Ambiguities of the Future: Theological Hints in the Novels of Patrick White

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Abstract: This essay explores the presence of and relationship between different visions of the future in the novels of Patrick White. In works such as *Voss, A Fringe of Leaves, Riders of the Chariot* and *The Vivisector* we can detect traces of what Moltmann calls "calculable" and "desirable" visions of the future. White's treatment of the themes of the body and the land speak of a future that is made possible from within the framework of existing possibilities. Yet throughout his writing White also hints at a future that can only be received, often in moments of intense, and sometimes spiritual illumination. This dual vision comes to expression in the figure of the outsider, the judgement of art and, crucially, in White's repeated use of crucifixion imagery. In this way White, though in many ways a quintessentially Australian novelist, helps us to reflect theologically on aspects of the human situation and the tensions inherent within it.

1. WHITE, GOD AND THE FUTURE

I REALISE THAT, as a European, I may seem to be over-presumptuous in reflecting on an Australian novelist.[1] Moreover, for many people Patrick White is the unsurpassed modern Australian novelist and prophetic voice, though for other Australians a controversial, cantankerous, quarrelsome eccentric on the national scene, especially in his final years. Perhaps I might be allowed to speak about White because he belongs both to Australia and Europe, taking the great European themes and legends and setting them in the Australian landscape – placing the quest of the Odyssey in such novels as *The Aunt's Story*, *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves*, re-writing the myth of Plato's cave in *The Eye of the Storm*, and using the European appropriations of

1. This present essay is a heavily revised and expanded version of an earlier article by me, "Patrick White and the Vision of God", *Christian* 9/4 (1985) 42-55, which is drawn on by kind permission of the editor and publishers of *Christian*.

the Genesis narrative in *The Tree of Man* and of the crucifixion story – as we shall see – just about everywhere.[2]

To remark that Patrick White is above all an Australian novelist is not simply to speak of his nationality. In epic style, he takes a whole continent as a symbol for the human condition, and for the possibility of growth in the spiritual life. The struggle of the pioneers and explorers with the deserts and outback of Australia reveals a basic tension in human existence, between physical limitations on the one hand and the freedom to transcend them towards the future on the other. May an outside observer suggest that this is the position in which modern Australians also find themselves, caught between the physical boundaries of their island-continent and the wide open future which a new and expansive country offers in the Asia-Pacific region? But this polarity also charts the universal human situation, of living in the tensions between our past, present and future. Speaking of her awareness that she has discovered too little of her country, Laura Trevelyan in White's novel, *Voss*,[3] goes on to reflect that:

> Knowledge was never a matter of geography. Quite the reverse, it overflows all maps that exist. Perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind. (p. 446)

But, you might well ask, does White have any hope for the future at all? Reading his views on national life in his letters, you might not think so. Here I am going to quote from an unpublished letter which I am pleased to own myself, written to his cousin and friend Peggy Garland in an Oxfordshire village in August 1981; it pulls no punches with regard to either the UK or Australia, alluding to the royal wedding of Charles and Diana against the background of riots taking place in British cities due to racial tensions and urban poverty, and to the current election in Australia. It begins:

> We have been thinking about you during all the upheavals in England and imagining how distressing you must find it. Or perhaps one isn't conscious of what is happening unless living close to it. The revolutionary scenes made the fairytale wedding and congregation of the rich and glamorous even more nauseating. Almost everyone I despise in Australia seems to have flown over to London for the occasion. Our dreadful Fraser grows more hypocritical every week, & even his supporters are starting to express disgust – but they may continue voting for him when it

2. David Coad, "Patrick White: Prophet in the Wilderness", *World Literature Today* 67/3 (Summer 1993) 510-14, has stressed this: see pp. 510-11.

3 . Patrick White, *Voss* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960).

> comes to an election, too afraid their money will be taken from them if they don't.[4]

This sour polemic seems to show little sign of hope for the future. Indeed, it echoes the shock that White felt on returning to Australia in 1948 after his upbringing and education in England, and finding that "in all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness,[5] in which the mind is the least of possessions...and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves."[6] The appalling danger which White perceived is that people might settle for some easily obtainable average, for the mediocre. With a lacerating satire he portrays the fostering of the merely average and the banal in society, with its roots in the mercantile Sydney of the last century, and its deadly flowering in the suburbs of today.

