatically and mercilessly reduces him by applying to him the kind of grotesque similes and metaphors that are characteristic of grotesque satire. These reduce the Emperor of All Byzantium to the kinds of lower existential orders described by Weisenburger that I discussed in the Introduction. White first ascribes to Angelos the view that 'men are to women as apples to figs, the clean and the messy among fruits' (p. 25). This is not only a grossly misogynistic metaphor but one that reduces Angelos, as speaker, to the botanical order. We cannot, however, be sure which of the lower existential orders is most appropriate to Angelos — he smells 'of something — fungus?
Eudoxia describes him as an animal — ‘an old Alsatian dog... nosing at the hem of my skirt’ (pp. 28-29) and so consigns him to the zoological order. She later describes his ‘nutshell eyelids’ (p. 31), his feet ‘like skate on the fishmonger’s slab’ (p. 33), and, in what becomes an increasingly risible and discordant mix of animal similes, as ‘this subtle old Greek lizard’ (p. 64) and, later, his hands as ‘working like talons’ (p. 104) so reducing him, respectively, to the botanical, piscatorial, simian, and ornithological orders.

These tropes ensure that Angelos appears as an outrageously but deliciously comical figure while they also suggest themselves to be the product of White’s increasingly bleak vision of humanity. In addition, they serve to violate the tenor of the narrative for as gross hybridisations they disrupt its material surface and, as violations of category, they also trouble the narrative’s representational foundation. Their appearance more importantly signals an author becoming increasingly concerned about his own activity — what is this world I am describing/creating?

White does not restrict his grotesque similes and metaphors to his patently mad Emperor but extends them, in Part Two, to a range of characters who are, to all intents and purposes, ‘normal’ rather than ‘mad’. At a lunch given for Eddie Twyborn on his return from Europe, Mr Effans, the headwaiter, is described as ‘that giant currawong...swirling and descending’ not birdlike in search of food, but ironically as it happens, humanlike in search of gratuities. Eddie’s father, Judge Twyborn, glances out from his plate ‘like some noble beast’ but he is still, like an animal, ‘grazing’ so that Eddie cannot fail to notice his ‘velvet’ but nevertheless animal ‘muzzle’. Marcia Lushington is not only a ‘rich dowdy, or fashionable slattern’ but is also comically cast into the realm of the botanical when the monkey fur ‘straggling down from her Venetian tricorne’ gives her head ‘the look of a hanging basket in a fernery’, then into the zoological when she reminds Eddie ‘somewhat of a raw scallop’, and finally into the geological when he notes her ‘lips of a pale coral’ (pp. 168-171). Don Prowse describes his employer, Greg Lushington, as being
‘full of money like a tick with blood’ (p. 177). Prowse, in turn, appears to Eddie as an orang-utang with an orange paw (p. 188). Later, Eddie finds Greg Lushington ‘more than ever pear shaped, even toadlike’ (p. 197). This arresting mix of animal and vegetable metaphors draws our attention to the writing, raising the question what world is this? Mrs Peggy Tyrrell, the cook, cackles through the gap between her ‘two brown, upper fangs’ like the ‘mongrel hens’ that sometimes join her ‘from under her feet’ (p. 180). Peggy is not only ‘bird-eyed’ (p. 181) but also appears — shades of Elizabeth Hunter — as if ‘she might have been a gnarled, half-burnt stump’ (p. 187). Marcia Lushington, who sees Don Prowse as ‘a human animal’ (p. 219), is once again cast into two lower orders of being: the biological — ‘Marcia...was not unlike a great downy moth irrationally involved in an obscene but delicious cannibalistic rite’ — and, most strikingly, the inanimate realm of the mechanical — her mouth ‘a blunt, open-spaced portcullis’ (p. 236). Denny Allen is at once bird-like and beast-like — he has a ‘plucked cockerel’s throat’ and a ‘horse’s yawn’ that tends to expose his ‘broad, green teeth’ (p. 248) and Dot Norton, before she marries Denny, will ‘pup along the riverbank’ (p. 238).

These reductive similes and metaphors cast White’s characters deeper into the mould of a debased and doubtful humanity, but it is ‘Ma’ Corkill, the extraordinarily awful mother of Peggy Tyrell, who best serves to illustrate his use of them. White describes Ma Corkill as a woman who ‘wore her hair in the semblance of a hat, a creation such as insects weave out of leaves and twigs, and dead grass, its structure containing a suppressed hum’ (p. 286). This description recalls Flannery O’Connor’s description, in her novel Wise Blood, of an unnamed woman who shouts at Hazel Motes, her central character, from beneath a coiffure ‘stacked in sausages around her head’ and also that of ‘the welfare woman’ whose hair ‘was so thin it looked like ham gravy trickling over her skull’13. White, like O’Connor, reaches a long way in

his simile to find a likeness but, because his simile too, is pure in the sense that the comparison is not qualified by 'seems' or 'as if', he also establishes a swift and direct linkage between vehicle and tenor so that the reader is left in no doubt as to how this character is to be taken. 'Ma' is to be understood as an exemplary grotesque figure in the world of Bogong.

The process of reducing individual characters to lower existential orders continues unabated in Part Three. Ursula Untermeyer is cast downwards into the realm of the piscatorial when we are told that she 'had been known to crown her own brittle carapace with a lacquered crab shell' (p. 341). The novel similarly consigns Eadith downwards to the ornithological by comparing her manicured nails to 'brittle, crimson talons' (p. 325), then to the equine when she feels she 'looks like a horse' (p. 343), and finally to the completely inanimate when we learn 'she looked like an exquisite plank with grain in it, her hair a perfectly incised helmet' (p. 356). Other reductions are similarly more or less playful or comical but always to a degree grotesque: the novel locates Bobbie in the botanical order when it describes her as a 'blemished cottage apple' (p. 316) and Madame Siderous much more derisively when it draws our attention to her 'leathery voracious face with its complexion suggestive of tropical fruits in the early stages of going off' (p. 339). In an apparently literal description that suggests a writer at play with his reader's vocabulary but in effect with his own devices, the novel casts Lord Gravenor into the realm of the zoological order when it describes his skin as 'squamous' (p. 322) — the term means lizard-like — and ultimately into the geological when it notes his 'stone' lips.

These similes substantially reduce White's characters but in a refinement of his technique he effects a more drastic — because collective — reduction of the clientele of Eadith's brothel by symbolising men as mice. The brothel is invaded by 'a plague' of these creatures one of which is 'evidently' — but very pointedly — 'crushed' to death by Eadith when she jams 'her legs together in her sleep' (p. 314). The novel thus deftly reduces the brothel's clientele to the order of animals and rather unprepossessing animals at that.
White's use of these grotesque similes and metaphors against his characters suggests he is having a good deal of wicked fun with them while at the same time the hybrid categorization that is involved in this kind of figuration further undermines the representational foundations of his narrative. This undermining of White's own work within his own work suggests that he has become increasingly concerned about his own role in the creation of fictional worlds in novels that purport and have been generally understood to represent, under the banner of realism, real worlds. The sudden proliferation of grotesque similes and metaphors that disturb both natural category and the foundations of traditional narrative are the proof and product of what are White's growing ontological concerns.

Perhaps the greatest refinement to White's technique is an extended metaphor that expands upon the subversive work of his grotesque similes. The pure similes that compose this metaphor do not reach down to a lower order of existential being, however, as do the 'independent' similes, but reach upwards from the brothel and its prostitutes to the religious order of a convent and its nuns. These similes thus reach again and again to what is a higher order of being to effect likeness. Eadith, as the brothel's madam, is compared to 'an abbess' (p. 323) and her girls subjected to what is 'almost a conventual rule' (p. 322). Ada Potter, the woman whom Eadith 'ordains' as her deputy, is 'got up' in 'a conventual habit' (p. 323). The girls who compose 'the order' (p. 324) of which Eadith is head are described in a notably grotesque — because pointedly obscene and contradictory — pun-metaphor as 'lubricious sisters' (p. 324) and, as if in confirmation of the paradoxical nature of this pun-metaphor, as 'her vernal nuns' (p. 324) and later again as 'novices, on call' (p. 329).

I hesitate to call these similes and metaphors offensive — such a judgement is a function of one's perspective in any case — but surely they deserve the attention of White's religious critics in particular. White the religious novelist 'pure and simple' is notably absent here. These grotesque similes, in asserting likeness between subjects and objects that are widely
disparate in terms of social and moral status, draw them closer together and so subvert both. Eadith, the girls, and the brothel are satirically reduced by being drawn up in an inevitably unfavourable comparison to a higher order while at the same time the novices, nuns, sisters, abbess and the Catholic institution of the nunnery are parodically reduced by being drawn down to a lower order.

