THE ILLUMINATED BRAND: PATRICK WHITE'S THE VIVISECTOR

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ABSTRACT

Through the written word, whether in the form of novel, short story, memoir, or letter, Patrick White has struggled to apprehend the experiential "Word", which is the ineffable name for God. The cabalistic focus of this calling has forced the author, both as poet and as artist, to wrestle with the angel of his personal religious faith in many different guises and from many points of view, thereby creating the personas of a host of characters. As a result, he has developed a well-rounded vision of the human condition, at the centre of which may be seen, by those men and women initiated through suffering and love, the invisible-green burning bush of a profound spiritual life.

In addressing this concern, central to all of White's work, I have attempted to explore the precise nature and relevance of the religious experience as illuminated by the contemplative, apophatic "light" of the Christian mystical tradition, and as that "light", emerging out of darkness, corresponds to the creative spirit's sense of revelation. This study is composed of three parts. The introduction concentrates on White's personal religious bias qualified by Thomas Merton's belief and analysis of man's "fundamental religious instinct". The section entitled

"Preliminaries" constitutes a brief survey of White's novels in so far as they help to substantiate the basic premise of my thesis. The third and final chapter examines in-depth The Vivisector, the role of the artist in relation to his art which reflects his relation with his God.

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A NOTE ON ABBREVIATION OF TEXTS

All quotations from Patrick White's work have been parenthetically identified by an abbreviation and a page number. The abbreviations are:

HV Happy Valley

LD The Living and the Dead

AS The Aunt's Story

TM The Tree of Man

V Voss

RC Riders in the Chariot

BO The Burnt Ones

SM The Solid Mandala

VS The Vivisector

ES The Eye of the Storm

C The Cockatoos

FL A Fringe of Leaves

TA The Twyborn Affair

FG Flaws in the Glass: A Self-Portrait

INTRODUCTION

I fluctuated in the watery glass;
according to the light...

Patrick White

First and foremost, Patrick White is a religious writer. Although this truism is accepted by many critics, it must be qualified by a comprehensive analysis of the nature of man's "fundamental religious instinct",[1] an instinct rooted in the intuition and blossoming in the conviction that God exists.[2] In his novels and short stories, White endeavours, with a vivisector's eye, to explore and express the complex, paradoxical dynamic operating at the heart of this belief. It is this struggle, a struggle which the author has described as "my own clumsy wrestling with what I see as a religious faith" (FG 188) that I wish to consider, particularly within the context of the Christian mystical tradition.

Modern literary criticism, seduced, not inspired, by pseudo-scientific, post-structuralist theories, has demonstrated a growing tendency to 'psychologize' out of existence the 'religious' experience, to explain away its mystery and relevance to human life in any 'real', by which I mean 'consuming', sense. If White's work is to be wholly

appreciated and even partially understood, then the numbing of man's longing for the divine by highfalutin hermeneutics cannot be condoned. It is an offense, not only against divinity, but also humanity. Yet, the alacrity with which the 'modern' critic depreciates the 'religious' into the merely 'romantic' is epidemic. Robert Baker, for example, would have us believe that authentic spiritual suffering was invented to satisfy the convention of Prometheanism, and that communion with the divine is just another definition for onanism.[3] In light of such a bias, it is hardly surprising that mysticism should be perceived as mistiness; especially, when the religiously motivated work of art is forced to conform to preconceived literary models that fail to grapple with the flesh and blood experience of faith.

Throughout his canon, White employs the concepts and language of his Christian heritage, a heritage more akin to Catholicism that Protestantism or Anglicanism. His essentially Roman Catholic vision, heavily sprinkled with Greek Orthodoxy, hearkens back to the faith of the Apostolic Fathers and their mystical encounter with the divine as distinct from their doctrinal statements about the divine. This distinction, or divergence of emphasis, established two parallel paths, or theological traditions: the 'kataphatic' and the 'apophatic'. The former dealt with God in His intellectual persona as idea, image, symbol; and the latter, with God in his spiritual essence as experience confirmed by

a darkness that is 'light'.[4]

As a writer, attempting to transpose the ineffable into words, White is obliged to straddle this theological fence; but repeatedly he confesses his disbelief in the intellect's ability to apprehend truth or language's ability to convey it. "Poetry resists academic pretension, just as the mystery of religious faith evaporates on contact with dogma" (FG 193). As long as poetry like faith, eludes interpretation, the truth that engendered it is preserved. A speculative knowledge of the divine must be initiated and qualified by a contemplative experience of the divine, though even then, it fails to hit the mark:

> 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. I hesitate to add a child, because a child can grow into a monster, a destroyer. Am I a destroyer? this face in the glass which has spent a lifetime searching for what it believes, but can never prove to be, the truth. A face consumed by wondering whether truth can be the worst destroyer of all. (FG 70)

Clearly, White's sympathies lie in the apophatic camp. Yet the question remains: what is the precise nature of the contemplative experience which is its own truth because it

is God's?

Before examining the mechanism of this unity, and applying the principles that infuse it to White's work, it is important to establish beyond a shadow of a doubt that White is not being forced to fit a mold or wear a mask with which he is not in sympathy, which is not of his own making, choosing, or simply, being. To avoid a charge of defamation of character, a charge White is fond of leveling against his critics, it is best to look to Flaws in the Glass and give the author an opportunity to make his own position clear: "Until painting this self-portrait I had never tried to draw the graph of my religious faith" (FG 143).

While White does not define in a cut-and-dried fashion the articles of his faith, he does describe, in considerable detail, his relation with the process of acquiring it, beginning at an early age:

> God is everywhere they told me. Is he in the bunya-bunya tree? Yes, everywhere....Determined on total conviction I asked, "Does he tear his pants?" (FG 70)

Overlooking this witticism on the part of a precocious child, it is clear that the seed of spiritual inquiry, if not exactly faith, had fallen on fertile soil and had begun to germinate in the physical reality of the bunya-bunya tree. Because of this simplistic, tongue-in-cheek encounter with a manifestation of the divine, White's pantheistic awareness grows to equate his sensuality with a personal

kind of spirituality; in other words, a reflection of the self:

> As a child at Mount Wilson and Rushcutters Bay, relationships with even cherished friends were inclined to come apart when I was faced with sharing surroundings associated with my own private mysteries, some corner where moss-upholstered steps swept down beside the monstera deliciosa, a rich mattress of slater-infested humus under the custard apples, or gullies crackling with smoky silence, rocks threatening to explode, pools so cold that the breath was cut off inside your ribs as you hung suspended like the corpse of a pale frog. (FG 16)

Worshipping in the sacred ascetic retreat of his sensations, White indulged and tempered his reclusive nature, his hermitic love of solitude: "I often flung stones at human beings I felt were invading my spiritual territory" (FG 16). In light of such behaviour, it is not surprising that "Till well into [his] life, houses, places, landscape meant more to [him] than people" (FG 16). To understand this affinity and affection for deserted settings, one must conceive of White's adolescent and early artistic self-absorption as a communion with an intense perceptual and sensual reality; an initially solipsistic reality that stimulated a subjective awareness of only himself and his private vision projected by and reflected off the landscape:

> As I could not come to terms with the inhabitants, either then, or again on returning to Australia after World War II, I found consolation in the landscape. The ideal Australia I

> visualized during any exile and which drew me back, was always, I realise, a landscape without figures. (FG 49)

Although White's emotional dependence on the Australian landscape is almost a deification of it, it is not until that landscape is internalized and populated with human values and concerns that White is able to suffuse his deity with his humanity:

> I tell myself I must not hate human beings. I try to conjure up my vision of an actual landscape and the inhabitants to whom it belongs. (FG 204)

In this effort to create an illusion of life through the actions, thoughts, and feelings of his characters, White was forced to objectify his emotional, an essentially moral, involvement with his fellowman. Breaking faith with his youthful egotism, he began wrestling with the overwhelming doubt and certainty that God, not merely man, was actively engaged in the handiwork of creation: "For many years I felt no need for a faith either dialectical or mystical, believing as I did in my own brash godhead" (FG 68).

Even though the dynamic of this struggle for faith, aspiring to a glimpse of the divine, cannot be separated from its human context, it is often tainted by the form and not the substance of faith:

> My spiritual self has always shrivelled in contact with organised religion...The ultimate spiritual union is probably as impossible to achieve as the perfect work of art or the unflawed human

> relationship. In matters of faith, art, and love I have had to reconcile myself to starting again where I began. (FG 74)

In "starting again where I began", an echo, similar, but not identical, to a passage from T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding", is heard:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.[5]

For White, however, there is no theoretical arrival, no ready-made theological resolution, there is just the quest; a working out of contradictions, ironies, insoluble riddles of darkness and of light. The human heart is the crucible in which he strives to distinguish the dross from the philosopher's stone. In this search, the alchemy of psychoanalysis is not overlooked:

> Jung's teaching also bolstered me up during a wavering of faith on realising I could not accept the sterility, the vulgarity, in many cases the bigotry of the Christian churches in Australia. Manoly seemed secure inside the structure of Eastern Orthodoxy. I had nothing from my upbringing in a kind of social C. of E. (a visiting card on the pew, clothes outgrown or no longer fashionable sent off to the jumble sale, a grateful rector and his wife calling to express gratitude for patronage.) So I evolved what I think Manoly has always seen as my non-religious or mystic circus. (FG 146)

With his "mystic circus" in tow, and Manoly, his kindred spirit and father confessor, as guide, White revisits Greece in later life to kiss the Panayia, to

eulogize the Parthenon and Ayia Sophia, to invest the Cave of the Apocalypse with a personal mystical relevance:

> To me, all our travels in Greece have been pilgrimages, searches,...
> I am always hoping for a miracle. (FG 197)

This desire is realized most completely for White in his intimacy with and affection for Manoly Lascaris; their reciprocal love approximates, in human terms, White's relationship with the divine:

> The Greeks have survived through their Orthodox faith, professed or submerged. It is also why an unlikely relationship between an Orthodox Greek and a lapsed Anglican egotist agnostic pantheist occultist existentialist would-be though failed Christian Australian has lasted forty years. (FG 102)

Between the extremes of a diluted, decorous, delinquent Anglican faith, and a concentrated, ritualized, consecrated Greek Orthodox faith swings the pendulum of Catholicism's conception of Christian mysticism. Despite White's condemnation of Catholic instruction, the dogma of its institutionalized form, he does express a nostalgic longing for Catholic conviction, the rite of passage to a sacred world, a sanctified telepathy with God:

> I believe that most Australian artists of Protestant upbringing would admit, most of them grudgingly, that they had missed something by not experiencing a Catholic childhood. It has always been obvious to this outsider that those who have left the Church luxuriate even in their lapse. (FG 244)

This observation by White does not exclude White, nor is he quite the outsider he would like us to believe. Although he is not a member of a specific Christian sect or an advocate of a formal Christian doctrine, he does strike an intensely Christian stance that is experientially grounded, not in a charitable love of 'one's neighbour', but in a selfless love of 'one's brother':

> You reach a point where you have had everything, and everything amounts to nothing. Only love redeems. I don't mean love in the Christian sense. To lavish what is seen as Christian love, indiscriminately on all mankind, is in the end as ineffectual and destructive as violence and hatred. Love in homeopathic doses can be more effective than indiscriminate slugs of the other doled out to a sick society. Christian love has lost its virtue, as antibiotics lose theirs through over-dosage. Christians will say I don't understand Christian love. Perhaps I don't; it is too grand a theory. When I say love redeems I mean the love shared with an individual... (FG 251-52)

While White rejects the concept of Christian love as a social panacea for mankind's moral ills, he views the simple love of one human being for another, exchanged in the honesty and purity of their need, as sacrosanct.

In attempting to shorten the distance and close the gap between two separate identities, the mind intuits its nature as a coalescing of natures; a unity, that for want of a better word, we call 'humanity', but which, in reality, is a pseudonym for God. Yet the diversity of White's fidelity

makes this fusion difficult, if not impossible, to achieve:

> It saddens me that those I love, have to make do with superficial acquaintanceship when I would have them enjoy complete union. But I am this black, bubbling pool. I am also this leaf rustling in the early light on the upper terrace of our garden. In the eyes of God, the Eye, or whatever supernatural power, I am probably pretty average crap, which will in time help fertilise the earth. (FG 182-83)

The most revealing aspect of this admission is White's self-deprecation, his effacement, yet affirmation, in the concrete otherness of natural phenomena; a sensual and spiritual bonding with the landscape of his childhood under the auspices of some divine dispensation that promises nothing but the customary afterlife of "pretty average crap". In light of this humbling perspective, it is evident that White cherishes few, if any illusions with respect to his significance in the scheme of things. His saving grace is the revelation that he, when integrated with creation, is sharing in the immanence and love of God for all created things, including man: "Perhaps my laughter will be heard on Nobel Avenue (true!) where I fell on my back in the mud beside the cow-bail, cursing a God in whom, I realised, I must believe after all" (FG 148).