But there is also plenty of evidence that White returned after twenty years to the rural Australia depicted in his first novel *Happy Valley*, written in exile in London, because he saw in his home country a place of new beginnings, even of utopian possibilities. Following a highly idiosyncratic kind of religious conversion in the early 1950s, his novels from *The Tree of Man* onwards are an attempt to reach towards this desired future by filling up the spiritual void he detected in Australian life. In contrast to the average, his heroic characters are called to live at the extremes of life, summoned to contradict the commonplace. Outrageous, excessive figures as they are, they are called to venture into the freedom of the spirit, while at the same time accepting and even celebrating the joys of creaturely flesh, whether in the natural world or in themselves. They experience glimpses, fleeting visions of spiritual reality, and abandon everything for the quest of a God who is hidden, who travels incognito, difficult to find and know, a desert God who promises no consolation. White may then sometimes take the face of an agnostic, even being an atheist, but in his autobiography he writes:

> What do I believe? I am accused of not making it explicit. How to be explicit about a grandeur too overwhelming to express, a daily wrestling match with an opponent whose limbs never become material, a struggle from which the sweat and blood are scattered on the pages of anything the serious writer writes? A belief contained less in what is said than in the silences. In patterns on water. A gust of wind. A flower opening.[7]

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4. Letter dated 23.viii.81, given to me in 1998 by Tanya Garland, daughter of Peggy Garland, formerly Withycombe, English cousin of White. Content copyright (©) the Estate of Patrick White.
5. Patrick White, "The Prodigal Son", *Australian Letters* 1/3 (1958) 37-40, see p. 40.
6. Coad, "Patrick White: Prophet in the Wilderness", 514, n. 3.
7. Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass: A Self-portrait* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981) 70.

Earlier, during an interview in 1969, White said: "Religion. Yes, that's behind all my books. What I am interested in is the relationship between the blundering human being and God."[8] The point of this essay, however, is to claim that the spiritual quest for White is not just the only theme for a novelist, but the only hope for the future. The main theme of the Centenary Conference of the Melbourne College of Divinity is "The Future of Religion in Australia". I do not dare to instruct members of the College on this, as I know too little about either church or society in Australia to venture a view. But I do want to assert that according to Patrick White the future of religion is the future of Australia, or better, that there is no future of Australia without religion – that is, filling in a spiritual emptiness by noticing the hints of the transcendence of the human spirit which are shaped by the cross of Christ.

2. THE FUTURE TO BE MADE AND THE FUTURE TO BE RECEIVED

So let us turn to the novel which is most overtly about the future of this country, namely *Voss*. At the beginning it appears that two different visions of the future are envisaged in this story, set in 1845. First, there is the view of the prosperous merchant in Sydney society, Mr Bonner. While stuffing himself with a huge and luscious apple pie made by his wife, he envisages the wealth that the country promises, pontificating:

> "....this is the country of the future. Who will not snap at an opportunity when he sees one? And get rich, he added, with sudden brutality of mouth." "This country," protested his full mouth..... We have only to consider the progress we have made. Look at our homes and public edifices. Look at the devotion of our administrators, and the solid achievement of those men who are settling the land. Why, in this very room, look at the remains of this good dinner we have just eaten." (pp. 28-9).

Here is a commitment to the future based on the achievement of the present, a utilitarian view which bases its confidence on human efficiency, intending to subjugate and exploit a continent to meet human needs. On the other hand there is the view of the German explorer Voss, who scorns the conventions of polite and genteel Sydney society. The merchant Bonner is prepared to back his expedition to explore the country because he sees it as a path to exploitation of its resources. Voss himself aims at nothing less than wrestling with the continent, asserting the freedom of his will over the natural limits of the desert. The tragic plot, based upon an actual event in 1848, is the attempt of Voss to cross the Australian continent for the

8. Coad, "Patrick White: Prophet in the Wilderness", 514, n. 6.

first time. After a terrible journey only one man from his small band of companions survives, and he had turned back before the end. Voss is a man of colossal will-power, exalting the potentialities of his inner will over the external world. Others might find scientific reasons for the journey, but the impulse which drives Voss is simply his desire to master the natural limitations around him, and the desert is the only opponent which his pride will recognise as adequate to him. "I will cross the continent from one end to the other. I have every intention to know it with my heart. Why I am pursued by this necessity it is no more possible for me to tell than it is for you..." (p. 33). Voss dominates his companions, carrying them along by the sheer force of his will, regarding the Aborigines (who are eventually to hack off his head) as "his" people (p. 343).

He also then has a view of the future, and it derives from the European romantic vision of self-transcendence, drawing the whole universe into the self. In the Nietzschean version, the future belongs to the *Übermenschen*, the "super-men" who can exert their will over the world and its weaknesses. Gathering money and stores for the expedition Voss meets Laura Trevelyan, the niece of the prosperous merchant. She remarks at one point that "it is far from clear what my future is to be". He replies: "Your future is what you will make it. Future is will." Laura replies quickly, "Oh, I have the will. But I have not yet grasped in what way I am to use it." With a similar pomposity to Mr Bonner, we feel, he comments, "This is something which perhaps comes later to a woman." Subtly, White undermines this stress on the pure will by giving us an insight into Laura's mind: "Of course, he could be quite insufferable, she saw, but she could put up with it." (p. 68)