The grotesque similes and metaphors described here have not previously attracted the critical attention their pervasiveness, complexity, and insistency demands. This is probably because even those Australian scholars like Brian Kiernan who do consider the subversive aspects of The Twyborn Affair, are among the many critics who still understand the role of the grotesque to be, as Weisenburger points out, 'limited to ridiculous depictions of specific characters and settings'\textsuperscript{14}. But if we reflect it can be seen that White's grotesque tropes exceed this limitation because their 'apples to oranges' comparisons, their multi-point attack, their hybrid categorizations, and their contradictions, set them against the formalist proposition that satire must have a clear object of attack and that it typically upholds normative standards and values against which excessive, eccentric or otherwise 'aberrant' behaviour may be judged. White's grotesque similes and metaphors not only ambivalently attack the subjects and objects of comparison but also our ways of signifying being and, moreover, far from signifying order as a normative value, celebrate disorder. This is the kind of disorder that constitutes a disarray of category that is essentially anterior to semiosis. As such this disorder is clearly antithetical to the production and consumption of stable signs.

The irruption of these grotesque similes and metaphors in White's satire should not be underestimated for they initiate what has described as the postmodernist turn in his work\textsuperscript{15}. In Part One, White carefully sets down Angelos Vatatzes in terms of various animal, vegetable, or mineral tropes, in Part Two he subjects many more characters to these kinds of tropes, and in Part Three

\textsuperscript{14} Weisenburger, p. 24.
not only are most of the characters individually subjected to such similes and
metaphors or collectively subject to his conventual metaphor but they are all
juxtaposed to the insectivorous image of the brothel as a (bee)hive of human
degeneracy. White’s characters not only become sufficiently ridiculous
and/or monstrous to rebuke the very idea of category and to compose a
terrestrial chaos but the tropes that envelop them inscribe significant
disruptions to codified knowledge by way of the intermixing of categories
that they effect, categories of being that our systems of language, and thus our
systems of representation, normally keep discrete. White, through his
grotesque imagery, is playing an atavistic game with a differential order of
signifiers, but because we as readers are necessarily involved in this play of
signifiers, we are also implicated in this atavistic game.

Because the incongruent and irreverent similes that White deploys,
especially those comprising his conventual metaphor, are pulled from distant
lexical fields, our first response to them is to laugh. However, we are only so
enlisted if we are not offended and if we have the interpretive competence to
participate in what may be called White’s disfiguration. If we do respond to
these tropes as indeed the novel invites us to, we also draw inferences about
the nature of White’s satire. We thus begin to read these tropes
contrapuntally, that is, against the grain of what is, or appears to be, an
accumulating and deadly serious modernist narrative. It is in this way that we
as readers become implicated in White’s atavistic game. This is the point of
grotesque art: it does not so much attack existence but the categorical
imperatives through which we shape experience. Ultimately, these grotesque
tropes not only contribute to White’s emerging grotesque satiric style but they
also semantically and pragmatically ally The Twyborn Affair with post-
modern fictional satire because of the challenge they issue to conventional
signification and to the notion of the linear or progressive narrative. The
second feature of grotesque degenerative post-modern satire that White’s
work exhibits in this novel is the kind of carnivalesque setting that serves as
the ground of grotesque figuration.
A Carnivalesque Setting or Life and Death in the Brothel of the World

Part Three begins with Lady Maud Bellasis and Lady Kitty Binns of Beckwith St, London, and their observation of ‘the goings-on’ that reveals number ‘Eighty-Four’ (p. 305) to be a whorehouse and its owner, the ‘rather odd Mrs Eadith Trist’, to be a madam (p. 311). White immediately subjects these two elderly sisters to ridicule by irony — Kitty’s virtue ‘in her younger days hadn’t been much more than a theory...and an admirable arrangement...till with age and reduced circumstances she suddenly found herself set cold in the aspic of fact’ and Maud, ‘flat and plain from the beginning, had never had the chance to test her virtue...and nobody would have been indiscreet enough to probe’. Both sisters “like to see themselves as ‘modern’” but only Kitty goes ‘the whole hog’ in respect of lipstick: she blossoms ‘like a tuberous begonia’ and so attracts the first botanical simile of this final section of the novel. We soon learn of the sisters’ real reason for abandoning their opposition to the brothel: they derive ‘a voluptuous pleasure in associating themselves with the imagined rituals of a sexual nature’.

The sisters’ imagination transports them inside the brothel where, amid reclining odalisques on satin cushions, gentlemen ‘with familiar faces, cousins and nephews, their favourite Gravenor, even their father the late duke, unbutton their formal black’ (p. 308). Because their interest is so pleasurably vicarious — ‘it was preposterous, monstrous, but delicious’ — the Ladies settle down to ‘the humdrum of living’, to life ‘in which they no longer had a part, except as extras stationed at a window, waiting for the real actors to appear’. A ‘real actor’ soon appears and the Ladies discover that the brothel is patronised by their ‘favourite Gravenor’, Lord Gravenor, Roderick Bellasis. When ‘lucky enough’, the ladies catch sight of their ‘favourite, if elusive nephew’ arriving or leaving ‘the house which played the most considerable part in their withering, insomniac lives’.
These first few pages of Part Three do not simply provide a pointed but intelligent modern satire of these privileged women as individuals or as representatives of a social type. White subverts Maud and Kitty but he also presents them, through their imaginative responses, their voluptuous pleasures, their vicarious and personal interests, as voyeuristic observers of the 'goings on' that centre on the brothel opposite their residence in Beckwith St. Their level of engagement casts them in the role of spectators to carnival in that it evokes the sexual energy and excitement of carnival. White thus suggests Beckwith St and its brothel to be the site of carnival and thus he provides the ground that grotesque figuration requires.

This development in Part Three recalls the extraordinary theatricality of *The Eye of the Storm*. The sisters, in appearing as imaginative participants and thus highly subjective observers of the brothel and its associated activities, loom as if they were members of an audience looking upon a stage through the so-called fourth wall of the theatre. The sisters serve to frame the opening scenes of Part Three in this theatrical way but in doing so they invite us to recognise as readers that we too, interpret the novel from an exterior position constituted by our own subjective sensibility and, rather more playfully, that in apprehending the life and the lives rescripted within the novel, we, too, are voyeurs.

The novel is at some pains to reinforce our sense that as readers we are these more or less subjective voyeur-observers. In Part One, the novel casts us in this role by placing us, via Joanie Golson, as eavesdroppers at the Vatzates' windows and it sustains us in this role by not revealing the nature of Eudoxia Vatzates' actual sexuality until near the end of Part One. In Part Two, the novel casts us in this role when Eddie Twyborn overhears the conversation between Don Prowse and Marcia Lushington. In Part Three, the novel not only takes our gaze across streets and through windows via the Bellasis sisters but also over parapets (p. 351) and even through 'a concealed eye' (p. 329) — a peephole — into the private rooms of the brothel. In casting readers in the role of voyeurs in this way, the novel demonstrates by
enactment that our perspective is not stable but shifting and partially obscured or distorted. All of these voyeuristic perspectives create the climate of spectator engagement characteristic of carnival.

However, this sense of our perspective being subject to shift and impairment is heightened when we are asked us to engage with the kind of phenomenal content that is always one step removed, so to speak, from the 'actual' or the 'real'. To effect this engagement, White invokes such refractions of the 'real' as occur in dreams, in the theatre, and in mirrors. Kitty Bellasis dreams of 'a clamorous plane tree, its foliage replaced by the faces of girls' and 'a turmoil of quaking buttocks and sticky bellies' (p. 309); when Eadith staffs her brothel she casts 'the play she had been engaged to direct' (p. 321); and, upon peering into 'the glass' on another occasion, she sees 'a woman of character' and 'a ravaged mess, a travesty no amount of lipstick or powder could restore' 'swimming out of mirrors and consciousness' (p. 351). These shifting and partial perspectives open up a raft of interpretative possibilities and so inhibit and indeed militate against the elicitation of any conventional or preferred reading of the text. The vagaries of these perspectives disable readers' attempts to reconstruct the narrative in terms of a single, unified authorial point of view, a single, stable 'meaning', or by consistent characterisation. White's text thus not only destabilizes itself but in doing so it challenges an important reader reception convention by subverting the aesthetic which asserts that texts ought to be written in such a way that their meaning and import are clear and thus reasonably readily available to readers.