This mystical awakening, conversion in a Christian sense, bears the earmarks of an apophatic or contemplative experience: a faith emerging out of doubt; a God emerging out of darkness; a man emerging out of mud. The mechanics

of this process, however, remain a mystery that must be studied, understood, then contemplated by a mind infused with knowledge, by a soul imbued with spirit.

It is my intention, therefore, to consider briefly, in so far as they illuminate this mystery, the thoughts of the Roman Catholic theologian and priest, Carmelite monk and mystic, Thomas Merton.

In this age of incredulity, advanced by scientific scepticism and rampant cynicism, it is all too tempting to capitulate to the authority of numbers, categories, formulas, and fractional linguistics; or become at best, in many cases out of embarrassment, an apologist for the mystical experience. It takes a miracle of moral courage to grip the bull of empirical proof by its intellectual horns and vault heavenward, rejecting both the mechanization of life and the ensuing faintheartedness.

Through his writings, Patrick White has undertaken and accomplished, with varying degrees of success, a poetic exploration of the religious experience as it is perceived in the minds of his characters; as it is divined in the darkness of its apophatic 'light'. What White has not done - and it should not be held against him, for it is clearly another man's task - is to provide a systematic, theological

and psychological analysis of Christian faith in its pursuit of God, a faith confirmed by a contemplative bonding with the divine. It is precisely such an analysis that Thomas Merton attempted and achieved in The Ascent to Truth.

This work is an in-depth reflection on the function and operation of Christian mysticism as revealed by the doctrine of Saint John of the Cross, supported by the elucidations of other contemplatives and saints, sustained by the patronage of the Virgin Mary or Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and, ultimately, inspired by the love of God or Christ. Although the epistemology for Merton's claim to truth is largely seen, in certain literary circles, as an antiquated self-deception - barely countenanced by some, and discarded outright by others - it is not a proven fallacy, invalid or unsound. White himself is strongly biased in its favour; a fact that will be substantiated at a later point.

Merton begins with the premise that man possesses a "fundamental religious instinct" that compels him to seek meaning in his life through a sense of wholeness. This theme recurs again and again in White and nowhere more convincingly than in his own conclusion:

> If I were to stage the end I would set it on the upper terrace, not the one moment of any morning, but all that I have ever lived, splintering and coalescing,... (FG 256)

In the context of this last request, the "religious instinct" must be comprehended as a psychological necessity

contingent on a spiritual longing, or nostalgia for the singular totality of the 'absolute'.

While the nature of the 'absolute' eludes a dictionary definition, it can be intuited as a moral pattern, an a priori implicit in the mind and manifest only when the mind is aligned with it:

> What are the elements of this "pattern" I speak of? First, and most important of all, I must adapt myself to objective reality. Second, this adaptation is achieved by the work of my highest spiritual faculties - intelligence and will. Third, it demands expression when my whole being, commanded by my will, produces actions which, by their moral vitality and fruitfulness, show that I am living in harmony with the true order of things.[6]

In this passage, Merton makes assumptions that are tantamount to givens, certainties which often raise the hackles on post-structuralist backs: the first, that there is an 'objective reality'; and the second, which bears directly on the first, that there is a 'true order of things'. It is not my purpose at this time to split philosophic hairs by trying to determine whether 'you' and 'I' see the same world, much less, debate the absurdity of whether or not we live in it. Of course, there are those who would, in their objective astuteness, argue that order is dictated by perspective, and that, therefore, the value judgments of 'truth' or 'falsity' are merely relative. I, along with Merton, and, by implication, White, contend that

when the mind attains a state of rest, its impartiality excites an instinctual awareness of the world as an orchestrated unity. Such a state of rest should not be misconstrued as 'static', any more than Mahatma Gandhi's passive resistance was 'static'. Instead, the mind is highly attentive, attuned to a moral current analogous to the migratory flight of birds, an intuition just as logical as and even more persuasive than the molecular structure of water.

According to Merton, the prerequisite for following the contemplative or apophatic path is an "interior ascesis",[7] a passive inner life that encourages an ascetic detachment from the world of sense as self, yet nurtures an objective relation to the world of sense as soul. White and many of his characters achieve this detachment, paradoxically, through a sensual integration with landscape, a fusion that generates a visionary landscape. However, this ascetic posture, or preparation, does not guarantee divine union, for it is only the first tentative step towards it. Nor should the artist be confused with the mystic; they may share a common ground, but their responses to revelation are mutually exclusive:

> The experience of the artist and the experience of the mystic are completely distinct. Although it is quite possible for a man to be both an artist and a mystic at the same time, his art and his mysticism must always remain two

> different things. The mystical experience can, on reflection, become the subject of an esthetic experience. Saint John of the Cross could convey, in poetry, something of his experience of God in prayer. But there always remained an unpassable abyss between his poetry and his prayer. He would never have been tempted to suppose that the composition of a poem was an act of contemplation.[8]

I believe that White would concur with Merton. Artistic expression must acknowledge it indebtedness to mystical experience.

The msytic, travelling towards the apophatic 'light' is regulated by the natures, or proclivities, of both intelligence and will. Because the "religious instinct" seeks its source of gratification and ultimate fulfillment in divine union, the function of the intelligence, or reason, is to inhibit that instinct, and, thereby, preserve the self. The function of the will, however, in so far as it reveres the longing of the "religious instinct", excites that instinct to the realization of its desire conceived in the love of God. While the will is passionately drawn to truth as love, the intelligence controls the will's obsessive lust by means of reason; but a reason that is not a mere invention of the human intellect. Consider White's conviction:

> I don't set myself up as an intellectual. What drives me is sensual, emotional, instinctive. At the same time I like to think creative reason reins me in as I approach the

edge of disaster. (FG 81)

Here, the distinction between the concepts of instinct and inspiration begins to blur. "Creative reason" for White is what Merton would define as inspired reason. The knowledge, understanding, and accidental wisdom of the 'I' are slowly apprehended as gifts bestowed by the 'other':

> Saint Gregory Nazianzen calls the soul of the spiritual man - the mystic - an instrument played by the Holy Spirit: organum pulsatum a Spiritu Sancto. The Holy Ghost draws from this instrument harmonies and a melody of which reason and the will of man alone could never even dream. It is this music vibrating on the well-tuned strings of a perfect human personality that makes a man a saint. It is when special harmonies are wrung from a human instrument that the Holy Ghost makes a man a contemplative. What part has reason in this silent song that God sings for Himself and for His elect in the soul of a mystic? It is the function of reason not to play the instrument but only to tune the strings. The Master Himself does not waste time tuning the instrument. He shows His servant, reason, how to do it and leaves him to do the work. If He then comes and finds the piano still out of tune, He does not bother to play anything on it. He strikes a chord, then goes away. The trouble generally is that the tuner has been banging on the keys himself all day, without bothering to do the work assigned to him: which is to keep the thing in tune.[9]

Although this metaphor is beautifully seductive in its sincerity and simplicity, it does not explain how reason tunes the organism: its body, mind, and soul.

The mystery of this process can never be expressed

in terms that satisfy the human mind's capacity and hunger for intellectualization; it can only be experienced during contemplation, and, in retrospect, enigmatically described as the "Night of Sense" succumbing to the "Night of the Soul";[10] in other words, sensation without illumination converted to a soul crucified by divine love. When the mystic finds himself immersed in the apophatic, faith-affirming darkness and silence of God, that faith and darkness and silence become the rock upon which he, Saint John of the Cross as well as Merton, constructs his theological conception of God; or in the case of White, his literary edifice to life:

> ...I suppose I've indulged my vanity by tricking myself out in words. Not all ornamentation. Part of me is austere enough to have conveyed the truth, I like to think, but that again could be vanity. If I believe this today, tomorrow I may feel that truth is the property of silence - at any rate the silences filling the space between words, and over those I sometimes have control. (FG 42)

By his own admission, White makes use of language to punctuate the silence, to approach the truth, but never to apprehend its nature, its ineffable 'light'.

The truth or 'light' for Merton, and, I contend, for White, is the infused love of God; a love that manifests itself in the sacred, suffering humanity of Christ. While "no man cometh unto the Father, but by me [Christ]" (John 14:6), White's mysticism is viewed by some as pantheism,

just as "Saint John of the Cross is treated by some as if he lived as a pantheist behind a Christian façade".[11] Although White's beatific visions of God are heavily veiled in landscape, they are, in moments of mystical prayer or peace, revealed by the action and grace of Christ in man.

In the last chapter of The Ascent to Truth, entitled "The Giant Moves in His Sleep", Merton pays homage to the Mother of Christ, who mothers Christ's humanity in each of us:

> ...Our Lady is the model of contemplatives and the mirror of mystics. Those who love the pure Truth of God instinctively love the simplicity of the Immaculate Mother of God. She draws them into the heart of her silence and of her humility....
>
> When the angel spoke, God awoke in the heart of this girl of Nazareth and moved within her like a giant. He stirred and opened His eyes and her soul saw that in containing Him she contained the world besides. The Annunciation was not so much a vision as an earthquake in which God moved the universe and unsettled the spheres, and the beginning and end of all things came before her in her deepest heart. And far beneath the movement of this silent cataclysm she slept in the infinite tranquillity of God, and God was a child curled up who slept in her and her veins were flooded with His wisdom which is night, which is starlight, which is silence. And her whole being was embraced in Him whom she embraced and they became tremendous silence.[12]

Towards such a sanctification, the human soul evolves, progressing from knowledge rooted in experience, through the darkness of faith, to the understanding or revelation,

conferred by grace, that man is sanctified as long as he is centred in the divine and the divine is centred in him.

Artistic creativity is a very lonely calling. Surrounded by an endless silence filled with an unending darkness, the artist struggles to experience and to express his relation with reality, God and man. As this struggle is religious and mystical in nature, I shall endeavour to shed some light on the apophatic sense essential to the development of the artist and his aesthetic eye as portrayed in The Vivisector by Patrick White.

In so far as White's other novels and short stories help to refine and cohere his vision of the divinely human dynamic, they will be reviewed and relevant passages examined with respect to those particulars which contribute to the emergence of The Vivisector as a statement of belief about the process of creation.

Primarily, however, I shall focus on the character of Hurtle Duffield, an artist and vivisector, and analyse his contemplative involvement with the dominant, recurrent images of truth which nourish and sustain him; and which, eventually, in the solitude and loneliness of old age, culminate in the crescendo of his last canvas, a portrait of God as light conceiving out of indigo. It is within the

limits of this all-consuming drive to render through the medium of paint the ultimate abstraction and meaning, refracted in a life of revelation, that Patrick White's The Vivisector must be studied.

Notes

[1] Thomas Merton, The Ascent to Truth (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951) 4.

[2] I have accepted the existence of God as a valid metaphysical position.

[3] Robert S. Baker, "Romantic Onanism in Patrick White's The Vivisector", Texas Studies in Literature and Language 21.2 (1979): 202-25.

[4] The imagery and metaphor of 'light' has had a long tradition in Christian literature and must be understood in terms of 'revelation'.

[5] T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets (London: Faber and Faber, 1944) 48.

[6] Merton 8-9.

[7] Merton 13.

[8] Merton 62.

[9] Merton 181-82.

[10] Merton 188.

[11] Merton 243.

[12] Merton 317.

PRELIMINARIES

> For all that we know, Reality
> is the undifferentiated unity
> of the mystical experience...
>
> Arnold Toynbee

Since Patrick White evinces the characteristics of man's "fundamental religious instinct", as defined by Thomas Merton, his artistic expression must be perceived as a reflection of a spiritual longing for identification with God. In this respect, the creative act may be seen as a contemplative act - not, perhaps, in its execution, which entails primarily technique, but definitely in its inspiration: an initial impulse and a persevering will to truth.