The flash of his will helps her in turn to challenge the conventions of her dowdy, self-righteous township; for example, she shocks polite society by adopting the illegitimate child of her family's maid. But while she gains from Voss the strength to assert her freedom, she also keeps hold of the limits of her creaturehood. In her love for Voss she sees his downfall threatening, for he has exalted his making of the future at the expense of accepting his bodily limits; his will has been distorted into a blasphemous pride in which he believes that he is God and not a creature: "she saw him standing in the glare of his own brilliant desert. Of course, He was himself indestructible. And she did then begin to pity him." (p. 90)

Though the ideas of the future held by Bonner and Voss appear quite different – one the utilitarianism of the average person, the other the existential passion of the visionary – they are in fact strangely alike. As the critic Norbert Platz has perceived, they both have an Enlightenment confidence in human progress, and see the future as a matter of subjugating the world through the superiority of the human mind over

nature as the human being imposes value on it.[9] My own proposal is that they both therefore see the future as a mere extension of the present, either the present conditions of economic progress, or the present conditions of human will-power. It is the theologian Jürgen Moltmann who refers to this kind of future as a "calculable future" and contrasts it with a "desirable future". A calculable future is a mere projection of the present, in modern terms the extrapolation of the curve of a graph or application of a computer model; it merely extends the conditions of the present that already exist and so has no power to transform them. Moltmann follows Ernst Bloch[10] in saying that "promise announces the coming of a *not yet* existing reality from the future of the truth".[11] He agrees with Bloch that the object of hope is not a "calculable" future extended from present actuality, but a "desirable" future which contradicts the power structures of the present. So the future is a "new pattern of transcendence", creating a revolutionary consciousness, challenging the status quo.[12] Moltmann urges us to wait for the God who comes in the future, doing something genuinely new and unexpected which is not contained in the present; this is no mere passivity, but a stance in which hope has the power to overturn the present structures of injustice, power and greed as we no longer find them tolerable in the light of a world to come. The new makes us impatient with the old, and so waiting and trusting in hope becomes a radical activity.

White presents just a slight sketch of a man in the expeditionary party who does have this attitude of trust, in the person of Palfreyman. This unassuming botanist has the humility which the Nietzschean Voss finds "loathsome" ("My God [Voss announces] is above humility" p. 90) and which he constantly mocks in such comments as: "Mr. Palfreyman, in his capacity as Jesus Christ, lances the boils." Servant of all, he does the most menial of tasks, yet he is a free man. Despite his weaknesses and absurdities, for which others told him in contempt, he can hold together the two poles of existence, flesh and spirit. As a scientist he is absorbed in the present conditions of the natural world, fascinated for example by the wings of a butterfly; at the same time his faith gives him a sense of a divine will which confronts the world with its own unconditional demands (p. 47). Significantly, the author offers an explanation for his holding the tensions of life in balance: "his trusting nature built a bridge" so that "the two banks of his life were reconciled...and it was seldom noticed that a strong

9. Norbert H. Platz, "The Western Consciousness of Novel Writing and the Image of Australia in Patrick White's *Voss*", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 24/1 (1998) 172.

10. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Vol. I, transl. N. Plaice, S. Plaice and P. Knight (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 235-49.

11. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, transl. J. Leitch (London: SCM, 1967) 85.

12. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Future of Creation*, transl. M. Kohl (London: SCM, 1979) 9-12.

current flowed between" (p. 46). There is the clue – an attitude of trust and acceptance, which White's other characters who have spiritual vision also possess. In Ellen Roxburgh's spiritual journey through the desert, for example, in *The Fringe of Leaves,* where she endures and survives a similar situation of capture by Aborigines, she "has no plan but will trust to God".[13] Elizabeth Hunter in *The Eye of the Storm*, a woman dying in a house in suburban Sydney and ruling her household with a brutal callousness, is finally able to surrender to death, "no longer filling the void with mock substance: myself..."[14] In the tension between present and future, the proper response is the simple trustfulness which White commends in the last words of his autobiography: "Not that I don't love and venerate...before all, pureness of heart and trustfulness."[15] As Holstius tells Theodora in *The Aunt's Story,* it is because "you cannot reconcile illusion and reality... [that] you must accept" (p. 293).[16]

This kind of trustful waiting can of course be misunderstood as mere submission to an absolute power, which rightly falls under post-modern suspicion of a dominating divine consciousness. In a personal letter which White's biographer, David Marr, kindly wrote to me he expressed the view that:

> The point at which Patrick brings God into the equation (and into human lives) is with this notion of duty, of calling.... I sometimes think this God of Patrick's is like an overseer of some great White property in the bush, standing at dawn on the veranda, giving the jackaroos their orders for the day: You, dig rabbits. You, briars. You, sow the top paddock" etc.[17]

Respectfully, since few people knew White better than Marr, the sense of submission I myself gain from the novels is a hopeful waiting for some spiritual reality to be disclosed that will open up new possibilities for the future. This is the urging of Paul Tillich to "accept that we are accepted",[18] or the kind of "waiting" on God described by Simon Weil.[19] Veronica Brady suggests that White recognises the Australian experience of being "outside history, left with a sense of alienation, of being controlled by forces beyond them which rob them of choice and of energy", but that White has confidence in a stronger