It is a further measure of White's desire to destabilise his own work that his text suggests that his characters sometimes independently create the 'reality' of the novel. The text suggests this when it credits an exceedingly minor character, Evadne Schumacher, the Bellasis sisters' cook and, pointedly, a 'crypto-novelist' (p. 308), with 'perhaps' conceiving 'the additional conceit of the violet cachou Eadith took to chewing when got up in her purple drag' (p. 310). Readers may well ask whose conceit was this?
This device, and the instability that it produces, confirms White as an author increasingly concerned with his role in creating the world of the novel. What kind of world is this and what is my role in it, the novel seems to ask on White’s and our behalf.

White, in casting his readers as voyeur-interpreters, in more generally withholding stability of point of view, character, and meaning, and in playfully enacting the cession of his authority as author to a character, confirms his interest in extending the limits of fiction by requiring it to comment upon itself. Furthermore, in doing so he exhibits a healthy scepticism towards the kinds of accepted literary decorums and conventions that proceeded on the assumption that fiction could and should accurately apprehend and re-present truth-in-the world. These manifest transgressions of convention bespeak the post-modernist turn in this work that I referred to earlier.

While the devices I have referred to set up the carnivalesque setting that is crucial to the celebration of disorder that typically occurs in grotesque works, the most insistent image of disorder in The Twyborn Affair is the carnivalesque masquerade. Brian Kiernan rightly identifies this as part of ‘Bakhtin’s carnivalesque-grotesque tradition’\(^\text{16}\). In this masquerade the normal world is ‘turned upside down or inside out’ and various ‘others’ such has the criminal, the fool, the hopelessly dissolve, or, in White’s novel, the various hetaera, but especially Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith, take centre stage, if, in some cases, only for a moment. The masquerade as image of disorder is also evident in the cross-dressing masquerades that Joanie Golson and Eadie Twyborn enact at the Australia Hotel (pp. 44-45), in the disturbing mirror refractions that especially beset Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith, and in the cross-dressing masquerades that he/she enacts throughout the novel. However, the masquerade as image of disorder most powerfully culminates in the brothel scenes of Part Three because we as readers are made to spy on these scenes and are thus we are invited to see the brothel as a disorderly, chaotic, beehive

\(^{16}\) Kiernan 1997, p. 178.
of human activity. These images of masquerade as disorder, as well as the images of characters and readers as voyeurs, constitute the carnivalesque setting of *The Twyborn Affair*.

The carnivalesque masquerade that culminates in the brothel as beehive metaphor is central to the celebration of disorder that the novel effects but it is central in a particular way for the novel insists that we as readers create this world through our distorted limited vision. We don't know this world, we are not quite there, we can't see it clearly, so this world and what we are to make of it is unclear. The novel celebrates this disorder, as bad as it is, because, it is not entirely the novel's creation – it is our (flawed) creation.

In *The Twyborn Affair*, as in grotesque fictions generally, the topos of carnival is anti-representational for, as during carnival, nothing is what it seems, nothing is what it purports itself to be, so that during carnival characters move in a space only of surfaces, a space that has, ironically, no space for the fictions of the internal man. This is the space in which human subjects are just their simulacra or roles but, as Weisenburger has pointed out, in playing them, these human subjects 'discover the freedoms of the radical other, in absurd, monstrous opposition to a society of rigid stereotypes'. We need only think of the superficial and temporary success — superficial because inner torments remain — with which Eddie Twyborn switches identity to realize that his life moves entirely within a space only of surfaces. As a subject Eddie invariably looms as just a simulacra or embodiment of his present role and we may think of his ever superficial and always temporary success as a fair measure of the extent to which the fictions of the internal man bear no significance. It is, moreover, not only Eddie and the three minor characters, M. Pelletier, Ma Corkill and Maisie, who are, as human subjects, most evidently just the simulacra of their roles, but also most of the other characters as well. These characters, in playing their roles, do not 'discover' the freedoms of the radical other for themselves, but rather for White's readers. It must be noted, however, that they do play their roles to a greater or

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17 Weisenburger, p. 25.
lesser extent in more or less monstrous opposition to a society of rigid stereotypes. Eddie and Eadie Twyborn, and Joanie Golson, most forcefully mount this kind of opposition through their various (dis)guises, but it is also mounted by the minor characters: if we apply the standard form of address — 'Your Grace' — to the noble Lord Gravenor for example, it can be seen that his attitude and his behaviour run against the grain of the values implicit in this time-honoured honorific.

The openness of carnival extends its freedom to language itself in *The Twyborn Affair*, for it encourages a proliferation of discourse types including underworld slang, cant, professional jargon, popular slang, standardised English, obscenities, versions of lyric, and ethnic expletives. This flux of discourse emerges when Maisie remarks to Eadith that she expects to be 'back at it again' with her 'poxy' clientele and so on; in Eddie Twyborn's 'rather like a cunt' observation to Marcia; in Don Prowse's ethnic cant in respect of Dr Yip (p. 204) and in his denunciation of Eddie as a "'A fuckun' queen!'" (p. 284). Underworld slang, professional jargon, popular slang, cant and obscenities regularly occur and they do so in the context of standardised English. This clash of linguistic registers opens the field of permissible discourse because 'the literary' is counter-posed to 'the non-literary', the formal to the informal. Carnival, by way of this opening, is instrumental in illustrating the semiotic processes of dismantling and exposure of which satire is a part but more importantly, amid the consequent disorder, we are able to discover otherwise hidden points of view and specific orderings that are suppressed by or are in pointed opposition to authorized representations.

**Sterility, Violence, and Regress as Progress**

The third feature of degenerate grotesque satire identified by Weisenburger — regressive plotting and the obsession with violence that accompanies it — emerges early on in *The Twyborn Affair*. Thanks to his father's connections, it is arranged for Eddie Twyborn to work as a jackeroo
on 'Bogong', the property of Greg and Marcia Lushington in the Monaro region of southern New South Wales. White’s description of Bogong is cast in terms of a depressingly primordial past — the landscape is ‘cold’ and ‘huge’, the rocks ‘arranged in groups of formal sculpture suggesting prehistoric rites’, and the animals are as primitive as the landscape: the sheep seem ‘archaic inside a carapace of what could have passed for stone wool’ and the horses are ‘razor-backed nags’ with ‘slatternly’ tails. Eddie wonders ‘where civilisation ended, and still more, where it began’ as Don Prowse, the manager of Bogong, shows him to his quarters (pp. 174-179). This is clearly a sterile world, one that does not seem capable of offering Eddie the kind of refuge in which he might correct the mistake whom he feels himself to be.

Seemingly in spite of this evidently natural sterility, White depicts the culture of Bogong in terms of an aggressive masculinity. His method is deceptively simple: he has Eddie witness or learn of, or he subjects him to or he has him participate in, a number of gross, brutal, or otherwise ugly and violent acts. This violence is directly enacted or revealed through dialogue or authorial interpolation and it defines life at Bogong. It first emerges when Eddie witnesses the casually brutal way Denny Allen and his father treat their dogs: Denny idly cracks his whip at ‘his own cringing curs’ and, when a terrier attempts to rape a kelpie bitch, the father lashes out and ‘catches the terrier in the balls’ (p. 190). Eddie learns from Mrs Tyrell, the cook, that ‘bloody Kevun’ is ‘pokin the hell’ out of ‘our poor Else’ and that she herself is mother of seventeen — ‘a football team of boys’. It occurs to Eddie that her womb may have been ‘kicked to pieces’ by this football team (pp. 182-183).

There is also a recursive aspect to this violence — Mrs Tyrell causes Eddie to envision ‘a withered dug flexed for action’ when she insists on her nursing skills by telling him as he is recovering from his riding accident that she has ‘“taken on worse’n this…a family of seventeen’ (p. 204). This awful, almost chthonic image — the term dug usually refers to a cow’s udder — not only symbolises and satirises the vulgarity and harshness of Mrs Tyrrell’s life.
in the bush but it also invites us to recall *Riders in the Chariot* and the Lady from Czernowitz in the gas chamber at Friedensdorf Camp who is the only other woman in White’s *oeuvre* whose breast has attracted this abject term.

Violence, as it transpires, is endemic to both Bogong and the Monaro region: we learn that Don Prowse’s father ‘went broke on a place where Mexican thistle took over’ before finally shooting himself through the mouth ‘amongst the bloody thistle’ (p. 202). And Eddie is not immune from this violence: he is concussed by a fall from his horse and is dragged along the road until he grows conscious again of ‘the pains shooting through his ribs, legs, head’ (pp. 202-203). The peculiarly sterile and violent male world of Bogong is made profoundly clear when Eddie recovers from this accident only to suffer greater violence — Don Prowse anally rapes Eddie (p. 284). Eddie later reciprocates by violently raping Prowse — he plunges ‘deep into this passive yet quaking carcasse’ — in an act in which his ‘feminine compassion’ for this ‘pitiable man’ is subsumed ‘less by lust than a desire for male revenge’ (p. 296).