While a chronological consideration of White's work is valuable from a stylistic or thematic point of view, it does not serve the purpose here, for a linear analysis runs against the grain of an organic 'life-philosophy'; instead, therefore, the whole must be conceived as a fragmented, peripheral tension that intensifies and unifies as it approaches the gravitational centre of its conviction. Although this centre is fixed in a supraconceptual experience of the divine, it should not be mistaken for an

affiliation with the institution of organized religion, neither as doctrine nor as dogma.

In Riders in the Chariot, the four major characters are somewhat unorthodox in their religious orientation: Mary Hare has her sanctuary, the wildlife habitat of crumbling Xanadu; Mordecai Himmelfarb has his intellect and asceticism; Mrs. Godbold has her laundry, ironing board, and family; and Alf Dubbo has his art. Each preoccupation provides a mystical medium through which the human heart seeks to open a channel of communication with the divine. Formal and social, or denominational and congregational, worship is seen by White to be a hollow ritual divorced from any genuine religious sense. As a young man, Himmelfarb - predisposed from childhood to an ill-defined notion of God - discards the seemingly unnecessary trappings of his Jewish heritage in favour of a nature more accessible and gratifying to his sensual, indistinct from his spiritual, vitality:

> The presence of that God amongst the walnut furniture of the sumptuous house - for Himmelfarbs had moved from above the shop before Mordecai was able to remember - was unquestioned by the worldly, but prudently respectful Moshe, taken for granted by the little boy, even by the confident young man who the latter eventually became, and who turned sceptical not of his religion, rather, of his own need for it. Religion, like a winter overcoat, grew oppressive and superfluous as spring developed into summer, and the natural sources of warmth were gradually revealed. But

> there was no mistaking the love and respect the young man kept for the enduring qualities of his old, discarded coat. In the solstice of his self-love, in the heat of physical ardour, he would melt with nostalgia at the thought of it. (RC 105)

Considering White's merciless contempt for the little white asbestos church at Mount Wilson, which he attended as a child, such an affectionate, almost sentimental treatment of Judaism can only be accounted for by the fact that it is not Christian. This contention is substantiated by Alf Dubbo's apostate reply to Mrs. Godbold's priestly query:

> "Are you a Christian?" Mrs Godbold asked quickly to get it over.
> Even so, she was mortified, knowing that the word did not represent what it was intended to.
> "No," he replied. "I was educated up to it. But gave it away. Pretty early on, in fact. When I found I could do better. I mean," he mumbled, "a man must make use of what he has. There is no point in putting on a pair of boots to walk to town, if you can do it better in your bare feet." (RC 304)

For White, contemporary Christianity is a counterfeit currency, a misrepresentation and perversion of the original purity of Christ's admonition to his followers to love one's neighbour as one's self. It is not surprising, therefore, that White should turn his back on the lip service paid to Christian ideals as a social convention of Sunday worship, and, "in [his] bare feet", go in search of God; "make use of what he has".

Attaching no real relevance to state approved religion, both White and his characters take refuge in the authority of their own religious sense, an instinctive grassroots intuition of the world as an intelligible entity, as the "divine milieu".[1] It is Arthur Brown, the simpleton and genius in The Solid Mandala, who dwells upon this mystery in the form of a conundrum posed by Mrs. Musto's glib and feeble reference to John 1:1:

> "But as I was saying - what was I saying? Conversation is the prime purpose this little slit was given us for - to communicate in words. We are told: 'In the beginning was the Word.' Which sort of proves, don't it?"
>
> She had a snub nose you could look right up.
>
> "In the beginning was what word?" Arthur asked, seated on that beaded stool, looking up Mrs. Musto's nose.
>
> "Why," she said, "the Word of God!"
>
> "Oh," said Arthur. "God." (SM 78)

Shortly thereafter, Arthur solves the riddle; then asks Waldo, his dilettante brother, to

> "Tell Mrs. Musto I'm concentrating on words. The Word. But also words that are just words. There's so many kinds. You could make necklaces. Big chunks of words, for instance, and the shiny, polished ones. God," he said, and the spit splattered on Waldo's face, "is a kind of sort of rock crystal." (SM 80)

By reducing words to tangible objects, and "The Word", or God, to a sensually apprehensible concrete reality, Arthur threatens to undermine the relevance of language, the very fabric of Waldo's intellectual self-image and self-love. In

self-defense, he dismisses with disgust his brother's "extravagant, not to say idiotic, ideas" (SM 80).

Similarly, Elyot Standish, in The Living and the Dead, is unnerved by the realization that "The whole business [of life] was either a mystery, or else meaningless, and of the two, the meaningless is the more difficult to take" (LD 13). He, like Waldo Brown, protects himself by hiding behind the printed word and retreating into the mausoleum of his mind, his vicarious lives:

> ...he closed his door in the morning, he began to work, there were also the visits to museum and to library, which amounted in time to so many reverent comments on the literary achievements of the dead, and as much correct approval from the Sunday press. The devotion of Mr Standish to letters was the devotion of a single mind, it had been said. A devotion to dust. (LD, p. 20)

This fictional disillusionment is further qualified by White's postwar reflection on and attitude towards the artistic living and the aesthetic dead:

> Demobilisation in England left me with the alternative of remaining in what I felt to be an actual and spiritual graveyard, with the prospect of ceasing to be an artist and turning instead into the most sterile of beings, a London intellectual...[2]

Pervading all White's work is a deep distrust of the intellect, in so far as it betrays emotion and negates feeling; ironically - considering that they compose White's own medium - words, the tools of the intellect, are also

suspect. In A Fringe of Leaves, a conversation between Mr. Pilcher, a mate on the Bristol Maid, and the scholastic Mr. Roxburgh, who imagines death to be a "'literary conceit'" (FL, 76), reveals the disparity between a knowledge derived from language and a knowledge derived from experience:

> "That is the truth!" the mate blurted passionately, and looked in the direction of the land. "If I was sent out here in irons, for what I done - or what someone else had done, "cause that can happen too, you know - I'd find a way to join the bolters. I'd learn the country by heart, like any of your books, Mr Roxburgh, and find more to it perhaps."
>
> The passenger was surprised that one whom he scarcely knew should be acquainted with his tastes.
>
> "Experience, no doubt, leaves a deeper impression than words."
>
> " 'Specially when it's printed on yer back in blood."
>
> Mr Roxburgh winced,... (FL 151-52)

The inadequacy of language to convey the complexity and mystery of being in and of the world is thoroughly exposed in The Tree of Man. The spoken, and to a large extent the written, word are subordinated to the silence that envelopes the novel and shapes its characters. Stan Parker grows to accept this condition as both a natural phenomenon and a spiritual medium. Although he hungers for poetic self-expression, he pacifies that hunger by reconciling himself to the silence and establishing an intimacy with a landscape that his hands have come to know:

> There was no one could sink a post hole like Stan Parker, or fell a tree, or

> shoe a horse at a pinch, with improvised tools, in shorter time, which he had of course from his dad. If a poetry sometimes almost formed in his head, or a vision of God, nobody knew, because you did not talk about such things, or, rather, you were not aware of the practice of doing so. (TM 63-64)

Arising out of Stan's affinity with silence is a blind, nonverbal faith in an instinctive knowledge, an intuitive wisdom; for example, he attempts to calm his wife's anxiety concerning the difficulty that they and Con, their Greek hired-man, encounter in communicating with words:

> "That young man, Stan," said Amy Parker, "do you think he is happy?"
> "I suppose so. Why not?" said her husband. "You don't have to understand words to feel happy. But he will learn to speak in time. Then you can ask him how he feels, if he doesn't tell you." (TM 230)

This emphasis on feeling is crucial to a sensitive and sympathetic reading of the novel. While the intellect may articulate the meaning of experience after the fact, it cannot hope to integrate itself with a physical, non-linguistic landscape.

Yet, an experiential bonding of the mind with matter is precisely what White strives to create. The means by which he achieves this identification involves an ascetic fusion with the elements of nature, an immersion perceived as a sensual extension and awareness of self that aspires to a loss of self. Theodora Goodman, in The Aunt's Story, is only one, among many of White's characters, who seeks

absorption in a meaning greater than herself; a unified, but veiled, totality:

> Cloud bred cloud on heavy afternoons, where Theodora walked. The water in the creek was brown and warm. Frogs brooded, and magpies flew low. Light yawned out of the hills, and from the yellow thickets of the gorse. Theodora stood and let the water lip her legs. She could just hear. Now light and water lay smoothly together. She took off her clothes. She would lie in the water. And soon her thin brown body was the shallow, browner water. She would not think. She would drift. As still as a stick. And as thin. But on the water circles widen and cut. (AS 30)

Such an exercise in self-negation helps to sharpen Theodora's sensibilities and enables her to establish an ontological rapport with the people and the things that constitute and share the landscape in which she happens to find herself.

In the "Jardin Exotique", the incident of the nautilus - that Mrs. Rapallo has purchased and that Katina Pavlou admires - supports the claim that knowledge is more akin to sensation than definition:

> The girl took in her hands the frail shell. She listened to its sound. She listened to the thick-throated pines fill the room, their clear blue-green water rising and falling. The music of the nautilus was in her face, Theodora saw, behind the thin membrane that just separates experience from intuition. (AS 149)

General Sokolnikov's righteous indignation and rage in response to the crassness and insensitivity of Mrs. Rapallo,

in light of her most recent acquisition, introduces the notion of defilement. The nautilus, in its symbolic role as landscape, and the landscape as knowledge, is now a thing possessed by the 'eye' and 'I', or 'ego'. Reduced to property and real estate, the shell, for General Sokolnikov, has lost its artistic and spiritual value; his private visionary landscape has been shattered:

> "You are a thief," he said. "It is immensely obvious. If there were any delicacy left in your American handbag, you would not have stolen what it is not possible to buy. Because it is not possible to buy, Mrs. Ra-pall-o, what is already mine. It is mine from staring at, for many years. It responded through the glass. A tender, a subtle relationship has existed, which now in an instant you destroy. Oh, what an arrogant woman! What a terrible state of affairs! What assassination of the feelings! I do not hesitate to accuse. You are more than a cheeky thief. You are a murderess. You have killed a relationship," the General cried. (AS 150-51)

Although the nature of this relationship is extremely difficult to define, the effort must be made, for it is central to all White's work. Of course, it has everything to do with love; yet the question remains, the love of what? In a nutshell, it is the love of self idealized as an intimacy with an objective reality.

While White's treatment of General Sokolnikov in relation to his visionary landscape is comical and melodramatic, in Voss, White's treatment of the hero in

relation to his visionary landscape is tragic and intensely real. The reason for this change of mood, if not of heart, is dictated by the fact that Voss pits his obdurate intellectual will against the crushing spiritual presence of the Australian landscape, which is, according to White's paradigm, synonymous with God. The theme of exploration is essentially a quest for faith resulting in the death of Voss, an ultimate lesson in humility; for just as the illusion of the self is expunged by the landscape, so the appearance of the landscape is transformed into the blinding reality of light:

> The two men rode on, in hats and beards, which strangely enough had not been adopted as disguises. In that flat country of secret colours, their figures were small, even when viewed in the foreground. Their great horses had become as children's ponies. It was the light that prevailed, and distance, which, after all, was a massing of light, and the mobs of cockatoos, which exploded, and broke into flashes of clattering, shrieking, white and sulphur light. Trees, too, were but illusory substance, for they would quickly turn to shadow, which is another shape of the ever-protean light. (V 168)

The concept of "shadow" as an aspect "of the ever-protean light" serves as a milestone that marks the path towards a truly apophatic union with the divine; yet, such a union can only be inferred. Frank Le Mesurier's brief encounter with the sun "that allowed him to enter, with the result that he was both blinded and illuminated" (V 138) is inspired

largely by poetic indulgence as distinct from religious conviction. While in spite of the numerous allusions to Voss's Christ-like identification and transfiguration into a symbolic catch-all for the suffering of his followers, an experience that fulfills the criteria of the genuine contemplative embrace, if not entirely absent, is not sufficiently described. For such an account one must look to The Eye of the Storm.