13. Patrick White, *A Fringe of Leaves* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) 329.
14. Patrick White, *The Eye of the Storm* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 551.
15. White, *Flaws in the Glass* 155.
16. Patrick White, *The Aunt's Story* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1958) 293.
17. David Marr, personal letter, 29 May 1996 (used by kind permission of the writer).
18. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (London: Fontana, 1962) 159-71.
19. See Simone Weil's appeal to the phrase *en hypomene*, in *Waiting on God* (London: Fontana, 1958) 50-51; cf. 35-37.

power which enables us to take possession of our situation,[20] something which Elizabeth Hunter finds at the eye of the storm and which she realises "existed...only by grace".[21] The future, then, is not merely to be "made", whether by Bonner or Voss, but "received" as something to be desired.

To return to Voss, in his last hours, imprisoned by the Aboriginal tribe which is to kill him in ritual slaughter, he too learns to trust in quiet humility. It is not just that he recognises his pride, and sees himself as "a frail God upon a rickety throne" (p. 390). He learns to face what life is left with a calm trustfulness, inspired partly by the memory of Palfreyman. When the survivor Judd misremembers Voss as washing the sores of the men and cleaning up their filth with his own hands, he is confusing him with Palfreyman, and yet he is not altogether wrong. Voss always had the potential for the vision which truly transcends life, for in Laura's final verdict upon him "Voss had a little of Christ in him, like other men" (p. 455). Palfreyman had been offered up as the scapegoat for human fear earlier on, killed when going to parley with the aborigines; as he shows them the palms of his hands which "of course would have been quite empty, but for the fate that was written on them" (p. 342), a spear is thrown and quivers in his side. This Calvary too is transferred by Judd to Voss: "There was none of us that could believe it when we saw the spear hanging from his side, and shaking." (p. 342)

My argument so far has been that White presents us with a desirable future which is to be received in moments of spiritual illumination. As Moltmann puts it, this is a future which has a power to transcend the present. With Voss, the hint of transcendence we have found so far is in the land itself: the hidden God comes through the sheer givenness of the physical world, and especially the extraordinary Australian landscape. Quite early on in the expedition Voss is overwhelmed by the physical presence and beauty of the land, which begins to impose itself on him rather than his imposing his will upon it. He often dreams about the landscape, in a way which is reminiscent of the Aboriginal "dreamtime" in which there is a spiritual intercourse with the land:[22] "At once the hills were enfolding him.... he was touching those same hills and was not surprised at their suave flesh. That which would have been reprehensible, nauseating, frightening in

20. Veronica Brady, *A Crucible of Prophets. Australians and the Question of God*, Australian and New Zealand Studies in Theology and Religion (Sydney: Theological Explorations, 1981) 72; so Patrick White, *The Living and the Dead* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967) 17.

21. White, *The Eye of the Storm*, 424.

22. Platz, "Western consciousness", 175, cites Amos Rapoport, "Australian Aborigines and the Definition of Place", in William Mitchell (ed.), *Environmental Design: Research and Practice*; 2 vols. (Los Angeles: 1972) I. 335. See also Manley Johnson, "Patrick White: 'Failure' as Ontology", *Journal of Popular Culture* 23/2 (1989) 3-80, see pp. 77-78.

life was permissible, even desirable, in sleep.... That is the hill of love, his voice said..." (p. 151).

In the much later novel *The Twyborn Affair*, Eddie in his incarnation as a Jackaroo (in a later life he is Eadith, the flamboyant madam of a London brothel) finds that the landscape enables him to move beyond his own self with which he is so ill at ease, releasing him into a new future: his "loss of faith in himself was replaced by an affinity with the landscape surrounding him.... it happened very gradually, in spite of a sadistic wind, the sour grass, deformed trees, rocks crouching like great animals petrified by time."[23]

3. THE GOD WHO COMES IN THE BODY OF HUMILITY

For White, the human body and the land are in communion, and it is in the body that God also comes incognito, disturbing the certainties of the present and opening the future. Voss is helped to his moment of vision by Laura, who is always present with him in empathy and intuition, though none of their letters to each other are ever delivered; she shares his final moment of exhaustion and illumination in her own fever. The dream I have already recounted fuses her body with the feminine shape of the hills. He also dreams of her riding side by side with him, consuming his words of love like communion wafers as he consumes her prayers for him that have sprung up like white lilies along the way. In mutual acceptance their lives pass into each other, "so they stood there, munching a while" (p. 393). The underlying image of the Eucharist is an apt one, for we are being faced with spirit become flesh; there is transcendence of the physical conditions of life and yet an acceptance of their most earthy nature at the same time.