White ingeniously puts a fair measure of the far from unquestionable behaviour that he ascribes to Eddie at the service of the satire that he directs to Bogong’s aggressive male world. He presents Eddie as the antithesis of that world: Eddie, for example, not only succumbs to the temptation to try on Marcia clothes — he is ‘seduced by the empty garments’ (p. 282) — but also, when he overhears Prowse telling Marcia that he, her lover, is “nothun’ more than a bloody queen”, is so distressed as to go home, shed his clothes, and to begin ‘automatically masturbating’ (pp. 287-290). Eddie also harbours a cruelly unkind attitude to Marcia that is typified in his insensitive and misogynistic or brutally funny remark to her — it depends on one’s point of view — as they are about to make love in regard to ‘throwing open’ one’s poetry to the public “rather like a cunt” (p. 244). White’s obsession with violence is most profoundly demonstrated in his portrayal of ‘Ma’ Corkill, a very minor, comically vulgar, gross character whose sole purpose is to serve
as a vehicle for his dark wit so as to underscore the primitive horror of
Bogong.

Ma Corkhill — this 'completely toothless' 'she-ancient of she-ancients'
occupies her daughter's bed where 'the women's voices would entwine in a
duet embellished by roulades and trills worthy of a more rococo age'. Ma not
only swigs from a medicine bottle that makes her vocabulary 'serviceable' but
she does so while she sits on the 'double dunny' with her daughter. Ma's
inexplicable flinging of a kettle of boiling water at her daughter not only
brings to an end her brief visit to Bogong but also completes the shift in her
behaviour from the realm of the eccentric but amusing to the realm of the
downright horrific (pp. 286-287). This violent act is, of course, a device to
get rid of Ma after she has made her limited but notable contribution to
White's satire upon the male world of Bogong — Ma is even more coarse and
more genuinely and mindlessly aggressive than any of the male characters
who stupidly dominate Bogong.

The station owners, Greg and Marcia Lushington, are by no means as
gross or as grotesque, as abject or as absurd, as the other inhabitants of
Bogong. However, an aura of effete, self-indulgent degeneracy encircles
them. Greg is 'a slow old bastard' more interested in 'the travel life' (p. 186)
and in writing 'disgraceful poetry' (p. 232) than in his wife or his property.
Greg is an idle 'crypto-poet' who comically confuses the words 'placebo' and
'purulence' in his poem about 'unfulfilled love' (p. 238). This confusion
suggests that at Bogong, love, at best, may appease or reassure its recipient
even though it has no intrinsic remedial value and love, at worst, is no more
than a putrid excrescence. Such is Greg's nature that when he inspects his
property, he issues peremptory orders to his 'acquiescent' manager and,
ludicrously, tends to 'embrace the panorama with a Napoleonic gesture' (p.
194). The neglected and childless Marcia has no hesitation in sharing her bed
with Eddie because of the "the fineness" she detects in him (p. 221). As it
transpires (p. 287), and as the third headstone in the Lushington's private
cemetery — that of Gregory Donald Prowse Lushington (p. 230) — suggests,
Marcia has also taken Don Prowse to her bed in pursuit of the child that has twice previously eluded her. Marcia eventually falls pregnant to Eddie (p. 293) but, at the end of Part Two after he has abandoned her and Bogong, we learn that this child too has died (p. 300) so that their relationship symbolically affirms that which an unnamed ‘foreigner’— one of ‘those complacent Hunter valley squatters’— points out — ‘Bogong is sterile country’ (p. 229).

White’s description of Bogong and its degenerate inhabitants represents a highly subjective view of Australian bush life but it is almost certainly one influenced by his own unhappy experience of working as a jackeroo on ‘Bolaro’, a sheep station owned by a friend of his father’s in the late 1920s. However, the antipathy towards bush life that underwrites White’s account — ill-founded or not — produces a pointed, trenchant satire upon the male world of Bogong. An important facet of this satire is the parody that White mounts of the bush realist tradition of Australian Literature established by such writers as Joseph Furphy and Henry Lawson. This attack formally satirises the ideals of the tradition by recalling and parodying Joseph Furphy’s foundational account of the proper relations between workers and bosses on ‘the right thinking Australian station’, Runnymede homestead in his *Such is Life*. At Bogong, Greg Lushington’s stockmen rush to meet his every need, as Susan Lever points out, so that they ‘in the Twentieth Century did the sort of thing that has always been expected of serfs’ (p. 198). And at campsites, although we learn in echo of Henry Lawson that ‘the democratic spirit of Australia ‘prevailed’, we also learn that it did so ‘only after congealed chops were produced from saddle-pouches and the quarts had boiled’, then ‘men and boss sank their teeth into fatty chops, trying to outdo each other in a display of ugliness and appetite’ (p. 198). The novel undermines the tradition by

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18 An implied criticism of White’s antecedents given that they were originally Hunter Valley squatters.
19 See Marr 1991, pp. 95-96.
suggesting that the egalitarian ideals of Australian democracy are more honoured in the breach than in the observance and that all that unites employer and worker is a shared delight in gross behaviour.

Gross behaviour is central to White’s mockery of Bogong, its inhabitants, and his parody of the bush tradition in a number of ways. Don Prowse habitually relieves himself by pissing off the back steps of the staff quarters at Bogong (p. 188) and when he does so he also forgoes the egalitarian camaraderie offered by way of the quarters’ ‘two seater dunny’ (p. 190). This remarkable dunny, in being tissue free, provides White with an opportunity to exercise his vulgar wit — Eddie, on one occasion, wipes himself on a recipe for pumpkin scones (p. 190) — but also more significantly to offer this dunny as a grotesque monument — because shit-filled but hollow — to Australia’s egalitarian ideals.

This sense that sterility is the hallmark of human relationships and of life at Bogong is deeply underscored when Eddie Twyborn visits Denny Allen and his family in their ‘huggermugger shack’. Eddie is to ‘have a beer’ and meet Denny’s wife Dot, the daughter of Dick Norton, Bogong’s resident rabbiter, and their new baby (p. 274). The passages concerning this visit are recursive in two ways — they invite us to recall to the earlier rustic comedy that swirls around the O’Dowds in The Tree of Man even though this comedy is consistently darker — if not totally black — and they recall the much discussed epiphanies that occur in the earlier novels.

It is not surprising that Eddie’s visit is to the Allen’s is not auspicious for we know that Dot is ‘a miserable stunted female, of lashless, red-rimmed eyes, and nostrils pinched so close together the gristle could barely have allowed the passage of air’ — in short ‘a kind of runt’ (p. 208). Certainly her response to Eddie is less than enthusiastic — she dismisses him ‘to the limbo of foreigners and amateurs’ and shouts that she has ‘“No time”’ for ‘“swillin’ beer”’. She disappears into the ‘eternal smells of boiling mutton and burnt cabbage’ and when the baby begins to cry — it is ‘in tongue to split the
shack’s buckled boards’ (p. 276) — she blames Denny — “‘Bringin’ back mates’” — and shouts that he has “‘no consideration’”.

Denny, quite on the contrary, gathers up the baby even though it has become by now ‘the screaming, congested infant’ and sits down on the edge of the veranda coddling and cooing ‘‘Choo choo choo’’ at it. Even though Denny’s love, unfortunately, ‘dribbles down’ from his lips in ‘a slender thread of saliva’ while the baby thrashes around, ‘revealing that her nappy was out to dry’ — and the Allens’ poverty — he has a salutary effect. Dot re-appears ‘preparing some fresh outburst’ but finds the baby ‘laughing, her tender, gummy smile related at the other end of time to Peggy Tyrell’s toughened grin’. While the novel insists here that the prospects for the renewal and growth of humanity at Bogong are grey if not grim, Dot is more hopeful — she concedes Denny is ‘‘good with the baby’’ and murmurs that “‘Denny’s good’”.