Whereas Voss, in his Nietzschean opposition to the landscape, perishes, Elizabeth Hunter, in her instinctive equanimity towards the landscape, survives:

> Without much thought for her own wreckage, she moved slowly down what had been a beach, picking her way between torn-off branches, great beaded hassocks of amber weed, everywhere fish the sea had tossed out, together with a loaf of no longer bread, but a fluffier, disintegrating foam rubber. Just as 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 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.
>
> But she could not contemplate the storm for this dream of glistening peace through which she was moved. (ES 411)

Encompassing, surpassing, and obliterating physical sensation, this experience of wholeness, or sanctified well-being, is the sanctum sanctorum of White's spiritual

landscape. While it reflects the essence of mystical prayer, an incontrovertible sense of self submerged in the 'blinding' otherness of an awesome calm, a deafening silence, two ingredients are still required before the apophatic moment can be christened, 'Christian'.

Stan Parker provides the first which involves an acknowledgment and acceptance of God in His ubiquitousness and omniscience:

> The rain buffeted and ran off the limbs of the man seated on the edge of the veranda. In his new humility weakness and acceptance had become virtues. He retreated now, into the shelter of the veranda, humbly holding with his hand the wooden post that he had put there himself years before, and at this hour of the night he was quite grateful for the presence of the simple wood. As the rain sluiced his lands, and the fork of the lightning entered the crests of his trees. The darkness was full of wonder. Standing there somewhat meekly, the man could have loved something, someone, if he could have penetrated beyond the wood, beyond the moving darkness. But he could not, and in his confusion he prayed to God, not in specific petition, wordlessly almost, for the sake of company. Till he began to know every corner of the darkness, as if it were daylight, and he were in love with the heaving world, down to the last blade of grass. (TM 152)

Darkness, for the Christian mystic, is the face of God unblemished by idea or image. It is the eternal motive force, which can and does, through grace, reveal itself, in a knowledge of itself, as love.

This mysterious ineffable dynamic of divine and human love is the second ingredient. It is supplied for White by all, like Mary Hare, "'Who are the riders in the Chariot...'" (RC 20):

> If fellowship with Himmelfarb and Mrs Godbold, and perhaps her brief communion with a certain blackfellow, would confirm rather than expound a mystery, the reason could be that, in the last light, illumination is synonymous with blinding. (RC 21)

The sense of worship implicit in this 'solid mandala', composed of four unique, but similarly motivated lives, is directed towards the acme of the contemplative experience: divine union. Yet, commiserate with this desire, and indispensable to a fulfillment of it, is the heartfelt reality of a profound humanity. The cohesive factor, fundamental to forging such an intimacy and trust, is love, a love enmeshed in moral suffering - for all suffering, which is not just pain, is moral - that must be shared like loaves and fishes, or rarely, but occasionally, works of literature.

Such concerns have focused White's vision from the very beginning as the epigraph to Happy Valley attests:

> "It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering, which is the one indispensible condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone...the purer the suffering, the greater the progress."

The implications of these words expressing the credo of

Mahatma Gandhi are arranged and rearranged by White like a cabalistic search for the tetragrammaton, the name, the 'Word' which is God. They take their most convincing shape in the experiential, absolute knowledge of the suffering and crucified Himmelfarb: the Man/Christ/God Trinity. Yet permeating White's Christology and infused with the Holy Ghost is the figure of Mrs. Godbold, Mary the Mother of God, for whom her life and her love is her art:

> Time had broken into a mosaic much that had seemed complete, obsessive, actual, painful. Now she could approach her work of living, as an artist, after an interval, will approach and judge his work of art. So, at last, the figure of her Lord and Saviour would stand before her in the chancel, looking down at her from beneath the yellow eyelids, along the strong, but gentle beak of a nose. She was content to leave then, since all converged finally upon the Risen Christ, and her own eyes had confirmed that the wounds were healed. (RC 531)

In its finest spiritual form, the "work of living" is perceived as religious art deserving of reliquary homage, adoration, and sanctification. Treated as an idol in life, Elizabeth Hunter is canonized in death by the affections of those who had come to contemplate and love the power of her reflection. Arnold Wyburd, her solicitor, commits the second discreditable act of his career (both venial sins - making love to Elizabeth Hunter was the first) by stealing the blue sapphire symbolic of her spiritual value:

> Finally he looked at his sapphire. He invoked the star hidden in it.

> His eyes, normally pale and reserved, snapped and glittered. Caged in the ribs from which he had only once escaped, his breathing had become a torment: more so, the eye of the sapphire, with its bars, or cross, of recurring light.
>
> ...he returned the sapphire to the bookcase, ramming Halsbury Vol XV into the void where his jewel would continue smouldering. (ES 582)

The power, beauty, and genius of this image is derived from the belief and knowledge that human history, or man's interpretation of his progress in time, is only a façade behind which a greater, more efficacious truth exists, is threatening to brust into flame.

Unfortunately, the "work of living", when conceived as merely passionate aestheticism, so easily can and so often does result in an illuminated impotence. General Sokolnikov's personal manifesto, addressed to Theodora as Ludmilla, is a prime example:

> "I am an artist," said Alyosha Sergei, in a still, convinced voice. "Although I cannot produce any material evidence, and it is doubtful whether my sensibility will ever crystallize in just that way, I am the Artist. Very few people have the capacity for creating life, for being. But you cannot deny, Ludmilla, that one moment of my existence is intensely varied, intensely moving. Take that gob of spittle, for instance. A moonstone, a jewel. There is no denying that I am an artist." (AS 162)

Despite the General's faith in the brilliance of his fancy, Theodora does suspect the legitimacy of his artistic

overtures...tweaks the sottish nose of the "old clown" (AS 163).

How, then, is one to appraise the role of the artist who is not blessed with sanctity or cursed with delusion? Surely, it is his emotional, moral, and spiritual responsibility to create, to "crystallize" and fashion from the raw materials of matter and spirit his version of the truth, which is, when properly attuned by suffering and love, a vision of the truth; for only by his works can he be known.

Notes

[1] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The Heart of Matter (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 76.

[2] Patrick White, "The Prodigal Son", Australian Letters 1.3 (April 1958): 38.

EXAMINATION

> Only that which does not teach, which does not cry out, which does not persuade, which does not condescend, which does not explain, is irresistible.
>
> W. B. Yeats

The Artists

Ostensibly, The Vivisector by Patrick White is a study of an artist's life in relation to the creative process. If it was only this and nothing else, the novel would be just another reworking of the old 'romantic' theme, convention, and cliché of the inspired artistic spirit, suffering in solitude, for what it feels to be the 'truth'. Some critics have taken precisely this view, and, consequently, the novel and its hero, Hurtle Duffield - not to mention White - have been savaged by these critics and reviewers.[1] One such critic, Terry Smith, has argued that "The Vivisector is the least of White's novels" because

> White tries to fix the essential characteristics of the eternal Artist in the figure of Duffield. The aim is too grandiose, the result too small. Duffield is not a paradigm artist - he is an early nineteenth century Romantic (cf. Voss) expressionist artist. Like

> the Romantics, he has a subjectivist view of truth, a conception of genius, a minimal social consciousness, a dedication to the particular as revelatory of general ideas, and most of all he is alienated from society, essentially alone in the service of art.[2]

All true - and justified in light of White's perception and use of art as a medium and metaphor for the religious experience.

To disparage White's portrayal of the artist on the grounds that it incorporates the antiquated ideas, views, and sentiments of Romanticism, does not negate its legitimacy within the context of the Christian mystical tradition. Indeed, the characteristics that have been attributed to the Romantics are symptomatic, in a rudimentary and undeveloped form, of the mystic or contemplative as treated by William James in The Varieties of Religious Experience.

I would contend that White had little interest in catering to contemporary aesthetic tastes, and, furthermore, that his sketchy literary acquaintance with artistic theories, styles, and techniques of drawing and painting, does not undermine Duffield's credibility as an artist; for Duffield is an artist only in the symbolic sense of the creator, preceded by the analytic reflex of the vivisector. His art is not an end in itself, but a means that enables him to externalize, objectify, and hone his inner meditative

vision. In this respect, it serves primarily as smoke and mirrors to conceal his real concern, which is his search for God, a search that leaves him - to hearken back to Terry Smith - "essentially alone in the service of art" - in other words, the service of God.

Considering White's unfulfilled ambition to express himself on canvas - a medium approximating a landscape devoid of language - his concept of the artist is intensely personal:

> The Vivisector...is about a painter, the one I was not destined to become - another of my frustrations. I had imagined that if I could acquire the technique I might give visual expression to what I have inside me, and that the physical act of painting would exhilarate me far more than grinding away at grey, bronchial prose. (FG 150)

While this aspiration inspires an image of the artist infused with White's own passionate conviction, Hurtle Duffield is not exclusively a product of his maker's self-gratifying imagination as certain critics and artists have maintained: "Whether Hurtle Duffield is or is not a painter, I see him as a composite of several I have known, welded together by the one I have in me but never became" (FG 151). This dependence necessitates a cursory consideration of White's relationships with those painters who helped to shape his concept of the artist.

The first major influence on White was Roy de Maistre, an expatriate painter with whom he established a

friendship during his formative, experimental years in London while eking out a literary life:

> Roy was twenty years older than I. He became what I most needed, an intellectual and aesthetic mentor. He taught me how to look at paintings, to listen to music. He persuaded me to walk in the present instead of lying curled and stationary in that over-upholstered cocoon the past, refuge of so many Australians then and now.
>
> He also taught me to discipline myself as an artist. I had seen him close his door in the faces of casual callers. I thought it a cranky joke. I did not really get the message till I found he did not discriminate. It hurt at first. I saw him as a sour old bastard. Nowadays when I close the door on some importunate, destroyer face I feel as though the spirit of Roy de Maistre is at my elbow supporting me. (FG 60)

It is clear that White researched his memory of this association in shaping the character, habits, and attitudes of Hurtle Duffield as vivisector; but de Maistre's contribution to the nature of the artist as creator is much more subtle, and not so easily defined. Yet John Rothenstein has, with profound astuteness, placed his finger on de Maistre's religious pulse: "...he is so intensely preoccupied with the most delicate perceptions of his conscious self on the spiritual level as to qualify the applicability of the term realist."[3] This description is equally apt for White, and, in turn, for Duffield.

Another major influence and source of inspiration for White's concept of the artist as vivisector was his

friendship with the painter, William Dobell. Expatriates, both men eventually returned to Australia - Dobell in 1939 and White in 1948 - where they were drawn together by their interest in art, specifically, and their concern for the state of the arts, in general. Although this friendship waned in the late fifties-early sixties, many details of Dobell's middle and later life served as a model for Duffield's: "He [Dobell] was middle-aged before he achieved celebrity, and it was then too late for him to be dazzled by the chimera of popular success."[4] In addition, it is curious to note that Dobell was a bachelor who lived with his unmarried sister, and who, in old age, tried his hand at abstract art. Of course, White has taken liberties with these particulars, but such is the licence of the novelist.