In *A Fringe of Leaves*, Ellen Roxburgh actually shares in a portion of cannibal flesh. In a shocking version of a sacrament, "tasting flesh from a human thigh-bone in the stillness of a forest morning had nourished not only her animal body but some darker need of the hungry spirit".[24] She had admitted her membership of a community of human need, and despite the extremity of the event, felt she had received grace.

White, like Swift, does not shy away from the body with its various effusions, sexual or excremental. God is to be found in the flesh, with all its humble juices of sweat, blood, urine, semen and spittle. Elizabeth Hunter has her dying moment of vision while using a commode. In *The Tree of Man*, an earlier novel about struggle with the wilderness of Australia, Stan Parker has an innate sympathy with the rhythms of the land as he cultivates it into what is to be, ironically, suburbia. Cornered in the last minutes of his life by a fervent Christian evangelist who

23. Patrick White, *The Twyborn Affair* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981) 194.
24. White, *A Fringe of Leaves*, 245.

demands to know whether he believes in God, the old man has a moment of illumination:

> He pointed with his stick at the gob of spittle. "That is God," he said. As it lay glittering intensely and personally on the ground.[25]

This is not a simple identification, but a path marked out from flesh to spirit, while not leaving flesh behind. The "jewel of spittle" has its counterpart in a later novel, *The Solid Mandala,* where a glass marble performs the same function for the "simpleton" Arthur: " 'God', he said, and the spit spattered on Waldo's face, 'is a kind of sort of rock crystal' ".[26] The shiny marble (like a "Mandala" or Hindu sacred circle), with its solid knot of colour at the centre, points to the solidity of the spiritual life which just comes, as a gift of grace to those who are simple in heart; Arthur can dance the circling measures at the heart of the mandala, a dance which encompasses the joy of life as well as the passion of crucifixion, "the blood running out of the backs of his hands, water out of the hole in his ribs" (p. 266). Such is the vision which, to return to some words from Voss, "makes the world of substance to quake".[27] It comes from a simple acceptance of being accepted, for at the end of the dance, Arthur "added the little quivering footnote on forgiveness" (p. 267).

A more theological footnote on grace is added by Laura, as she lies in her fever with leeches filling themselves with her blood, at the very moment when natives are drawing blood from Voss who has now learned to be humble. In being brought down to earth – the humus, the place of humility[28] – he has come to understand how to enter upon the future, not by the power of will but as a gift. She reflects:

> How important it is to understand the three stages. Of God into Man. Man. And man returning into God…. When man is truly humbled, when he has learnt that he is not God, then he is nearest to becoming so. In the end, he may ascend. (pp. 386-7)

White understands that spiritual insight comes as a gift to be received, through the givenness of the land and the humbleness of the body, and that only this gives us a future. However, I have called this essay "the ambiguities of the future", and this does not only draw attention to White's uncertainty about whether his homeland has a future at all. In the theologian's understanding of a true future, there is certainly the need to receive as well as make, but there is also an initiative of God which is surprising and unexpected. God brings what is truly new in history through God's own advent, which transcends

25. Patrick White, *The Tree of Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961) 476.
26. Patrick White, *The Solid Mandala* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) 87.
27. White, *Voss,* 350.
28. This is pointed out by Platz, "Western Consciousness", 175.

the familiar sequences of human experience.[29] White, however, is ambiguous here: he seems more sure about receiving the future than about any divine action coming from it. On the very last page Laura, now a respectable headmistress, is asked a question by a visitor:

> "Oh yes, a country with a future. But when does the future become present? That is what always puzzles me."
> "Now."
> "How – now?" asked Mr Ludlow.
> "Every moment that we live and breathe, and love, and suffer, and die."

Then she adds: "Voss did not die.... He is there still, it is said, in the country." Is then the spiritual life – though greater than human possibilities – still to be received only within those already existing possibilities? Then we would return to a future only projected from the present, to the Bonner-Voss project. The future becomes present, as Laura says, but can it transform the present with the promise of new creation? Perhaps this doubt is at the heart of White's misgivings about his society. And yet in all his writings White seems to be waiting in the silence for something truly new, for the word that is not yet spoken, or the hue of colour that has not yet been mixed. Hurtle Duffield, in *The Vivisector,* finds in his last moments the "blessed blue" for which he has been searching ("indi-ggoddd" – a wonderful combination of indigo and God)[30], and Elizabeth Hunter, in *The Eye of the Storm,* finds the calm at the "eye" or heart of the storm where sea-birds ride gently on the swell, because there is a greater eye which contemplates her.[31] These are only whispers of a God, the outer fringes of his garment (as we read in Job 26:14), but they hint at the possibility of the coming of God.