It seems in keeping with Dot’s change of heart that she is, at this point, touched by ‘a moment of revelation’. But there is little comfort in this for those of White’s readers accustomed to and expecting such a moment of revelation or a glimpse of transcendence. Instead, there is an immediate and ‘active violation of grace’ in the form of Dot’s father, Dick, on his ‘skeletal nag’ with ‘the rabble of his mongrel pack at heel’ (p. 277). Dick is promptly told to ‘‘Fuck off’’ by Dot and then to “‘fuck orf — fuckin old Dick!’” by Denny — who is, paradoxically, ‘very dignified’ despite ‘the spittle flying in all directions’. As his son-in-law drives him off with gunshots, Dick’s final words are “‘Oo’d want a social visit with a bunch of bastards like youse?’” While the irony of Dick’s question may not be lost on readers — he is, after all, the father of Dot’s baby — it appears to elude both Denny and Dot: he is ‘exhilarated by his masterful initiative’ while she merely wonders “‘What will Mr Twyborn think?’” What Eddie thinks when he leaves is not how disgraceful family life at Bogong is, as Dot’s question presupposes, but instead he wonders, in a moment of seeming revelation, if he ‘wasn’t leaving the best of all possible worlds’ (p. 278). This suggests that although social
arrangements are terrible and life consequently exceedingly bad at Bogong, this life may very well be as good as life ever can be. Since the life Eddie has just witnessed has so little to commend it as good, let alone best, his ‘revelation’ is pointedly ironic so that, like M. Pelletier’s false epiphany, it mockingly rehearses those frequently discussed epiphanies, moments of revelation, and glimpses of transcendence in White’s earlier novels.

White’s world of Bogong is peopled by an ensemble of characters who are variably but sufficiently base, gross, violent, absurd or grotesque in their attitudes and behaviour to not only prevent the development of the relationship Eddie seeks but also to effect what Kiernan calls ‘satiric changes on the conventions of the Australian novel of rural life’21. This involves, in broad terms, an almost total denial of value to rural life: these characters do not overcome natural disasters like the characters in traditional Australian bush stories or demonstrate the value of mateship, or, for that matter, gain glimpses of transcendence in the manner of White’s own Stan Parker, but remain victims not only of a bleak and unrelentingly harsh world but also of their own ignorance or self-interest. Ma Corkill, Denny Allen, Dot Allen, Don Prowse, and Jim Norton deny, through their violations of decorum, the possibility of a natural order and, despite their wealth and privilege, the Lushingtons, in confusing the boundaries between normal and non-normal behaviour, contribute to this denial. The net effect of this sustained attack on bush life is to produce a grotesque if not absurd world that is almost completely value-free and not redemptive. White’s Bogong consequently resembles the brutal bush world that Barbara Baynton presents in such short stories as *Squeaker’s Mate* and in her novel *Human Toll*22 and so it is rather different to the worlds depicted by Henry Lawson or the other writers of the bush-realist school. White satirises ‘the bush’ but he also refrains from parodying Baynton’s work and this suggests that she may have influenced him, at least in terms of the tenor and tone of his attack. White’s satire serves

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to confirm Baynton's work while at the same time it, too, provides a counterpoint — if not an antidote — to such values as mateship and the ideal of the common man as they are represented in work of Lawson and the other bush realists.

At first glance, Part Three of *The Twyborn Affair* reads like another modernist indictment of modern life for the lives of characters unfold in a 1930s London that is painted in terms that consistently reflect the kind of doubt, disillusion, and despair evident in *The Living and The Dead* (1941) or T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* (1922). White’s Beckwith St is permanently on the relapse. Empty milk bottles once put out seemed to stand indefinitely, unless falling like hollow skittles in the night. On sunny mornings there were the skeins of cats entangled on the short tessellated walk between pavement and front doors. In the house where the vanishing race of servants was still to be found, whether the sad put-upon variety, or those doing an enormous favour before twisting the knife by giving notice, either sort would rise out of the areas, and from behind iron bars glance up and down the street as though in search of something they might never find — unless at Eighty-Four. p. 319

And

Mrs Trist had taken to walking, not only at dawn, the hour of forgiveness, but also by broad daylight, and farther afield, through scorching or soaking afternoons, in which newspapers blew in her face, or wrapped themselves in wet wads, like compresses, round her ankles and shins, as she shambled low-heeled over bottle-tops and broken glass, through dead kittens and vegetables, endlessly marching, round Islington, Stepney, Bethnal Green. What she hoped to escape or discover was not clear even to herself. p. 392

The atmosphere of despair evoked by these and similar passages provides a backdrop appropriate to a world made degenerate, violent, and chaotic by its inhabitants’ own behaviours. The novel proposes this violence as typical of a world that it describes as ‘determined on its own downfall’ (p. 321). Annabel abandons ‘the solid architecture of her noble origins’ to run out ‘into the labyrinth of lapsed values’ (p. 311) where she becomes ‘a born harlot and
mid-morning alcoholic’ before she dies horrifically ‘crushed by a train — at Clapham Junction’ (p. 320). Lydia, who attends mass as well as confession and who has been feeling ‘‘fucked out’’ and thinking of ‘‘giving the game away’’ (p. 330), confesses her sins and is killed for them — her body is found floating in a canal and her confessor, moreover, ‘arrested for her murder’ (p. 331). Dulcie has ‘‘a go at herself with the knitting-needle’’ (p. 350) and Eddie/Eadith bleeds to death in the street after an exploding German bomb severs her hand as she is making her way across London to meet her mother, Eadie (pp. 429-431). Because the characters insistently and consistently enact these kinds of behaviours, the world of Part Three far exceeds the worlds of Parts One and Two in terms of degeneracy, violence, and chaos. This world suggests White’s philosophic disposition is becoming increasingly despairing.

Even those passages that are comically energised by White’s dark wit also forcefully evoke a degenerate, chaotic, violent world. These passages serve as notably incandescent markers of eccentricity of appearance, attitude, or behaviour, irrespective of whether or not a character serves an active or passive role as agent or victim, or even as both. Only a few examples can be given here but there are many others distributed throughout Part Three. Where The Duke, the father of Lord Rodney, dies from a ‘drawn-out bout with unconfessed syph’ (p. 347), Brigadier Blenkinsop dies ‘astride the negress from Sierra Leone’ (p. 361). Cecily Snape is ‘an insipid girl’ and one who is forced to leave the country because she manages to have an affair with ‘an entire negro band’. When she eventually returns she does so only to live alone, to go for endless walks in the rain, and to curl up in bed with her fifteen dogs ‘without even taking her gumboots off’ (pp. 337-338). Lord Roderick himself is not deterred by the ‘B.O.’ of Bobbie, one of Eadith’s girls, or her mismatched breasts, but rather prefers her because sleeping with ‘‘even a distant cousin is a little bit incestuous’’ (pp. 313-314). In all of these passages both ends of the spectrum of supply and demand, as it were, attract White’s scorn so that it appears that the targets of his satire are not these
characters as individuals but the milieu, the society, and the world of degeneracy and random chaos in which they are located.

The violence that permeates *The Twyborn Affair* is inextricably bound up with the third feature of grotesque satire, regression as the principle of its action, its plot. Grotesque satire requires for its plots a kind of double action, that is, a regress in the form of a progress. The life of Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith in particular reflects regress in the form of progress. Eudoxia Vatatzes, in returning to Australia and in going to Bogong as Eddie Twyborn seems about to make progress — as Eddie Twyborn she seems about to regain 'her' birth identity. But circumstances, not least the violence he/she encounters and perpetrates at Bogong, conspire against her so that this apparent progress is a regress. Eudoxia geo-physically goes back in a painful and unsuccessful attempt to recover — as much as to discover — her former self. At the same time this move back is progressive because to go back to make such an attempt represents progress in the light of her difficulties as Eudoxia Vatatzes. Similarly, Eddie's return to Europe to emerge as Mrs Eadith Trist is a regress because she again goes back in another attempt to recover/discover a former self while at the same time it represents progress in light of the difficulties he experiences at Bogong as Eddie Twyborn. That Eddie as Eadith Trist the transvestite London madam does recover something of his/her former self as Eudoxia the transvestite lover of Angelos Vatatzes, confirms that his/her life and thus the plot of the novel effects regress in the form progress. Eddie finally 'progresses' to London but this too is a regress for her life there is far from satisfactory — the violence that permeates the novel eventually kills her there.

White's story of Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith's life exemplifies regressive plotting: she/he seems to progress by making major moves to other worlds but this movement is a regress not only because she/he invariably goes back to discover/recover her self but also because she/he never recovers her/him self because her/his engagement with these worlds is only bound up with their surfaces — with clothes, make-up, appearances and with ephemeral
phenomena such as mirror refractions, dreams, self-perceptions, and impossible relationships. Even in the ‘real’ Australian world of Bogong — real because harsh, bitter, and seemingly native to Eddie — we may recall his concern as to whether he will ‘ever succeed in making credible to others the new moleskins and elastic sides’ (p. 183) and the occasion when he is ‘seduced’ (p. 282) into dressing himself in the clothes of his absent lover, Marcia. This failure to discover/recover self suggests that there is no self to recover, that identity too, is a masquerade, an endless series of performances without a consistent entity behind the masks. This regress to various shadowy, reflective, insubstantial worlds that fail to produce any sense of identity for Eddie constitutes a satire on the much discussed ‘quest for identity’ theme that was originally identified in The Tree of Man.