It is, however, in his artistic vision and style that White's depiction of Duffield is most indebted to Dobell. As implied by Bernard Smith in his analysis of Dobell's work, a vivisectional objectivity conjoins with an instinctual humanity to produce an outer likeness of the inner man:

> In these paintings a complete mastery of the traditional techniques of draughtmanship and painting are united with a personal gift for characterization equally responsive to the vanity, ugliness, charm, stupidity, sensuality, beauty, obesity, vitality or arrogance of his sitters. On the whole it is a tough and unpleasant vision of humanity that he presents, but one, for all its implicit pessimism, never far

> short of the truth. It is not often in his work that any inner grace or spiritual beauty shines through the fatty imprisonment of the flesh. And though he renders the substance of flesh in his mature work with superb skill he does not paint it, as Titian and Renoir did, with deep sensual pleasure, but as if he were painting the skin of a grub not long out of the earth. If such a view of the surface of life is distressing to those who cherish a sentimental view of human nature it does perhaps explain the objectivity and clarity of a vision which makes it possible for Dobell to paint the arrogance of a statesman as naturally as he would paint the arrogance of a builder's labourer.[5]

With perhaps a single qualification, this appraisal could apply as readily to Duffield and to White, in light of their intention and achievement. In Duffield's paintings, like White's novels, the sensual is pleasurable or beautiful only to the extent that it is imbued with a spiritual life which is never sentimental, which is always realistic in its merciless, excruciating truthfulness. Dobell's controversial "Portrait of an Artist", awarded the Archibald Prize in 1943, reflects this fusion of sensuality and spirituality, as well as the sacramental function of the artist:

> There was an expression partly of wonder and partly of self-pity upon the face but the figure sat erect with a natural if uneasy dignity. It was as if one of Drysdale's Albury stick-figures had suddenly blossomed in a burning bush and glowed with spiritual fire; and it was one of his finest paintings.[6]

To this artistic ideal, an essentially religious ideal, White dedicated Duffield, like an anchorite seeking his God in the desert of art. The nature of such a singular devotion recalls the following lines from W. B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium":

> O sages standing in God's holy fire
> As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
> Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
> And be the singing-masters of my soul.[7]

Yet, The Vivisector is not dedicated to Dobell, but to Cynthia and Sydney Nolan. While the reasons for this are complicated and personal, the simplest explanation is that White's friendship with the Nolans was contemporaneous with the writing and publication of the novel. A more involved explanation, however, must include a recognition of Sydney Nolan's contribution to White's characterization of Duffield, in particular, his artistically inspired sensibilities. Although Dobell supplied the style, technique, and discipline that guaranteed Duffield's maturation as an artist of whom White could approve, Nolan's creative approach, in practice and in theory, advocated a spontaneous, grassroots apprehension and expression of experience. This expression bordered on an ontological imperative, with which White, in his own life and work, was familiar and sympathetic:

> In their break with tradition the Angry Penguins group had more in common with the Sydney abstract and semi-abstract painters, but were not prepared like

> them to submit their art to intellectual principles of formal construction.
>
> In the place of tradition the Angry Penguins painters laid the greatest emphasis upon vitality in art. All forms of training, they felt, were professionally inhibiting. Writing in 1944, Sydney Nolan remarked that "A painting is generally the result of an underground disturbance; when the disturbance is an almost biblical moving of the bowels one can only trace the convolutions by oblique means. And in the end as with most things, one backs a hunch."[8]

While acknowledging the superiority of intuition to intellection, White is fully aware that the intuitive sense must be aligned with an instinctive motivational vitality outside the parameters of the ego, of which the ego, naturally, is a part.

A prevalent danger is in perceiving this relation as a grandiose extension of the self, or a 'romantic' self-indulgence; rather than a negation of identity in an affirmation of divinity, or an ascetic bonding with the power and authority of the 'religious' absolute. It is my impression that White, in dedicating The Vivisector to Nolan - while paying tribute to Nolan's accomplishments - was subtly attempting to direct him away from the pitfalls of fame and fortune that were opening in his path, and guide him instead towards an image of the artist alone in the service of his God as vivisector and creator. The novel, then, does not address a concern for the artistic temperament conceived in a vacuum, but a concern for a real-

life affection exposed to the elements.

Clearly, White's depiction of the artist in the character of Hurtle Duffield is an arbitrary blend of attributes distilled from the personalities, the distinctive aesthetic perspectives, and the work, as well as the lives, of several painters that White had known. In this respect, Duffield is an idealization; but an idealization subjected to White's grueling spiritual standard for realism, a realism that must withstand the test of time, survive the acid test of brutal honesty. Evolving to artistic truth, the artist shapes himself, or feels himself to be reshaped. The artist does not spring fullgrown from the mind of God; nor Duffield, from the mind of White. He has his antecedents, both actual and literary (not simply imaginary).

Willy Standish, in The Living and the Dead, provides a starting point for the development of White's fictitious artist:

> It was not queer to have a child who painted passably in water-colour. It was queer to have a son who left the Army to become a painter. One patronized art, sometimes, one didn't produce it. (LD 32)

White, however, is obsessively concerned with those individuals who do produce 'art', whether as painter or writer. Consider the minor, almost ghostly, role of Lieselotte, in The Aunt's Story, and the cameo appearance of

Mr. Gage, in The Tree of Man; both characters serve as foils for White's compulsive longing to create, a longing with which he cannot come to terms in any form except the written word. It constitutes a tangible, if symbolic, proof of his ability to fashion something out of the void of the human mind, out of the fullness of human life. Regrettably, the act necessitates a betrayal of being. Self-expression leads to self-destruction. Artists are vivisected by the God of their creative natures:

> "Here," said Lieselotte, "is where I live principally. Here you will find my raison d'être."
>
> Theodora saw that they were in a large room, somewhere high, the light purified by an immensity of surrounding space, the walls pierced by the open windows of pictures. And now she was drawn to the many windows, and the world these contained, the hanging gardens flowering with miraculous questions, the glass pagoda from which her own soul looked out, flaming like a bird of paradise.
>
> "I shall not ask you whether you like my pictures," Lieselotte said. "Because there is no more embarrassing question. This is what I think."
>
> And she took a knife, and she smashed the glass pagoda with its flaming bird.
>
> "No!" cried Theodora, holding her hands to her head to protect it from the glass which did not fall. (AS 161-62)

Lieselotte, in shattering her picture window of "the glass pagoda with its flaming bird", a symbol of Theodora's soul - the shards of which are held in place by will and grace - is indirectly turning the knife inward on herself and her failure to lose herself in her art. So Mr. Gage, in his

external representation of the crucified Christ, separates himself from Christ, then hangs himself like Judas.

Rejecting the escapism and violence of suicide as a remedy to the creative spirit's painful sense of separation from creation, the artist strives to approach the work of art as an object of worship that is not an adoration of the self, but an adoration of something indeterminate, yet demanding, something that controls and consumes the self. In Riders in the Chariot, such a relationship is characterized by the dying Alf Dubbo's intimacy with his painting of Christ's crucifixion:

> Dubbo was unaware how many days he had been at work. The act itself destroyed the artificial divisions created both by time and habit. All the emotional whirlpools were waiting to swallow him down, in whorls of blue and crimson, through the long funnel of his most corrosive green, but he clung tenaciously to the structure of his picture, and in that way was saved from disaster. Once on emerging from behind the barricade of planes, the curtain of textures, he ventured to retouch the wounds of the dead Christ with the love that he had never dared express in life, and at once the blood was gushing from his own mouth, the wounds in the canvas were shining and palpitating with his own conviction. (RC 488)

The interdependence of the artist and his work of art is symbiotic in nature. It involves two separate existences converging on a point of mutual consensus that cannot be agreed upon or experienced until the artist and his work of art are transubstantiated. This creative union is

essentially a religious act expressed through suffering as love.

Traditional and romantic as it may appear, this mystical assumption is the bedrock underlying White's analysis of the artist's paradoxical emergence as both vivisector and creator in the character of Hurtle Duffield.

Hurtle Duffield

The selection of epigraphs that preludes The Vivisector provides the reader with a cryptic synopsis of Patrick White's beliefs as well as an indication, in a very loose sense, of his modus operandi. In the first epigraph, Ben Nicholson, a British abstract painter, maintains that "painting and religious experience are the same thing". This assertion should not be miscontrued to mean that painting is a substitute for the religious experience, but that it is an equivalent of the religious experience. To understand the novel in the context of White's intention, we must accept the creative act as a spiritual exercise, an act of worship that has its sights set on 'infinity'; in other words, on God. Nicholson's postulate that art is a medium of divine expression is followed by two stanzas from a poem (they compose the entire poem) by William Blake, entitled "The Divine Image". Blake implies that the nature of the divine must be perceived in strictly human terms and

apprehended by means of a ruthless artistry in which humanity is racked on its divinity and united with God through suffering. It is fitting that Saint Augustine should supply the third epigraph, which may be paraphrased as follows: the obstacle that lies insensitively in the path of our longing for divine union is our love (for we are 'they') of truth when it is impersonal, objective, distant, and our hatred of truth when it is personal, subjective, pertinent. Because the artist struggles to reveal the world of human nature in its clearest light, he finds himself detested, ostracized, and driven, like Rimbaud, into the desert of his knowledge. He becomes, by virtue of his truthfulness, "the great Accursed One".

From an early age, perhaps from birth, Hurtle Duffield is also accursed and set apart, much like frail hunch-back Rhoda Courtney at Sunningdale or the white crook-neck pullet in his parents' yard off Cox Street:

> "Why're the others pecking at it, Pa?"
> "Because they don't like the look of it. Because it's different." (VS 3)

Yet Hurtle is not distinguished by physical deformity, but by a highly intuitive intelligence and a precocious sense of self that bolsters the authority of the 'I'. This authority is amplified by the dominant, almost exclusive, first-person perspective that pervades chapter one; a perspective that invites the reader to identify with Hurtle's instinctual

knowledge of human nature and to accept the sophistication and credibility of the burgeoning artist's psychological eye.

In light of Hurtle's humble origins - despite a romantic and privileged ancestry symbolized by the story of his grandfather's death and the mysterious gold ring - he remains a riddle, a contradiction and exception to the rule of thumb that like begets like:

> There was so much of him that didn't belong to his family. He could see them watching him, wanting to ask him questions. Sometimes they did, and he answered, but the answers weren't the ones they wanted. They looked puzzled, even hurt. (VS 8)

This rift is widened by his natural ability to read and draw. Such an instinctive creativity increases the angle of departure from the character and expectations of the social class into which he has been born, but to which he does not belong.

Over and above his preoccupation and obsession with himself, his feelings, thoughts, and images, Hurtle is acutely sensitive to his surroundings, as well as the actions, motivations, and values of other human beings. Although it is somewhat premature to dub a six-year-old with the title of 'Vivisector', it is abundantly clear that his aptitude for detecting and dissecting, with the scalpel of the mind's eye, sensual impressions and emotional veracities is beginning to reveal itself:

> He loved the feel of a smooth stone, or to take a flower to pieces, to see what there was inside. He loved the pepper tree breaking into light, and the white hens rustling by moonlight in the black branches, and the sleepy sound of henshit dropping. He could do nothing about it, though. Not yet. He could only carry all of it in his head. Not talk about it. Because Mumma and Pa would not have understood. They talked about what was "right" and "honest", and the price of things, but people looked down at their plates if you said something was "beautiful." (VS 12)

Inquisitive and introspective, Hurtle is attracted and seduced by the numinous physical qualities of things. As a result, he develops an intensely vivid aesthetic life. Strange as it may seem, this rarefied sensibility burgeons in the midst of poverty and ignorance. For White, such a paradoxical relation is highly appropriate, even prerequisite to a truly meaningful existence. It precludes a reliance on anything except essentials. Knowledge, rooted in experience, sensation, instinct, stands in sharp contrast to the intellectual luxury and tyranny of the educated opinion; and, one might add, for the sake of controversy, the educated imagination.

The circumstances of Hurtle's impoverished upbringing - prior to Sunningdale - contribute to the mythology of the gifted child tormented by his intellectual, which must be equated with his creative, hunger. The only means available for self-expression, for conveying the cherished secret longings hoarded in his head, is "droring"

(VS 10). Language is illegitimate, for his mother and father, whom he loves and with whom he would like to communicate, are incapable of grasping the subtleties of the potentialities he senses in himself. His parents' conversation focuses instead on clichéd moral judgments and money issues, but never on a concept as remote and foreign as beauty, the thought of which embarrasses them because it eludes their natures and their lives.

The strongest link between the Duffield yard in Cox Street and Sunningdale - to which Hurtle is exposed by the Providence of his mother's washerwoman status and her self-sacrificing love - is "the pepper tree breaking into light" and the chandelier glittering in "a round, domed room":

> "Bet you never in yer life saw a chandelier," Lizzie proudly accused him.
> He didn't answer. He hadn't, of course. But as he stood underneath, looking up through the glass fruit and flickering of broken rainbow, he knew all about a chandelier, from perhaps dreaming of it, and only now recognizing his dream. (VS 18)

While the pepper tree is rooted in the earth and covered with henshit - perhaps the original inspiration from which Patricia Morley began to unravel her theme of "dreck"[9] - the crystal chandelier is attached to the ceiling of a room symbolic of the skull. What mesmerizes Hurtle is not simply the chandelier's beauty, but the realization that its sudden appearance is a dream-reality of almost his own making, a work of art possessing the power of illumination:

> He stood looking up through the chandelier, holding his face almost flat, for the light to trickle and collect on it. The glass fruit tinkled slightly, the whole forest swaying, because of a draught from an open window. (VS 24)

This animation recalls the pepper tree and Hurtle's vision of black branches and henshit dripping with the sensuality of light.