5. THE COMING OF GOD IN THE OUTSIDER

In dialogue with White, I suggest that if we are to have hope for the future as theologians we must hold together both the possibilities that lie in the present, what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur calls the overflowing "excess" of human potential,[32] and the new thing that only God can do that reaches from the future into the present. Both must be received, both trusted in. We are confronted by this duality, I suggest, in the figure of the outsider, the outrageous person who has inner

29. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God. Christian Eschatology*, transl. M. Kohl (London: SCM, 1996) 26-29.
30. Patrick White, *The Vivisector* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) 617.
31. White, *The Eye of the Storm,* 532.
32. Paul Ricoeur, "Freedom in the Light of Hope", transl. R. Sweeney, in Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974) 405-07, 410-11.

possibilities that disturb society, but who also seems to be aware of what comes from beyond the present. Voss has a touch of this identity, and White's following novel *Riders in the Chariot*[33] accentuates this theme. It also portrays the hostility which people attract when they live in the vision of the spiritual life. The mediocre or the mere "average", turns out to be a malicious force. The banality of suburban life is the power of this world which crucified the Lord of glory.[34]

In this novel, White describes the lives of four very different people living in a respectable and petty community, typified as "Sarsaparilla". They are all conditioned and limited by the physical constraints of their life. Miss Hare, a semi-crazed elderly spinster lives in shabby, genteel poverty in a crumbling mansion; Himmelfarb, a German Jew, has escaped from Hitler's gas chambers to be persecuted in the factory where he assembles bicycle lamps; Mrs Godbold, a placid and plump woman from East Anglia, lives in a wooden shed and takes in washing; Alf Dubbo is an uprooted, half-educated aboriginal young man who sweeps the floor in the bicycle lamp factory. These four worlds weave together into the constricting, stifling world of Sarsaparilla. Yet each of the four transcends his or her limiting environment where the other inhabitants wallow in mediocrity. Miss Hare has an awkward love of truth, Mrs Godbold has an absolutely reliable compassion which builds a close-knit and loving family, Himmelfarb has a mystical spirituality nourished on Jewish writings, and Dubbo has a remarkable gift for painting in which he can distance himself from his surroundings and see them from a new perspective. In fact, they all see and know the fiery chariot of Ezekiel's prophecy which appears mysteriously to them; they share a common vision which is a common gift of freedom, and they gradually discover their kinship with each other as riders in the chariot. As Himmelfarb explains to Miss Hare:

> "In each generation, we say, there are thirty-six hidden zaddikhim – holy men who go secretly about the world, healing, interpreting, doing their good deeds…. "It is even told," continued the Jew, stroking grass, "how the creative light of God poured into the zaddikhim. That they are the Chariot of God. (p. 155)

They are and are not the chariot, just as human humility is, and yet is not, divine. It is important that the chariot appears to each of them in a way adapted to their background, for their intuitive mode of consciousness both rises beyond and yet also affirms their physical limits. It is spirit in flesh, a vision in the midst of both extremes of life. Miss Hare cloudily perceives the chariot in the forms of nature whose plants and animals are taking root in her decaying home and with which she

33. Patrick White, *Riders in the Chariot* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).
34. Cf. 1 Corinthians 2:8.

has an amazing affinity: "The wheels began to plough the tranquil fields of the white sky. She could feel the breath of horses on her battered cheeks". (p. 37) In her hazy vision she cannot see the horses, but Mrs. Godbold, whose solid strength and faithfulness is rooted in the fen farming country from which she comes, can visualise them very well: "the massive rumps of her horses waited, swishing their tails through eternity" (p. 67). Himmelfarb finds the chariot in the mystical writings of his Jewish tradition, which mould his being despite his earlier attempts to break away from his race. As a young boy, Dubbo stumbles across an engraving of the chariot in a book in the rectory which is his adoptive home, and from which he flees after a sexual encounter with his guardian; appropriately, the picture this time is Apollo's chariot.

The chariot with its upward movement is a symbol for the transcendence of the human personality over its boundaries, an intuitive knowledge of pure Being, a sense of the radiance of existence. But it is also the symbol of something new, a coming from beyond the present. It is found not through an assertive thrust of the will but as a gift of sheer grace in response to trust. This simple trustfulness is best displayed in Mrs. Godbold:

> In the performance of her duties, polishing plate, scrubbing the floors, mending the abandoned stockings...she could have been offering up the active essence of her being in unstinted praise. And had some left over for a further expression of faith to which she had not been led. Whenever the doorbell rang, she would search the faces of strangers to discover whether she would be required to testify. (p. 245)

But the novel makes clear those who ride in the chariot are the object of the fear and hatred of those who are trapped in convention. The average takes a terrible revenge on those who dare to live on the boundaries. Miss Hare is subjected to mockery from the self-righteous Mrs Jolly: "Who is not wicked and evil, waiting for chariots at sunset, as if they was taxis?" (p. 88). Yet more savage is the mock-crucifixion of Himmelfarb by his work-mates, who string him up on a tree as a banal joke, giving him injuries from which he dies on the next day, which happens to be Good Friday. In his agony, Himmelfarb waits for God, directing his trust to the Mystery which the chariot represents, "and was conscious of a stillness and a clarity, which was the stillness and the clarity of pure water, at the centre of which God was reflected" (p. 413). His humble waiting must also finally accept the apparent failure of his self-sacrifice, for "Very quietly Himmelfarb left the factory in which it had not been accorded to him to expiate the sins of the world." (p. 418)