The obsession with violence in grotesque degenerative satire, as Weisenburger points out, has produced over-determined plots and thus a structural counter-pointing ‘so articulated as to seem an intensely reasoned hysteria’. This argument is largely borne out by The Twyborn Affair for violence interpenetrates White’s satire as an insistent trope — in Angelos Vatatzes’ perfervid imagination, in the harsh reality of Bogong, in the brothel scenes, in London itself, in the fates of so many minor characters, and in Eddie’s death. Violence in this novel does produce an over-determined plot for it rules the lives and determines the fates of many of the characters — the sexual violence to which Don Prowse subjects Eddie, for example, not only produces reciprocal violence but this in turn drives him away from Bogong and eventually to his fate in Europe. And Ma Corkill, a minor character, disappears from the narrative altogether on account of her violent behaviour. This plot thus violently imposes order on disorder through its radical (de)terminations so that it constitutes something of an intensely reasoned hysteria against violence itself. This violence, moreover, is atavistic and thus it suggests itself, as Weisenburger describes it, to be ‘the only stop’ humanity creates for incompleteness (p. 27). As Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith makes his/her regressive progress through all manner of more or less violent dislocations,
guises, mirrorings, digressions and regressions she/he provides an exemplary model of this kind of incompleteness. The recurrent, atavistic violence of another war kills Eddie for her essential incompleteness and so violence looms as an obsession in this novel. However, violence, despite its pervasiveness and its atavism, does not quite restore order to the novel for White ensures that it ends on an ambiguous note when the bulbul dips his beak, cocks his head, and shakes his little velvet jester's cap (p. 432). Ultimately, White's grotesque style and his regressive plotting, the topos of carnival, enable to him to produce a novel that defies the processes of reading that conventionally seek to integrate the text with social and aesthetic norms or with consensus building.

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This chapter initially focussed on the notably recursive quality of White's work in *The Twyborn Affair* to show how this novel evinces a number of the characteristics and features of the four earlier novels that concern this study. *The Twyborn Affair* opens after Edith Wharton in the first instance for the same reason *Voss* opens in the manner of Jane Austen — to mock affectedly pretentious human social behaviour — but in the second and more important instance, it opens in Wharton comic mode to draw our attention to the tendency of critics to read literature in terms of established, clearly delineated genres. The later novel not only subverts the reading of Part One as a comedy of manners by satirically undercutting the relevance of Wharton's work, but it also calls our attention to some of the earlier criticism of White's work. We may recall Geoffrey Dutton's observation regarding 'the traditionally ironic comedy of Jane Austen ...as in the society episodes in *Voss* and Brian Kiernan's description of the opening scenes of that novel as introducing an 'ironically poised comedy of manners that is sustained throughout'. What *The Twyborn Affair* suggests is not that these critical responses have no

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grounds but that they are limited insofar as they overlook, obfuscate, and ultimately deny White's subversive purposes.

This chapter also discussed the gross but self-critical parody of his own earlier Romantic impulse that White enacts through M. Pelletier. It argued that this is a recursive parody in that it recalls the self-parodies enacted by Basil Hunter in *The Eye of the Storm* but also that it is satirical because self-reflexively ironic. The novel in this aspect deftly demonstrates White's *oeuvre* while at the same it locates itself in relation to the wider Romantic literary tradition. It does so by subverting aspects of its own earlier oeuvre-internal antecedents as well as aspects of its own earlier oeuvre-external influences.

In this chapter I also considered the extent to which *The Twyborn Affair* embraces and exhibits the features of grotesque satire. I showed how White's grotesque similes and metaphors, in collectively or individually encircling his characters, effect a bizarre intermixing of categories of being, how they blur the boundaries between character and scene, how they seem to celebrate disorder, and how they almost exclusively compose and thus dominate the novel's grotesque style. In their disposition, however, these grotesque figures also radically disturb the representational foundations of the narrative through the violations of tenor and consequent disruption of material surface that they effect between subject and object of comparison. This chapter demonstrated that the carnivalesque setting required for grotesque figuration takes the form of a vast carnivalesque masquerade in this novel that extends throughout it as an image of disorder. I argued that this masquerade as image of disorder is particularly evident in the various cross-dressing guises that Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith adopts but that various more or less phobic others take centre stage at least for a moment so that in this masquerade the normal world is inverted. This chapter also elaborated the essentially regressive nature of the novel's plot by showing how it is (over)determined by violence and how White's story of Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith's life is, essentially, a story of regression.

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This chapter demonstrates that White’s recourse to the devices, tropes, and strategies of grotesque satire in *The Twyborn Affair* should not be underestimated. His drawing on the features of this form and his mixing of them with those of conventional modern satire in the manner identified by Greenblatt, but also with those of parody, self-parody, and meta-fiction, as well his recourse to some of the other earlier features of his work such as a marked literariness and the playful use of literary references, allusions, and signposts, enhances the medley quality that is the chief characteristic of satire. That the novel comprises the features, devices, tropes, and effects of these various forms means that this medley quality is its chief characteristic, a characteristic that demonstrates White’s willingness to experiment with form in order to push out the boundaries of creative writing while at the same time it ensures that White’s work is never static, as generic approaches suggest, but ever-changing, ever responding to the problems and issues thrown up by life and literary art in new ways.

The grotesque style, the carnivalesque topos, and the regressive plot that White develops not only enhance the medley quality of this novel but also operate in their own right. Firstly, these devices, tropes and strategies, by way of figural reduction of the characters, the terrestrial chaos that this creates, the intermixing of categories of being, and the consequences of this for traditional signification, effect a radical change in the nature of White’s style. Secondly, they challenge the tradition of reading that seeks to integrate the text with social and aesthetic norms and with consensus building meta-narratives and so shift what would otherwise have remained a conventionally modern, seemingly corrective satire into the field of post-modern, degenerative grotesque satire. This comprises the last formal shift in White’s work and one that marks the emergence of his mature style.

However, the critical importance of *The Twyborn Affair* to White’s oeuvre does not solely ensue from the radical stylistic changes that he brings to effect in it. This, White’s penultimate novel, reflects his radically changed view of individual and collective humanity, of human progress in all its
configurations. This novel expresses what is an irretrievably bleak philosophy. Not only is the notion of progress finally rejected in favour of a notion of degeneration, of regress, but so also is the idea of the progressive novel itself. White’s philosophy, as it is produced in this novel, simply does not make the kind of affirmations that we encounter in the earlier novels. White does not make even a pretence to teaching Australians about their history, society, or culture, so the novel does not propose a better future nor does it affirm the idea that Australians are capable of learning. The novel is intent on mockery for mockery’s sake so that it does not even propose the limited better future posited at the close of The Tree of Man as the idea of progress through art or as the writing of Australian history at the end of Voss. At the end of The Twyborn Affair, even the reconciliation that its central character, Eddie Twyborn, seems to be granted with his mother, Eadie, is so far from complete and in any case so short-lived as to seem deliberately withheld and, in finally ending with a bulbul cocking its head and shaking its ‘velvet jester’s cap’ at Eadith Twyborn in implied dismay, the novel strongly suggests that life — and the art that records it moreover — is, at best, an enigma, a game, or a joke.

White’s satire produces this radically changed philosophy and his consequently bleak vision of human affairs because it is degenerative as opposed to generative. His satire no longer turns upon the four primary elements of traditional generative satire: it is not rhetorical because it does not attempt to persuade readers to a point of view, it does not have a single, clear target of attack in the ‘real’ world, it does not propose or suggest a corrective or ameliorative course of action in response to that target, and it does not propose itself as universally normative by appealing to some absolute moral code in order to validate the aggressions that ensue from the other three elements. Quite simply, this satire is not written nor is it to be read in the expectation of a return to order and grace.

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Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Patrick White is an impulsive but accomplished satirist who adopted and adapted the devices, techniques, and strategies that have been traditionally associated with satire and with such other subversive forms as parody and burlesque. It elaborates the way he not only mixes his modes of subversive writing in his post 1948 oeuvre but that he mixes the mix, so to speak, in variable proportions within his narratives so that his writing comes to comprise a rich medley of literary effects. Since White increasingly turns to satire and its related forms, 'the satiric' eventually occupies the pre-eminent position within this medley of effects. This study grew out of what I saw as a gap in White criticism in which these developments largely eluded the attention of critics.