Because the pepper tree is an integral part of the landscape, which is, in accordance with White's ontology, synonymous with God - after all, God was in the bunya-bunya tree of White's own past - it is a greater mystery than the chandelier. And yet, the chandelier, although an artificial construct, bears a symmetrical affinity to the human body and by implication to the human mind:

> Nobody, not his family, not Mrs Courtney, only faintly himself, knew he had inside him his own chandelier. That was what made you at times jangle and want to explode into smithereens. (VS 43)

The chandelier becomes an approximation and idealization of Hurtle's physical and emotional relation to the landscape as seen from the branches of the pepper tree; similarly, the kataphatic concept, based on a theology of light, approximates and idealizes the apophatic experience, based on a theology of darkness:

> I...am droring a picture which will be a shandeleer with the wind through it when it is finished. I would like to draw everything I know. (VS 33)

The idealism of such an aspiration is doomed to failure by virtue of its partial success; for it is not possible to convey everything one knows. At times, one wonders if it is possible to convey anything at all. Consider, for example, Hurtle's depiction of death:

> "Death?" Miss Adams was frowning. "Looks like a kind of elephant to me. An elephant with hair instead of hide."
> "It is," he said. "An elephant in a lion's skin."
> "But Death? An elephant is such a gentle creature. Large, but gentle."
> "Not always it isn't," he corrected. "It can trample its keeper, without any warning, and rip with its tusks." (VS 32-33)

This drawing is a crystallization of Hurtle's fear, a representation of his response to the prospect of dying, a chimera which he has thrust between himself and the reality of death. Having substituted an image for what is imageless, he has created a semblance of truth that isolates the self in its existential struggle to escape its fate: "Mothers and fathers, whoever they were, really didn't matter: it was between you and Death or something" (VS 45).

Just as Hurtle has attempted to apprehend and objectify his inevitable death by forming a concept of it, so he has come to identify the unknown source of his inspiration and way of seeing with his picture of an "eye", which is perceived as a source of terror and described as "the Mad Eye" by those who do not understand its function and operation. Over this indelible "Mad Eye" on the wall of

the harness-room, Hurtle had drawn the chandelier, a symbol of his pristine consciousness. He "had never been able to rub it out, to make room for other things; it was still there, though grubbier" (VS 58). Internalized, like "the Mad Eye", the chandelier is now replaced by Hurtle's vision of a 'womb-exprience', inspired by the pain of separation:

> He was drawing Mumma's hollow body, with the new baby sprouting in it like one of the Chinese beans the Chow had given them at Christmas. Over all the chandelier. The Eye too: what Mumma called "the Mad Eye - it looks right through you." Aiming its arrows, the bow-shaped eye was at the same time the target, or bull's-eye. (VS 64)

Clearly, the artist's relationship with the unknown - whatever its nature - involves a reciprocal exchange of confidences.

Purchased, then adopted, by the Courtneys, Hurtle is ushered into a world of enormous wealth and opportunity as dictated by the crass materialistic values of the Australian upper class. Sunningdale is a montage of social graces and moral veneers in which the private lives and desires of its inhabitants are kept, like the sherry, under lock and key. In such a setting, it is natural that Hurtle's analytic, incisive imagination should continue exercising, in its search for real emotions, motivations, and meanings, an instinctive, brutal honesty. The day of his arrival, he compares Mrs. Courtney's mouth to "a pullet's arse the

moment before it drops the egg" (VS 69); while Rhoda's face recalls "the little quivering springs and things inside a clock he had once opened" (VS 71). Later, he fabricates a dream with which to embarrass and punish his deformed sister:

> "A dream," he said. "You had the head, the body, of the biggest ant. A white ant. The face was yours. Looking at me while it ate." (VS 80)

Hurtle's capacity for cruelity is exceeded only by his objective contemplation of the facts, untempered by humanity. The Shewcroft episode confirms this point:

> "Don't you believe in God, Mr Shewcroft?"
> "Good God!"
> Mr Shewcroft laughed. His face turned green. Then he grew very quiet. He got up and, walking on a curve, his curved body left the room: probably gone to the lavatory.
> Hurtle put in time drawing. It was a comfort to watch the drawing grow. Of the great eye. It wasn't Mr Shewcroft's eye; it wasn't his own: or perhaps it was his own, from looking at it so often in the glass. Anyway, there was the Eye. It might have started accusing him... (VS 84)

Precisely what "the Eye" is "accusing" Hurtle of is difficult to determine. Perhaps, it is his own disbelief in God or his judgment of Mr. Shewcroft, a judgment that drives the tormented man to suicide. Even more disconcerting is Hurtle's psychic intuition, almost Delphic knowledge, of the circumstances of Mr. Shewcroft's death, which he portrays on the canvas of his bedroom wall in bloodcurdling red and

black paint:

> Maman must have calmed down. "You knew, then," she said, "all the time - that Mr Shewcroft had taken his life."
> No, he only guessed - but because he knew. If she only knew, what he had painted on the wall was the least of what he knew. (VS 87)

This awareness is qualified by the callousness of his critical-artistic eye that identifies with the power and authority of the unknown:

> "I could do another," he said, "in another few days - a better one."
>
> He was still too exhausted by what had turned out to be, not a game of his own imagination, but a wrestling match with someone stronger; so he lay drowsily looking at the painting on the wall, particularly those places where he could see he had gone wrong. (VS 87)

In his all-consuming passion to execute a perfect likeness of the truth he feels infusing him, Hurtle subordinates the theme of his painting to technical considerations far removed from sentimentality or hysteria.

Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Courtney introduces her pet obsession; namely, "the prevention of vivisection":

> "I've heard the most hair-raising, heart-rending stories of animals being sacrificed to science - living animals cut up - in experiments."
> She was looking at him, or beyond him, or again, at him. (VS 89)

Mrs. Courtney's interest and concern develops into the central motif of the novel. By searching out the living principle, the mechanism or the 'isness', that coheres both

things and people, the artist is cast in the role of 'vivisector'. His inquiring nature endangers the complacent atmosphere of Sunningdale because it threatens to undermine and destroy the superficial illusion of social and emotional contentment. Like a shaman, Hurtle is initiated into the metaphor and mystery of the vivisector by a dream:

> He also had an actual dream which remained with him very vividly. The sheep Eldred killed was hanging on the post, as in life, except that in the dream he hadn't killed, only skinned it. Maman was there, dressed for dinner. She was wearing the spray of diamonds in her hair. She was crying horribly, while busy, too. As she pulled the guts out of the sheep, the heart bleated through the open wound; the blood shot over the tails of her sables: it clotted amongst the sapphires. Where is Rhoda, she kept on calling, I am looking for Rhoda she hurts me so. Maman by now was the colour of the skinned sheep, its beautiful cave of green and blue, her bloody lips opening like the heart itself. Help me Hurtle, she called. While he could only stare at the strange beauty of the scene. Crool crool cool and crool she began to shriek nasty little boy with eyes like knives. By the time she started pulling at the big cushiony bowel her lips had turned the colour of liver. I am your blood-mother I am only helping it to die to save it from the vivisector. Her white neck all freckled with blood. I know Hurturrl you would split my head open to see what there is inside. Her hair had parted wider than the parting and the skull was beginning to split. (VS 93)

Horrific as this nightmare vision is, it constitutes, for Hurtle, a visceral purging of his uncertainty with respect to himself and his ambition. It clears the air, as well as

the mind, for his boastful confession to Col Forster, an aspiring writer-jackeroo, that "I'm going to be a great painter" (VS 96); a claim that is supported in part by the planchette.

The Courtneys' trip abroad strengthens Hurtle's resolve to become an artist, as evidenced by his little painting of the river's mouth left "under the bed, amongst the fluff, against the slopping chamber pot" in a room in the hotel at St. Yves de Trégor "because it was too unsuccessful, or too private" (VS 115). While dampening his spirits, his adolescent self-consciousness concerning his talent has not curbed his vivisectionist appetite. Having unveiled and caught a voyeuristic glimpse of Rhoda at her morning toilette, he savours the image:

> ...he saw her very vividly: the ribs of her pale body beside the iron framework of the collapsible bidet, her naked face, and the tuft of pink in the shadow of her thighs. Courage was taking hold of him again. He began to try her out in his mind in several different attitudes and lights. Invaded by his vision of flesh, he forgot the botched estuary. (VS 116)

This proclivity is further highlighted by his attraction to a model of a disemboweled dog in a shop window on a London street; and by his mother's declamation against vivisectionists, a harangue that precipitates - in the name of human decency - their return to Australia.

Hurtle's growing self-absorption spawns a

solipsistic perception of reality, an egocentricity that discounts and denies the validity of anything except its own sensual awareness, supplemented and qualified by the authority of the mind's eye:

> At thirteen he had prayed sincerely, persistently, at times with passion: he begged to be allowed to witness some kind of miracle. By fourteen he had lost the faith you were supposed to have in prayer, just as he had lost control of his voice....He sat in church stroking his soft, silly shadow of moustache, not so much sulking at God as contemputous of all the kidding going on around him; till a fragmentation of light, or the illumination of a phrase, or some simple irrelevant image, a table, for instance, cropping up in his own mind, started him tingling electrically, afraid he might never be able to pin down his own insights, let alone convey them to others. (VS 126-27)

The anxiety arising from Hurtle's sense of impotence, an inability to communicate his innermost conviction, leads him to adopt an attitude that ignores, excludes, negates the relevance of other human beings, except as resource material. In this atmosphere of emotional indifference, intensified by a posture of calculated isolation, Mrs. Courtney sees her worst fears coming home to roost:

> "You can't prevent the slaughter," she said. "Men will always treat one another like animals."
>
> He was so drowsy he wasn't prepared for a real claw; when she said, looking at him: "You, Hurtle - you were born with a knife in your hand. No," she corrected herself, "in your eye."
>
> "What do you know about what I am?" (VS 129)

Although Mrs. Courtney has deciphered Hurtle's character, she knows very little about Hurtle's desperate desire to be an artist, and absolutely nothing about the complusive, inspired, tormented nature of the artistic temperament:

> "I'm an artist." He was, in fact, a thundering cart-horse.
> "Oh yes, yes! We know," she said, "and it's wonderful to have a satisfying hobby." (VS 137)

A classic case of adding insult to injury; Mrs. Courtney's patronizing condescension drives the wedge of incompatibility between herself and her son even deeper.

After his titillating tumble with Boo Hollingrake under the monstera deliciosa, Hurtle's self-identity becomes firmly rooted in his sexuality, a raw shapeless energy that seeks its ultimate expression and fulfillment in art:

> The thought that he might never be able to convey something that was his and nobody else's brought on such an intense despair he masturbated on the quilt, and was at once afraid they might find him out however hard he rubbed it with a towel. He wrote his name compulsively in margins, on the backs of drawing-blocks, once, guiltily, on a wall. Sometimes the name was Hurtle Courtney, sometimes more simply Duffield. He painted a painting in which the golden flesh of two bodies interlocked on a compost of leaves under a glittering rain of blood. (VS 140)

Even though Hurtle destroys this painting, he cannot eradicate the sensual/sexual desire that inspired it. Horrified by the hypocrisy and perversity of his mother's incestuous advances, he flees his home and country,

discarding the deceitful light of Sunningdale for the honest lust and carnal fires of Une Saison En Enfer.[10]

Embracing the poverty of his Duffield childhood, Hurtle wallows in a sensual vitality that is mated to a landscape as tangible, yet as inexplicable, as the pepper tree:

> In the mild, light-smeared night, eating this greasy food became a delicious orgy: himself drifting; rubbing up against the stone wall; staring. The slow sea and the long tongues of oily light made half the feast: the silence, too,... (VS 152)

In this meditative mood, encouraged by the silence and the darkness, Hurtle recalls the substance of the letters that punctuated his experience of the war: his mother's sentimental self-pity, resentment, and religious platitudes; his father's heartfelt love, understanding, and forgiveness; and Rhoda's sympathy, suffering, and kinship; none of which are able to reunite him with his past

> ...because total love must be resisted: it is overwhelming, like religion. He certainly wasn't religious: he was an artist. (VS 160)

Instead, he is left with the shrapnel of his memory, the gaping wound of his vision which contradicts the delusion that the artist is his own progenitor who functions in a solitude devoid of love or God:

> At the height of the bombardment he felt he only believed in life. At its

> most flickery, with the smell of death around it, life alone was knowable. His ghostliness yearned after its great tawny sprawling body. He found himself praying for survival: that he might reveal through the forms his spirit understood this physical life which now appeared only by glimpses, under gunfire, or in visionary bursts, by grace of melting Verey lights.
>
> Once after the shit had been frightened out of him, he tried to visualize God, but saw instead a patient black-polled bull giving at the knees, blood gushing from spongy muzzle as he went down under the axe. (VS 154)

When the self has been reduced to "shit" by terror, Hurtle attempts to conjure between his vulnerability and his mortality an image of God equivalent to a kataphatic shot in the dark. Yet, something of the apophatic nature of the divine has been apprehended, intuited, revealed in this vision of "a patient black-polled bull"; a symbol of the opacity, the density, and the concreteness of its being.