One normally perceptive critic, William Walsh,[35] has suggested that White overdoes the motif of crucifixion here, for the next day Himmelfarb dies of his wounds in the arms of Mrs Godbold attended by Miss Hare, and looking through the window of the poor shed Dubbo sees a modern version of the Deposition from the Cross; the body of Christ is received into the arms of the faithful women disciples. However such criticism perhaps misses the irony of the analogy; while Calvary is repeated, down to the last detail, it has no visible effect upon a wider society. Certainly, Dubbo has received the inspiration for the last masterpieces which he paints before coughing up his life in a tubercular fit, the blood mixing with the paint. First he portrays the Deposition and then the Chariot which he had always wanted to express, though as a symbol of apprehension of the mystery of Being, it cannot be depicted literally:

> Just as he had not dared completely realize the Christ, so here the Chariot was shyly offered. But its tentative nature became, if anything, its glory, causing it to blaze across the sky, or into the soul of the beholder. (p. 458)

But there are no beholders, or none with eyes to see. We are encouraged to think these are great paintings, yet when they are sold at auction "they fetched a few shillings, and caused a certain ribaldry.... Anyway, the paintings disappeared, and if not destroyed when they ceased to give the buyers a laugh, have still to be discovered" (p. 461). Those who are called to live in the vision find wholeness themselves, and share it with a few others, but they apparently remain outsiders to a wider society, unlike the institutionalised Christ. The God of the cross, coming incognito in the outsider, deliberately makes himself weak and powerless in the face of God's own creation, as the Apostle Paul perceived long ago.[36]

6. THE JUDGEMENT OF ART

The art of painting in fact provides White with an image similar to that of the explorer; the creator exercises freedom through working, even wrestling, with the solid materials of paint as the explorer struggles with the landscape – and White therefore understands painting as oil painting, with swirls and whorls of colour, as substantial as the secretions of the body. Once again there is a tension between freedom and limits, future and present. In White's novel which is the most extended study of the artistic experience, *The Vivisector*, Hurtle Duffield is regenerated in his creative imagination

35. William Walsh, *Patrick White's Fiction* (Sydney: George, Allen and Unwin, 1979) 62-63.
36. See 1 Corinthians 1:20-25.

through his tempestuous sexual relationship with Nance Lightfoot; he transfers her body to oil and canvas, which is the only place where he can begin to reach the final, eschatological truth that he occasionally glimpses in the forms and shapes of the world, "the last inch (that) you would never convey in paint" (p. 616):

> A sense of freedom started him whistling and singing, until he realised the wrestling match was on: to recreate the body as he saw it without losing the form of flesh.... What he conceived that day was vegetable in form and essence.... Like all human vegetables she was offering herself to the knife she only half suspected. (pp. 199-200)

The image of the knife is central to White's view of the artistic vision, and is reflected in the title of the book. Duffield is born "with a knife in his eye", and his half-sister Rhoda accepts as she goes to live with him in old age that it will mean being "vivisected afresh, in the name of truth – or art" (p. 445). To get at the reality of his subject, the artist must uncover layers of protection, and so runs the risk of destroying what he loves. This is not just a statement about art, but adds another dimension to the polarity between present and future in the human condition. An openness to the future can lead to a trusting simplicity, but it can (and probably must) also mean the thrust of the knife of truth into the life of the body. Future vision involves the eschatological aspect of judgement, and though this can be a healing self-knowledge it can also become cruel. Duffield is shocked by his sister's accusation, and White too appears horrified at times by his own art: "My pursuit of that razor-blade truth has made me a slasher. Not that I don't love and venerate in several senses – before all, pureness of heart and trustfulness."[37]

The other side of acceptance is judgement, and they must interpret each other, for part of a genuine stillness of spirit is "clarity".[38] A constant image in White's novels is the power which light has to expose things clearly as they are, and light is captured in paint. Hurtle Duffield half believes in God, whom he conceives as the supreme Artist and so (he thinks) as "The Divine Vivisector...otherwise how would men come by their cruelty – and their brilliance?" (p. 259). He can only conceive the judgement of truth as being destructive, for this has been his own experience; in a scandalous picture he presents the moon as "The Divine Destroyer", shining "waves of enlightened evil" upon a pair of lovers in a park (p. 336). It is only as he dies that just a hint is given of a new discovery, of "the iron feather which stroked" (p. 617); a highly compressed play on words here brings together the

37. White, *Flaws in the Glass* 155.
38. Walsh, *Patrick White's Fiction,* 125, aptly applies to White's vision the words of D. H. Lawrence about "clarity of vision".

stroke of the brush patting on "the never-yet-attainable blue", the knife-stroke of truth, the heart-stroke which kills him and the gentle stroke of a bird's feather. Yet since his attempt at brushing on "the otherwise unnameable I-N-D-I-G-O" is presented as a presumptuous playing at God ("indi-ggoddd") which is met by judgement, the end is still highly ambiguous; the iron which strokes him is a feather, but equally the feather is iron. There just the slight clue that the cutting edge of truth can, in divine hands, be an experience of acceptance.