This critical omission is partly attributable to the orthodox conception of White as a religious writer with which his often offensive or obscene satire does not sit well but also to the traditionally low status of satire, parody, and burlesque more generally, and to the problems that arise from formalist theories of satire. Anne Pender draws our attention to these problems when she ascribes the comparatively low critical interest in satire to definitions of it that are 'so rigid' that they ignore the satirical impulse when it is conveyed in 'a tonal quality or spirit rather than in a specific set of conventions'. The issue of whether or not satire comprises a genre or a mode of writing and the issue of whether it has corrective intentions and is thus generative or if it has not and is thus degenerative, propose themselves as additional critical deterrents. In response to these problems, this study argues that satire is best understood as a mode of writing, produced by instinct, mediated by temperament, driven by spirit, and thus it may be mild or extreme, wayward or controlled, obscene or otherwise offensive, socio-historically referential but highly subjective, not subject to a rigid set of conventions, and not intended as corrective or cure but produced to relieve the pressure in the satirist's own breast or simply for the fun or the hell of it. White's satire is testament to this formulation.

1 Anne Pender, Christina Stead Satirist, Altona, Victoria, Common Ground, 2002, p. 199.
My reading of the five novels selected here from the standpoint of satire enables this study to identify and elaborate a pattern of development that encompasses White’s post-1948 œuvre. This pattern of development begins in *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* with White’s re-visionary engagement with Australian history, myth, legend, and identity, and with the predominantly comic social satire that he mounts in these two otherwise serious, high-minded historical novels. My research into White’s sources for *Voss* shows him to be an author who draws extensively upon historical, ‘real life’ figures for his characters, and thus it indicates the extent of his engagement with history and his commitment to historical accuracy, while at the same time my analysis shows him to be an author who substantially transforms some of these figures by making them vehicles for satire. White not only engages with history as soon as he resumes his writing career in *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* but he also reaches out to satire as if to mediate the force of history that he confronts within that engagement. White’s historical drawings do not represent a failure of his imagination but are an integral part of his creativity and made all the more so because of his subversive transformation of them.

This study elaborates White’s expansion of his social satire in *Riders in the Chariot* through his attacks on the Hare family, Mrs Jolley, Mrs Flack, and Mrs Chalmers-Robinson. More specifically, it illustrates his use of the satirical devices, tropes, and strategies identified by Stephen Greenblatt in his study of the satires of Waugh, Huxley and Orwell in conjunction with four of the techniques and strategies of classical Menippean satire, particularly the strategy of sending the wise man out to confront ‘evil’ in the world, in order to sustain a number of hard-hitting and sometimes exaggerated satirical attacks on all manner of social issues and problems. The development of White’s satire continues in the form of the artistically self-referential satire by parody that he presents in *The Eye of The Storm* and in the host of often comical, typically playful literary allusions and signposts that he uses to underscore that satire. White’s willingness to experiment eventually leads him to employ the techniques and strategies of post-modern degenerative grotesque satire in his penultimate novel, *The Twyborn Affair*. This study thus reveals that White’s approach within this pattern of development was impulsive and experimental rather than determined and paradigmatic.
This pattern casts White and his novels in a new and altogether different light by charting the shifts and changes that occur in his writing as a result of his increasing and experimental use of satire and its related modes of writing. This pattern indicates that although his use of these subversive modes subsides in three of the novels from this period the trend within his oeuvre overall is to the greater use of them. These developments ensure that White’s satire, and consequently his writing generally, is not static but ever-changing and indeed evolutionary. It becomes clear that White only initially uses symbolism and allegory, that he inconsistently draws on religion and then comes to mock his recourse to it, that his novels are only psyche-driven to a degree, and that they come to express post-modernist as well modernist concerns. White experiments, he changes his mode of writing, he addresses fresh issues, problems, and concerns, including the art of fiction, his novels display a changing array of elements and features held in variable balance but also the nature of his satire itself changes so that his oeuvre develops in a way that reflects the great shift from modernism to post-modernism that occurred in the second half of the 20th century. His writing is subversive and ever-changing, enquiring in new ways, in new areas, and not static as the still dominant orthodox readings of his work suggest.

The successful mixture of history and satire that White produces in The Tree of Man and Voss seems to have given him the courage and the confidence to rather write as he pleases in Riders in the Chariot. This novel encompasses the historical sweep of the epic and the gravitas of contemporary history but his writing is remarkably unfettered and unrestrained so that he writes satire that is wayward and uncontrolled but also exuberant and powerful. White, in deploying the tropes and features of modern satire in the manner identified by Greenblatt and in drawing on four of the techniques and strategies of classical Menippean satire, also enacts what is his increasingly despairing view of humanity in this novel. He engages his four main characters as wise or good men or women in a hopeless battle with evil in the world and he draws upon another subversive mode, high burlesque, in order to highlight the failure of Alf Dubbo’s ‘Final Deposition’. White’s mixing of the techniques and strategies of modern and Menippean satire initiates a shift in the tonal quality of his satire — it is at times darkly comical but it is often unremittingly bleak because virtually all the characters are victims, they suffer a loss of identity, they choose to
play empty social roles, they retreat into private worlds, they are locked into circles of futility, and they neither understand nor overcome their suffering. *Riders in the Chariot* produces a dramatic shift in the nature of White’s satire by expanding and radicalising it in terms of its targets, tenor, and tone. This radicalisation, and the creative freedom from which it issues, is quite evident when White boldly takes his satire inside the gates of the extermination camp at Friedensdorf and in the grotesque parody of the crucifixion of Christ that he enacts at Sarsparilla. White’s courage as a satirist is proven by way of the decidedly adverse responses to his depiction of these events produced by Brian McFarlane and Michael Wilding respectively. These responses, moreover, indicate that White’s satire is truly a form of oppositional — if not adversarial — art. White’s recourse to and his mixing of these techniques and strategies not only produces the sharp, hard-edged satire of this novel but in doing so it also ensures that his satire takes on new meaning in that it is made to bear his philosophy, his increasingly despairing view of the society of humankind. My study thus reveals *Riders in the Chariot* to be a milestone in the development of White’s œuvre.

White employs a primarily literal psychological realist mode of writing in *The Solid Mandala* and *The Vivisector* in order to explore subjects and themes that were of personal and professional interest to him. These novels do not directly contribute to the development of his satire but this study shows that White reconsiders these same subjects and themes in *The Eye of the Storm* so that the dramatic turn inwards upon his own artistic activity that he executes through satire by parody in this novel owes something of its genesis to the two earlier novels. The self-referential satire by parody that White mounts and the host of often comical, typically playful literary allusions and signposts that he disposes in this novel ensures that the pattern of development that is this study’s primary focus continues in the form of another major shift in his mode of subversive writing. White mimics and mocks his own activity, and that of creative artists generally, when he turns inwards upon his own art in this novel. White’s use of *King Lear* and his witty, intelligent, and amusing references to many other literary works indicate that this turn is reflective and conscious rather than reflexive and unconscious. The novel consequently reflects a high level of artistic self-consciousness while at the same time it exhibits and enacts a recursive proliferation of signs and images that bespeaks what is White’s break
with modernism, a break in favour of post-modernism. This novel assumes critical importance in the context of the inwards turn I have referred to because what it indeed initiates and reflects is the change from the modernist epistemological concerns that underwrite and drive forward *The Tree of Man*, *Voss*, and *Riders in the Chariot*, and indeed *The Solid Mandala* and *The Vivisector*, to the postmodernist ontological concerns that find their ultimate expression in the grotesque degenerative satire of *The Twyborn Affair* and *The Memoirs of Many in One*. White embodies and enacts his own epistemological concerns in *The Eye of the Storm* principally through Sir Basil Hunter, his main character, whose foibles, fumblings, and failures, cast him as a parody actor-artist figure, one who serves to mock White’s own activity, that of the creative artist. White’s use of parody for satiric purposes in this novel not only demonstrates his willingness to mix and thus to experiment with the modes of subversive writing but it also provides an indication of the free-ranging nature of the critical disposition that underwrites and produces his satire.

This study recognizes *A Fringe Of Leaves*, the novel that follows upon *The Eye of the Storm*, as an historical work but one that constitutes an interlude rather than a disruption in the development of White’s subversive writing, even though it contains some satire, because it is a novel that he began and then set aside much earlier in his career. White’s completion of it exemplifies his commitment to his work, to the art of writing, to historical fiction, to history *per se*, and the creative virtuosity that he again demonstrates when he resumes and further develops his subversive writing in his next novel.