Hurtle's yearning "after [life's] great tawny sprawling body" is realized in the prostitute Nance Lightfoot, with whom he establishes a sort of working relationship. She personifies the sensuality of creation and serves as a muse, a source of inspiration for her lover's sexual and artistic self-gratification: "Ahhhh they were flooding together in cataracts of light and darkest deepest velvet" (VS 167). Couple this passion with the aesthetic mandate of Hurtle's egocentric eye:

> As she lolled looking at him from out of her tent of hair, her chalk-and-

> charcoal skin, her black lips, began yet another transformation. Shavings of golden light were crumbled on her breasts and thigh through the slats of the decrepit blind; little rosy flames began to live around the contours of her mouth, so that he was forced to get down on his knees beside her in his half-dressed, goose-pimpled state, to identify himself with what was at last a vision of his power: he didn't doubt he would translate the world into terms of his own. (VS 169)

The narcissism of this venture makes no allowances for Nance as a human being in need of love. Her existence is acknowledged only as a means to an end, a form to be internalized and rarefied until it becomes indigenous to Hurtle's visionary landscape:

> It seemed to him that he loved this woman he hardly knew as a person: at least he loved and needed her form. Whether he desired her sexually was a matter of how far art is dependent on sexuality. (VS 171)

Like William Blake's "The Tyger", Nance remains, in her instinctive sensual nature and expression, a mystery framed by the "immortal hand or eye"[11] of God; a hand and eye that Hurtle has mistaken for his own; a mystery which he has not solved, but in his vanity and ignorance helped to fashion. Yet gamboling in the tiger light of Nance's being is the sacrificial lamb of love:

> Suddenly she had got her mouth, or muzzle, into his ear: the words were propelled like bullets. "What your sort don't realize," she wasn't saying, she was firing into his brain, "is that other people exist. While you're all

> gummed up in the great art mystery, they're alive, and breakun their necks for love." (VS 178)

Unmoved by her appeal to his humanity, Hurtle continues to polish a hard, cool, clinical exterior, the self-image of a vivisector. His indifference to human life - specifically Nance's - except when it assists him in achieving the artistic effect he desires, is tantamount to murder. "Like all human vegetables, she was offering herself to the knife she only half suspected" (VS 180). Hurtle, however, is not oblivious to the moral implications of his attitude towards his model. Reprehensible though it may be, his exploitation of Nance's affection - in his mind's creative pursuit of her body's numinous echo - is justified by nothing but his love of art as self-reflection: "As they walked, swinging hands like any pair of lovers, he realized he was the prostitute: he was seducing Nance Lightfoot into giving him, not money, not her actual body so much as its formal vessel, from which to pour his visions of life" (VS 183). The fact remains the Nance has her own identity, an identity which Hurtle cannot love because he cannot transform it, in its entirety into a work of art; in other words, into a graven image of himself: "...what he wanted was not the common possessive pross he loved by needful spasms, but to shoot at an enormous naked canvas a whole radiant chandelier waiting in his mind and balls" (VS 187).

After painting his "Marriage of Light" - "for which

he had been preparing, or for which he might even have been prepared" (VS 189) - he sells the painting out from under Nance as if she had been superfluous to its composition.

Buying a piece of property in a ravine "up the line", Duffield enters his wilderness and begins to retreat even further into himself. In his ascetic withdrawal from the world of human relations, he is supported financially and encouraged creatively by Maurice Caldicott, his dealer. This period of trial by physical ordeal, in a brutal desert landscape, tempers Duffield's will and flesh until they meld with his surroundings:

> All those months at Ironstone his physical energies had been too thoroughly drained off by this building of his house and the difficulties of day-to-day existence. He decided to eat less, to avoid further calls on Caldicott and Nance. He lived off damper, dried beans, rice, lentils, and the woody swedes he grew himself in the thin soil of the ironstone escarpment. (VS 197)

Emerging out of his intimacy, almost communion, with the landscape's silence and dense incomprehensibility, a series of paintings on the theme of rock begin to evolve. The secret locked in them eludes Duffield

> Until a morning when his glittering cerebrations bred in him such a hopelessness he trod flat-footed across the boards, alone in his aching, powerless body, and began a version practically unrelated to those he had done already. The big, pink, cushiony

> forms suggested sleeping animals rather than the rocks of his mind: they neither crushed nor cut, but offered themselves trustfully to the one-eyed sun scattering down on them a shower of milky seed or light. (VS 206)

Duffield's struggle to prise out of the landscape of his mind an aesthetic truth succumbs, through the grace of revelation, to a spiritual truth - contained in the silence and darkness of rock, and conveyed as living rock - only when the self capitulates to love, which is the knowledge of God. This kataphatic expression of an apophatic experience reflects a brief arousal from what Thomas Merton and other Christian mystics have described as the "Night of Sense"; for the knowledge of the senses is the delusion of the self.

Painting his self-portrait, Duffield is forced to confront his ignorance, arrogance, and duplicity:

> He had never been altogether dishonest: nor yet entirely honest; because that isn't possible. Even saints kid themselves a bit. God or whatever couldn't have been entirely honest in creating the world.
>
> While working, he had to recognize that almost voluptuous love with which he carved his own cheek out of the paint, down to the board: his not convincingly ascetic cheek. The nick to the corner of his not quite honest but human - he hoped - watchful left eye produced the authentic shudder of love. (VS 213-14)

In attempting to create an impression, rather than produce a perfect likeness of himself, Duffield indulges in a sentimental rationalization of an inauthentic self, a self

that parodies the purity of God's creative will. No matter how often he reworks his point of view the portrait goes awry. Only Nance's visit and her tirade against the artist and his conception of "The Truth!" are capable of demolishing the pretense of objectivity and setting the record straight:

> Suddenly she grabbed the lamp, and the light, from being restricted and austere, blazed at the self-portrait which he was hoping she wouldn't notice, or intended to ignore. She had only been saving it up, it appeared. She made it look devilish: furtive, ingrown, all that he had persuaded himself it wasn't, and worse than anything else - bad, not morally, but aesthetically.
>
> "There," she said, holding her torch. "That's Duffield. Not bad. True. Lovun 'imself." (VS 225)

If Nance's judgment of Hurtle is harsh, Hurtle's judgment of himself, though merciless, is somewhat masochistic. By smearing his painting with human excrement, he attempts to humble and expunge the self, but only succeeds in reveling in the self's self-loathing. Humiliated and lying in one another's arms, Hurtle and Nance are momentarily united in their need for love. Hurtle, however, is too consumed with self-pity to understand Nance's need, her hunger for a symbol of his love: a ring of gold, a wedding ring.

Nance's suicide or accidental death, while searching for this symbol of union in the darkness of the ravine, shatters the solipsistic shell that Hurtle has constructed around himself at Ironstone:

> On arrival, he stalked round her, hoping something he had experienced before this encounter with the full stop of suffering might help him deal with it; but nothing in his life or art did. He got down at last beside her, on his knees, and laid his forehead on a rock, the corrugations of which didn't fit with his; as he hung there, sweating and trembling, groaning aloud for the inspiration withheld from him. (VS 229)

Defenceless and exposed to the crushing objective reality of human suffering, Hurtle is forced to recognize the chiaroscuro that his life has become. Neither his ascetic nor his aesthetic sleight of hand can protect him. Subsisting in the "Night of Sense", he is shut out from the landscape, his source of inspiration. In taking an axe to his self-portrait - which turns the blade - then flinging "the scarred monster" (VS 229) into the gorge where it drowns, is extinguished "in total silence" (VS 230), Hurtle enters the "Night of the Soul" to begin the ascent to truth and God.

The confessional nature of the Cutbush interlude, which takes place many years later, after Duffield has become a successful painter and is living in Flint Street, attests to Hurtle's change of heart:

> "Do you believe in God, Mr Cutbush?"
>
> "In the Divine Vivisector!"
>
> "I believe in Him - I think," his companion [Hurtle] was saying.

> "Yes, I believe in Him," the stranger [Hurtle] repeated. "Otherwise, how would men come by their cruelty - and their brilliance?" (VS 235-36)

Clearly, Hurtle's concept of God has begun to play a key role in the way he thinks about the world, specifically in terms of his relation to his fellowman. Consider the belated affection he feels and the compassionate understanding he has for Maurice Caldicott's misconstrued support:

> "He was my agent - and friend - a dealer who took me up, and stuck to me - for the wrong reason, I found out."
> "What reason?" asked the grocer, though facts interested him more than motives.
> "He was in love with me."
> "What - a man?"
> "Why not? He was a human being, and human beings aren't allowed to choose what they shall love: woman, man, cat - or God." (VS 237)

This realization, almost revelation, sets the tone for the rest of the novel, a tone as tender and cruel as "Lantana Lovers Under Moonfire".

In his studio off Chubb's Lane, working under the auspices of a single electric bulb, Hurtle Duffield has "become part of the landscape, like the iron railings and the gas meters" (VS 241), part of a neighbourhood whose inhabitants have come to regard him as "the Artist". Relatively well-off, he can afford the luxury of pampering his reclusive nature. His solitude, however, is encroached

upon by Olivia Davenport's return to Sydney; a patron who turns out to be both the Mrs. Lopez of his Ironstone years and the Boo Hollingrake of his youth. Their relationship revolves around his paintings and a potential sexual involvement:

> She was exposing herself completely. Here was another one, he saw, offering her throat to be cut, but by a more tortuous, a more jagged knife. Well, he wouldn't accept the invitation to a second murder. (VS 256)

Having previewed a "Pythoness at Tripod" - Hurtle's drawing of "his sister Rhoda Courtney standing beside the bidet on its iron tripod in the hotel bedroom at St. Yves de Trégor" - Olivia has no desire to become a work of art; instead, she provides a surrogate in the person of Hero Pavloussi.

While Hurtle moves at will, or as creative necessity demands, from "God the Vivisector" to "God the Artist" to "God", and although "it didn't disturb him not to know what he believed in - beyond his own powers, the unalterable landscape of childhood, and the revelations of light" (VS 279), his aesthetic eye is motivated less by the sensual than the spiritual; or, more precisely, the sensual to the extent that it conveys the spiritual.