The hint is perhaps stronger at the end of White's late novel, *The Twyborn Affair*. The bi-sexual hero of this tale, who is "twice-born" as son and as daughter, is constantly in search of the truth of the spirit through all the confusions and excesses of the flesh. As Eadith/Eddie dies in an air-raid he has a vision of "the Judge-Pantocrator looking through the gap in the star-painted ceiling" (p. 429),[39] and this evokes the relationship which he had always wanted but never attained with his father in childhood, though he has just succeeded in restoring his relationship with his mother. His mother's meditation could also be his: "…Eadith Eddie no matter which this fragment of my self which I lost is now returned where it belongs".[40]

The God who comes incognito in the land, in the humility of the body and in the outsider also comes in the judgement of art, bringing into the present the judgement of the Last Day when the truth of our lives will be revealed before the whole universe and we shall "know as we are known".[41] An understanding of eternal life in several modern theologies is of a state where this present life can be "re-viewed" from God's perspective of the whole of history; as Wolfhart Pannenberg puts it, "Eternity is the truth of time, which remains hidden in the flux of time."[42] For White, it is as if art has the power to anticipate this future vision in disclosing the hidden truth of things, sometimes causing pain, sometimes bringing out lost potential.

7. THE FUTURE WHICH COMES THROUGH THE CROSS

As we have followed Patrick White on his extraordinary spiritual journey through "the country of the mind" there is one theme that has been insistent – that of crucifixion, of which vivisection is a startling and perhaps distorted reflection. As Veronica Brady points out, "Every

39. White, *The Twyborn Affair*, 429.
40. White, *The Twyborn Affair*, 432.
41. For this concept of judgement as disclosure, see Luke 12:2-3; 1 Corinthians 4:4; 13:12.
42. Wolfhart Pannnenberg, *What is Man? Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, transl. D. Priebe (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 74; cf. *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, transl. G. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) 638-40; so also Eberhard Jüngel, *Death – the Riddle and the Mystery*, transl. I. and U. Nicol (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1975) 121-22.

one of his main characters in one way or another experiences a kind of crucifixion, or is in some sense or other an equivalent of Isaiah's suffering servant...." [43]

Of course, the familiar symbol is a useful way of focusing the pain of being torn between the present and the future which makes up the human condition in general and the Australian experience as part of it. White is telling us that there can be no future – for a religion or a country – without the pain of crucifixion before resurrection. But there is more than this. One theologian, Paul Tillich, maintains that we can only find the "courage to be" in the tensions of our finite existence, having the courage to "accept that we are accepted", because we know that God as Being Itself "participates in the suffering of existential estrangement".[44] This insight is fleshed out in the characters of White's novels. Just as they know a waiting for God, as the one who is known in the silence when all images fail, so they have the sense that this God is waiting also, that he is suffering with the outsiders, the poor and ridiculous who are mocked by the society of the mediocre. The God of the future who is beyond all images is not beyond the world.

When Mrs Poulter in *The Solid Mandala* comes face to face with the horrifying corpse of Waldo Brown, savaged by dogs, all the death she has seen on television and read in the newspapers "was turning real", and the icon of a romantic Christ comes crashing down: "And He released his hands from the nails. And fell down, in a thwack of canvas, a cloud of dust." (p. 303) Henceforth she will find the crucified Christ in Arthur, the "simpleton" who suffers for his brother: she resolves that "since her Lord and master Jesus had destroyed himself that same day, she had been given this man-child as a token of everlasting life" (p. 312).

Through the dialogue of White's stories with the Christian story, Christian believers can find themselves alerted to dimensions of the cross of Jesus. Failure to trust God in the tensions beween present and future produces the demon of mediocrity, and this is a crucifying power. The believer is brought to discover that the suffering God goes on being incarnated in the outsiders of society, who are rejected because their visions will not be conformed to the rules of the average; in living through their experience vicariously we can find the truth of the silence of Jesus, that it is not only the dumbness which comes from being misunderstood, but also a mystery of openness, a "waiting to receive" which is a kind of faith. Ambiguously stated though it is, White witnesses to theologians that there is much to receive in the present possibilities of the human body and the natural world, as well

43. Brady, *A Crucible of Prophets*, 74.
44. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Combined Volume (Welwyn: James Nisbet, 1968) Vol. 2, p. 203.

as from the unexpected and novel acts of God in a desired future. Indeed, the two cannot be separated.

The artist, the novelist, made in the image of the crucified God, absorbs the passions of others into himself, herself. But those portrayed find themselves brought to painful judgement, having to face the truth about themselves which is exposed precisely through the costly empathy of the artist with them, a truth which is the only gateway to the future.