I elaborate the progress as regress plot and the grotesque style that White disposes within an insistent topos of carnival in *The Twyborn Affair*, arguing that this not only troubles the representational foundations of his narrative but also that it defies the process of reading that seek to integrate the text with social and aesthetic norms. I show that this, White’s penultimate novel, consequently exhibits the chief features of post-modern degenerative satire and I argue that these features are the proof and product of White’s shift away from his earlier modernist epistemological concerns to his later post-modernist ontological concerns, the shift that he initiates by way of the turn inwards upon his own activity that he makes in *The Eye of the Storm*. 
This study also shows that White’s experimental rather than determined and paradigmatic approach to satire is beneficial to his writing. This experimentation begins with the incidental social satire and comedy of *The Tree of Man*, it continues in the expansion and intensification of White’s social satire in *Voss*, in the radicalisation of his satire in *Riders in the Chariot*, in the parodic satire that initiates the meta-fictional turn inwards upon art itself in *The Eye of the Storm*, and in *The Twyborn Affair* where White’s fiction undergoes its most radical shift by entering the field of the post-modern, degenerative, grotesque satire. This study thus shows that White’s writing up to and including *The Twyborn Affair* is never static, that he is not a religious novelist ‘pure and simple’, that he is not a writer of any particular genre, even though he realises his mature, predominately satiric style in *The Twyborn Affair*. White’s mature style is ironic but also playful, comic, and intimate, while at the same time it is less obviously self-referential in artistic terms but grotesque and degenerative and thus newly subversive in that the characters are now grotesquely figured and the narrative regressively plotted. The extent to which White’s last novel, *The Memoirs of Many in One*, is stylistically similar to *The Twyborn Affair* confirms that he realised his mature style in the earlier novel but, if he had lived longer, there is no reason to assume that his novels may not have reflected further experimentation and change.

The radicalisation of White’s satire is the single most important feature of his work that this study reveals. This shift implicates his satire in making manifest the changing philosophy that is the ultimate meaning of his work and, in so doing, it establishes his attitude to Australia, to the world in which he is located and upon which he draws. White’s satire is typically an expression of discontent and despair but its radicalisation is a further, more angered expression of it so that the significance of his satire now resides in what it suggests of his changing philosophy or worldview. White’s attitude towards Australia and Australian history, society, and culture, is initially positive in both *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* when he affirms the idea of human progress and so proposes a better future, the kind of future that he suggests in *The Prodigal Son*. The social satire that White mounts in these novels seems to serve this affirmative purpose too, in that it mocks and so draws out attention to the foibles and failures of humankind. The radicalisation of White’s satire in terms of its targets, tenor, and tone, and his use of it in conjunction with
grotesque parody and high burlesque means that it serves no such affirmative purpose in *Riders in the Chariot*. Instead this satire indicates that White's critical attitude towards Australia and Australians has hardened, that his faith in their possibilities and prospects has weakened, and it means that his philosophy of Australia has changed, that the island continent does not offer — let alone guarantee — social progress or a better future.

White's satire in *The Eye of the Storm*, specifically the satire by parody that effects an inwards turn upon his own activity, produces further philosophic change in his work. His mockery of the problems and processes involved in the creation of fictional worlds ridicules creative activity, including his own, by not only calling into question his ontological status as a creative artist located within the society and culture upon which he draws but also the ontological status of the work itself as the product of that creative activity. The emergence of White's ontological concerns in this novel's satire indicates that his philosophy of literary art has changed for his faith in its redemptive power of has dissolved so that art has become for White rather more a game than a legitimate, serious, educative, creative activity. This philosophy of literary art finds its fullest expression in the post-modern degenerative satire that White presents in *The Twyborn Affair* and in his last novel, *The Memoirs of Many in One*. The philosophy that his satire produces as the ultimate meaning of his work in these last novels consists of a worldview that insists that life, including White's own life and work, is but a game, a game signalled at the end of the tragi-comedy of Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith's life in *The Twyborn Affair* when the red jester bird cocks crest at the world — our world as White's readers — and in the artful meta-play between the imaginary and the real that White effects in *The Memoirs of Many in One*, his last novel but one which is kind of meta-play in which he appears as both Editor and character.

I have sought by focusing upon and drawing out White's satire to provide a reading of five of his novels that accounts for the major shifts and changes that occur in his *oeuvre* after his return to Australia in 1948. This focus counter-poses this study to the extant criticism that originally saw White as a symbolist–allegorist and which went on to insist on conceiving of him a determined modernist, an élitist, or a mother-hating misogynist, but ultimately as a metaphysical or religious writer. There are grounds for these readings in particular novels but the proponents of these readings are seemingly unaware of White's
increasing use of satire and the pattern of development that it produces. These readings persist even though they cannot offer a consistent, satisfactory explanation for the development of White's body of work as a whole or for the last novels that establish his mature style and set the seal on his career, *The Twyborn Affair* and *The Memoirs of Many in One*. A reading from the perspective of satire explains the development of White's oeuvre in terms of style and meaning, in other words, in terms of art and philosophy.

The discussion of White's philosophy that this study pursues shows that he was not — nor did he become — a religious writer in any conventional sense. The only religion White appears to have ever embraced was the 'religion' of art, essentially a faith in its redemptive powers, as Marjorie Barnard first suggested when she alone pointed out that art for White provided the solution to his bleak philosophy of humankind. Although White continued to write and indeed enacted the creation of visual, theatrical, as well as literary art in his work, this study reveals that he began to lose faith in the redemptive power of art in *Riders in the Chariot* and that he goes on to turn in upon art, initially in the satire by parody of dramatic art that he enacts in *The Eye of the Storm* and then more generally and aggressively in the post-modern degenerative satire of *The Twyborn Affair* and *The Memoirs of Many in One*. The development of White's satire, particularly the switch from the epistemological concerns of the earlier novels to ontological concerns of the later novels that it reflects, not only indicates that White lost faith in his own 'religion' of art but also that his philosophy was never religious but secular humanist. This is the ultimate meaning of White's satire.

The satire produced by White can be best understood within the context of some of the non-Australian satirical fiction of his period for although Anne Pender has recently and usefully re-conceptualised Christina Stead, the Australian novelist who was roughly contemporaneous to White, as a satirist, there was and is no substantive canon of Australian subversive writing, no body of work that can be said to constitute an Australian tradition of satire. While White (and Stead) employed satire and appear to have at least alerted such subsequent satirists as Frank Moorhouse and David Foster to the possibilities offered by it as a mode of writing, White needs be compared to, needs be understood in terms of such exemplars of the English tradition as George Orwell, Evelyn Waugh, and Aldous Huxley, and of the American tradition as Nathanael West and Flannery O'Connor.
This situation not only arises because there is no Australian tradition of satire but also because White's use of satire was ever-changing, because he never used a fixed or paradigmatic form of it, not even initially in his emergent satire in *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*. This ensures that White is continually moving towards the realization of his own distinctive — because variously mixed — satirical style.

My reading of White's fiction through the prism of satire allows us to understand the interrelationship between its formal and the contextual qualities. This study shows that White's satire in all its manifestations was the product of his experience, particularly of his intense, ongoing engagement with Australian society and culture after 1950, with the history, myth, and legend that underwrites that culture, and with the patterns of behaviour that characterised its contemporary forms and which he found objectionable. The thrust of White's satire is directed towards our historical and contemporary beliefs and practices, the very cornerstones of our Australian identity and sensibility, and we may see this in the topicality of his satire and in the currency of his satirical criticism in novel after novel. In addition, this approach allows us to circumvent the limitations of the extant criticism and the danger of continuing to see White in the same, fixed, time-honoured ways.

This study has deliberately limited its use of the biographical material on Patrick White's life in order to minimise its dependence on biographical arguments, but what must be pointed out as part of his achievement is that only a writer of his particular disposition, commitment, ability, and life experience could have produced the five novels that form the basis of this study. Only a writer such as White could have written exaggerated but entertaining, offensive but intelligent, unfair but amusing novels that are substantially informed by his knowledge of Australian myth and legend, by his historical research, by his study of English, French, and German Literature at Cambridge University, by his knowledge of the traditions and practices of Australian Literature, by his wide, ongoing reading of other literatures, and by his concerns as well as his perceptions. Only a repatriate, intelligent, well-read novelist like White engaged in a struggle to reconnect to his native land could draw upon and meld together these sources and influences in variable proportions but in ways that draw upon his experience and his powers of observation, that exercise his wit, that deliver a trenchant social critique, that question the reception of art and his own role in its production, that produce laughter or anger, that reflect his changing
philosophy. Although White's rambunctious satirical novels become increasingly degenerative in that they do not finally offer even a pretence to corrective or cure, they are, despite all the controversy they produced and the criticism they generated, the proof as well as the product of what was a deep commitment to Australia and Australian Literature.

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