In Hero Pavloussi, Hurtle believes that he has discovered a living work of art as flawless in its poise, simplicity, and honesty of gesture as the crystal bird centrepiece on Olivia Davenport's dining-room table:

> In his aesthetic desires and their consummation he believed himself to be honest; and in his desire to worship and be renewed by someone else's simplicity of spirit, he was not forsaking the pursuit of truth. So he was falling in love with Hero Pavloussi. (VS 293)

Apotheosized by Hurtle into "the pure soul" he can admire - imagining her to possess the grace capable of securing the illusion of his "fluctuating faith" (VS 295) - Hero's sanctity is gradually dispelled. In her sexual proclivities, she is even more perverse than Nance Lightfoot for whom sex was either work or love. Unfaithful to her husband in bed, Hero rationalizes his decision to drown a bag of cats by attempting to place the responsibility for evil squarely in the lap of God:

> "Who is cruel? Greeks? Turks? Man is cruel!" she shouted back. "God - God is cruel! We are his bagful of cats, aren't we? When God is no longer cruel many questions will be answered."
>
> "What I do believe in," she cried, "is my husband's goodness, because I have experienced it. You will not believe in it because of the bagful of cats. He loved the cats - which he killed. Yes, he killed them. Why do we kill what we love? Perhaps it is because it becomes too much for us - simply for that reason."
>
> "You could have saved the cats." (VS 320)

Hurtle's rejoinder underscores this blasphemy by emphasizing Hero's moral freedom. Yet, his portrayal of the Divine Destroyer, modelled on her husband, in a painting entitled, "Infinity of Cats", compels her to trivialize the truth:

"You are so wrong, so perverse, to pick on this one deed of my darling Cosma, and pump it up into a big moral issue and theme of art" (VS 326). This devotion to a twisted, sick idealism, a devotion that refuses to face the facts of man's depravity, reveals, for Hurtle, "the illusion she had hoped to nourish", as well as "his own stillborn idea of the pure soul" (VS 322). It is understandable, in light of this disillusionment, that he should be exhausted by the game he has been playing with this woman; that he should want to slip back into his monkish habits, his celibate, artistic quest for God:

> So far he had conceived in paint no more than fragments of a whole. If he were only free of women who wished to hold somebody else responsible for their self-destruction; more difficult still: if he could ignore the tremors of his own balls, then he might reach his resisted objective, whether through mottled sausage skins, or golden chrysalides and splinters of multi-coloured glass perhaps purposefully strewn on a tessellated floor, or the human face drained to its dregs, or the many mirrors in which his sister Rhoda was reflected, or all all of these and more fused in one - not to be avoided - vision of God. (VS 336)

Persuaded by his remaining affection for Hero and her naive, sentimental longing for the miraculous, he makes a pilgrimage to Greece. Arriving in Perialos, they spend the night at a convent-like bordello; and then, the next morning, climb the mountain to the House of God, only to find the custodian, a hermit by the name of Theodosius, away

on business and "a subsiding mound of human excrement beside the altar" (VS 355). The shock of having her spiritual expectations, hopes, and ideals dashed, reduced to offal, unhinges Hero:

> "Dreck! Dreck! The Germans express it best. Well, I will learn to live with such Dreck as I am: to find a reason and purpose in this Dreck." (VS 357)

Acquainted with this aspect of the divine, Hurtle simply consoles himself by savouring a commonplace revelation of grace: "The golden hen flashed her wings: not in flight; she remained consecrated to this earth even while scurrying through illuminated dust" (VS 358)

Hurtle's chance meeting with Mothersole like his chance meeting with Cutbush, twenty-five years earlier, is also confessional, almost conspiratorial in terms of its implied, yet strained humanity. Their exchange of confidences updates the reader concerning events in Hurtle's life. The fact of Hero's death is casually unearthed and examined from a great distance with an objective vivisector's eye:

> "I took it for granted I'd killed her, because her husband wrote me a letter telling me straight out that I had."
>
> "For a time I accepted my guilt: even though I kept telling myself she had used me as an instrument of self-torture. She was a very beautiful woman when she was least unhinged; but

> depravity could make her coarse, brutal. She was the most depraved woman I've ever met. It seemed she had to degrade herself for being unworthy of her husband-God - a rich old satrap, who drowned cats by the sackful - like other gods when they tire of them."
>
> "Well, he succeeded in making me believe I was the cause of his wife's death. I couldn't paint for several weeks." (VS 366-67)

Absolved of Hero's death by cancer, an act of Providence conjoined with a Godless will, Hurtle comes full circle, returning inevitably to his raison d'être and the problem of his contemplative, creative opacity. Obsessed with the 'isness' of things, he has endeavoured to approach and apprehend the nature of divinity in the substance of reality:

> "What sort of things do you paint?" he asked.
> "Well! For some time now, tables and chairs."
> "A funny sort of subject, if you don't mind my saying so."
> "Why? What could be more honest? I'm not talking about the gimcrack: there's dishonest furniture, just as there are dishonest human beings. But take an honest-to-God kitchen table, a kitchen chair. What could be more real? I've had immense difficulty reaching the core of that reality, in I don't know how many attempts, but think I may have done it at last - or thought so until this morning: when everything died on me." (VS 368)

This admission, tinged with self-pity, sets the stage for a mystical love trinity composed of Hurtle, Rhoda, and Kathy Volkov.

Out of the hollowness of Hero's death and a vision of her cancer-riddled womb, Hurtle longs to reproduce the best part of himself, to fashion a child after his own heart; yet, he fathers nothing but his stillborn hopes. The appearance of Kathy Volkov, a musically gifted adolescent nymphet, inspires a painting of a "Flowering Rosebush" with a child's face at the centre, as well as a drawing "of a cool, naked, fairly naturalistic, though sexless girl" (VS 388). It is this drawing which quickens Kathy's sexual desire, a mutual desire that grows until, at a later date, Hurtle gives birth to his idealized spiritual offspring during an act of fellatio.

Concomitant with Kathy presenting a kitten to Hurtle is the atavistic reemergence of the "ageless" Rhoda, the cat-woman whose purpose in life consists of feeding stray cats, another symbol for suffering humanity. Just as Hurtle accepts the kitten, so he invites the all-but-destitute Rhoda to share his home. Apologizing because his dwelling is not up to "Courtney standards", Hurtle begins to malign their common history; to which Rhoda responds, "but I'm glad to have lived some of my life under a chandelier!" (VS 402). Over time, this chandelier has been condensed into the bare electric bulb that illuminates both Rhoda's fear that she "might be vivisected afresh, in the name of truth - or art" (VS 406), and, almost simultaneously, her buried, but not

forgotten memory of what transpired, years ago, at St. Yves de Trégor:

> The painting at which Rhoda was now staring so painfully was an early "Pythoness": judging by the naturalistic treatment, probably one of the first. His own horror at their finding themselves in the present situation couldn't prevent him from experiencing a twinge of appreciation for his forgotten achievement: the thin, transparent arm; the sponge as organic as the human claw clutching it; the delicate but indestructible architecture of the tripod-bidet, beside which the rosy figure was stood up for eternity.
>
> This aesthetic orgasm lasted what seemed only a long second before the moral sponge was squeezed: its icy judgement was trickling in actual sweat down his petrified ribs.
>
> He heard Rhoda's voice. "I was born vivisected. I couldn't bear to be strapped to the table again."
>
> "I can't help it," he apologized, "if I turned out to be an artist." (VS 406-07)

This lame duck excuse is unconvincing, most of all for Hurtle, who has learned by trial and error that vivisection is not art; that it does not possess art's power of synthesis; that it cannot create because it cannot cohere.

Despite their differences in age, the parallels between Rhoda and Kathy Volkov are striking. First, they are acquainted with one another, almost friends. Second, they share a passion for music, as distinct from painting. And third, they have discovered, in Hurtle, an emotional vested interest; and vice versa. Without deflating them as living characters and inflating them as figments of Hurtle's

imagination, I would contend that Kathy Volkov functions, in part, as Rhoda's alter ego:

> The two voices laughed together intermittently, their laughter strangely similar in tone. Surely Kathy could only be imitating Rhoda?
> Lying on the bed, in the ever more deeply burnished light, he must have looked an inanimate lump of grey; though his mind, fidgeting through possibilities, didn't allow him any rest. Would Rhoda's friendship with Kathy lessen the chances of his destruction? Would it, on the other hand, destroy what he hoped to create from Kathy? (VS 423)

The tone of moral censure implied by Rhoda's presence, combined with Hurtle's lust for an aesthetic ideal perceived in Kathy Volkov, inspires two separate, but parallel, yet converging paths of intimacy and love, which find their expression through art:

> Of course it was a miserable refuge, too - oh God, yes, when he cared to admit it: he was an old man, turning his back and distorting truth to get at an effect, which he did, he knew, better than anybody else - well, almost anybody. But there were the days when he himself was operated on, half drunk sometimes, shitting himself with agony, when out of the tortures of knife and mind he was suddenly carried, without choice, on the wings of his exhaustion, to the point of intellectual and - dare he begin to say it? - spiritual self-justification. (VS 430)

Like "Girl at Piano", who "had discovered in herself that extra sense which is the source of all creative strength" (VS 461), Hurtle, too, feels infused with being,

experiences himself as a part of God's great life's work, as an extension of God 'The Father's' hand "dangling" like "a grimy calico bagful of uncut opals" (VS 485) waiting to be polished into 'light'. It is such a fusion of sensibilities - a fusion which cannot be analysed or vivisected without losing its vital force - that exposes Hurtle's breast to Rhoda's scathing barb: "Don't tell me you're a mystic!" (VS 473). Yet, a mystic is precisely what Hurtle has become. In reality, his art is simply a subterfuge, by which I mean, an exercise for disciplining his spiritual will.

After suffering a stroke, a lesson in humility which leaves him partially paralysed, Hurtle, in his devotion to art - a metaphor for God - is reduced to pure essential purpose. While the stroke sustains the theme of vivisection inherent in the human condition, it helps to reconcile the opposites of life and death by inspiring the redemptive act of creation, which is conceived with the power and conviction of revelation. Rhoda best renders this dynamic in layman's terms:

> I don't believe artists know half the time what they're creating. Oh yes, all the tralala, the technique - that's another matter. But like ordinary people who get out of bed, wash their faces, comb their hair, cut the tops off their boiled eggs, they don't act, they're instruments which are played on, or vessels which are filled - in many cases only with longing. (VS 523)

Within the confines of his kataphatic, conceptual

limitations, Hurtle's longing finds expression, if not completion, in a painting called, "The Whole of Life". It bears witness to his attempt to apprehend in paint the divine imageless visage of God implicit in the apophatic experience of light emerging out of darkness. During the course of a second, fatal stroke, Hurtle's parting perception of Rhoda as a "Rose", a symbol of love and beauty, bonds with the "Too tired too end-less obvi indi-ggoddd" (VS 567) in a moment of truth, a Christ-like union of humanity and divinity.

The Art of Life

In judging the success or failure of a work of literature, the reader, who is by instinct a critic, is forced to consider the extent to which a work of art convinces him or her of its reality; a reality which is ultimately based on one's perception and experience of life, not merely the subtleties of language. Although it is true that people see, interpret, and value different things in different ways, there does exist, if not an overriding consensus of opinion about the character of creation, at least, an underlying consensus about our being in the midst of it. We are, therefore, obliged to interact with other natures, wills that share the basic need - distinct from definition - for love and faith.

Through his writings, Patrick White has striven to expose the emotional and spiritual lives of human beings who find themselves inhabiting a dense and incomprehensible landscape, a landscape which is rendered accessible, and intelligible, only when the mind is infused with an apophatic sense of self-knowledge immersed in the knowledge of God. The Vivisector is no exception to this rule, an essentially religious rule that has grown out of White's own "fundamental religious instinct" qualified by a deeply felt humanity. While the novel has met with mixed reactions, both sympathetic and caustic, I cannot help admiring the moral purity and aesthetic honesty that inspired White's intention. If his achievement has fallen somewhat short of the mark in terms of credibility or execution, it is hardly surprising, considering that he chose the most demanding of themes and subjects, and placed them within the context of the absolute religious experience. For the atrophied, contemporary 'soul' - a concept no longer in vogue, disparaged, gutted by intellectual vivisectionists who fear the intuitive conviction of the rarefied sensibility - the importance of this novel, like the mass of White's canon, rests in its capacity to revitalize our spiritual longing hibernating in the mud of our sensual existence.

Yet, from the fictional portrayal of Hurtle Duffield's life, one lesson still remains to be committed to memory, to be taken to heart. This lesson is best expressed

by John Rothenstein in his description of Wyndham Lewis, a description which applies just as readily to Patrick White: "He believes in the face of the prevailing adulation of the specialist mind of the scientist, and has declared it throughout his writings, that the independent critical mind is still the supreme instrument of research."[12]

Notes

[1] Richard N. Coe, "The Artist and the Grocer: Patrick White's The Vivisector", Meanjin Quarterly 29 (December 1970): 526-29.

[2] Terry Smith, "A Portrait of the Artist in Patrick White's The Vivisector", Meanjin Quarterly 31 (June 1972): 168-69.

[3] John Rothenstein, Modern English Painters (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1957) 488.

[4] John Hetherington, Australian Painters (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1964) 81.

[5] Bernard Smith, Australian Painting (London: Oxford University Press, 1962) 263.

[6] Smith 264.

[7] W. B. Yeats, The Poems: A New Edition, ed. Richard J. Finneran (London: Macmillan, 1984) 193, 17-20.

[8] Smith 276-77.

[9] Patricia A. Morley, The Mystery of Unity (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1972) 209-32.

[10] Arthur Rimbaud, Une Saison En Enfer, trans. Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1961) 1-47.

[11] William Blake, Poems and Prophecies, ed. Max Plowman (London: Dent, 1970) 28.

[12] Rothenstein 255.

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