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MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE IN PATRICK WHITE'S RIDERS IN THE CHARIOT

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Patrick White, Novel Prize laureate, is one of the most influential writers in Australia. His life follows a typical pattern of Australian intellectuals in the last century. Born to an affluent, anglophile family in 1912, he is mainly educated in England, where he is despised as a colonial boy. He started his writing career in London, but decided to return to Australia for life after World War II, yearning after the scenes of childhood. Having two cultural heritages in himself, he is always conscious of the position of Australia as an adopted country in the light of European colonial history.

Indeed, White is as much a European writer, who devoted himself to writing about Australia by European standards. His cultural plurality is taken over by some of his characters. As a writer, he criticized the affectation and complacency of Australians with piercing irony, whereas he praised seeker-visionaries, who are mostly social outcasts or eccentrics. This treatment, along with his symbolic style, may partly explain why he won his reputation overseas first. He died in 1990, leaving twelve novels, two collections of short stories and several plays. Representing an artist in society has been a preoccupation for White. In fact, many characters in his novels can be regarded as artists to various degrees due to their unique inquiring minds and visionary qualities. One can better understand the works of White by locating them in the context of modernist movements in Australian art.

The appearance of *Riders in the Chariot* in 1961 seemed to divide White's critics into two implacably opposed camps. To those who all the long had rejected his style of writing, his treatment of Australia and Australians, and his predilection for mystical remoteness, the latest novel proved simply impossible to read; to his admirers it represented a new peak of achievement and is so stunning in its impact on one critic as to make any sort of critical appraisal redundant: "It seems to me that it is even above the level of art, and penetrates into what is now the almost inaccessible realm of mystical experience" (30) says Marcel Aurousseau in "Odi Profanum Vulgus: Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot*." It is, of course, strongly evident that from *The Aunt's Story* onwards White is primarily concerned with the possibility of a mystical union above physical reality and yet immanent in all its manifestations. In the earlier novels, however, the primary condition, for attaining transcendence is the retreat of the soul further and further into itself and away from the contingencies of the outer world. Here is obliquely stated White's own relation to the mystical centre of the novel, and his justification for choosing such a centre. The logic behind his choice is not that of carefully contrived relationships and parallels - *Riders in the Chariot* is too diffuse to be an allegory.

In *Riders in the Chariot* the major symbols seem to be sometimes arbitrarily imposed, and in this respect at least the novel is unusual in the present time - little attempt is made to explain the Chariot, the Fiery Furnace, the sparks of the Shechinah, the Crucifixion, and the other derived symbols, in terms which bind them indissolubly to the characters and action of the novel.

White's method of ensuring that the mystical reality expressed by the symbols is in no way diminished by the exigencies of character and plot, results in a certain detachment of the symbols, and gives rise to the criticism that they have no real grounding in the novel. But only if the Chariot, for instance, is regarded as important in itself, does the coming together of four visionaries, all of whom have had direct experience of it, seem a manipulated coincidence on the part of the author. The validity of the symbols themselves depends not on the action of the novel, but on the nature of the vision they convey, and as an awareness of this vision is built up in the reader's mind, the importance of the symbolic form in itself diminishes, and the light of the central vision reflects back through the forms to illuminate all the incidents of the novel.

White has chosen Jewish mysticism as the vehicle for his vision, not through any desire to be deliberately abstruse, but because here he has found a formalization and imagery whose total impact is intended for the senses rather than the intellect. Such an incident as Miss Hare's first vision of the Chariot becomes immediately significant because of the sensuous power with which it is described, a power White no doubt found present in his original sources, and which is familiar already to most people through the Old Testament. The symbols of *Riders in the Chariot*, then, derived from varying sources, refer always to the central mystical vision which informs every aspect of this extremely complex novel.

The complexity of *Riders in the Chariot* may be explained first in purely structural terms. Four main characters, the four "riders," dominate the book; in addition to these there are at least forty other characters who are given a great deal of attention. The time span for the actual events of the novel is comparatively short, but over half the book is taken up with the

life stories of Miss. Hare, Himmelfarb, Mrs. Godbold and Alf Dubbo, and the settings for these long flashbacks vary from East Anglia and Central Europe to Israel and northern New South Wales. From the start, little attempt is made by White to impose some hierarchy of order on this crowded canvas. Backwaters and byways are meticulously charted, there are numerous digressions, descriptions and details, and often, it seems as if the hand of the author has found wearisome the task of keeping everything under control.

Yet the figure in the carpet does emerge. The novel is, in effect, a vast dialogue between, good and evil. The dialectic which is sustained throughout is as firmly controlled as the Voss-Laura dialectic in *Voss*. The result in *Riders in the Chariot* is an intensification of social criticism to a point where the delineation of society becomes a far-reaching examination of the principles of good and evil. In a letter quoted by Geoffrey Button in *Australian Writers and their Work: Patrick White,* White says of *Riders in the Chariot*:

> There is certainly bitter comedy or satire running all through it, for it is about contemporary Australia. But it is too big and rambling to support the term 'comedy'; that suggests to me something compact and complete in itself.(10)

White must force his reader to acknowledge the reality of evil in a society which is collectively unable to do so. Only with this realization can the reader become involved in the opening out process which follows the exposure; only when the pervasiveness of evil is recognized will the story of the Jew, Himmelfarb, take on its proper significance.

In *Riders in the Chariot* the power for evil which results in the crucifixion of Himmelfarb emanates from an unlikely source - two suburban matrons, who present a picture at once comic, grotesque and terrifying. White unashamedly brings all his nastiness to bear in his depiction of Mrs. Flack and Mrs. Jolley - two fat furies who cast their spells from behind pastel Venetians. Between them they embody all the malice of the world, disguised beneath cups of tea, eiderdowns and the sentiments of motherhood. Their sights are set on Xanadu, the crumbling folly in which Miss Hare has lived since childhood and on all the people who at one time or another congregate there. Xanadu is set on a hill opposite Sarsaparilla, while the valley between is occupied by Himmelfarb and Mrs. Godbold. The aboriginal Alf Dubbo has no fixed address.

The geographical distribution of characters is of considerable importance to the novel, but for the moment it is sufficient to realize that a battle between forces of good and evil is being drawn up, and that Mrs. Jolley's foray, introduced in the first pages of the novel, into the territory of Miss. Hare at Xanadu, represents the first actual engagement. Stated thus baldly, the conflict might seem to partake of all the elements of crude melodrama, until it is discovered that the lines of demarcation are not at all as clear as they seem.

Failure to recognize this fact that White is not dealing with moral absolutes will lead to misinterpretation from the start: There is no character in *Riders in the Chariot* who is not faced at some time with his or her own guilt. Refusal by the individual to accept this guilt, or his attempt to transfer it to others equally incapable of accepting it, might be said to lead to ultimate damnation, were it not for the fact that the life of this individual is already a hell to be endured: by rejecting the possibility of evil in himself, he also rejects the possibility of good, and for this he pays dearly. The interdependence of good and evil is a theme that has been touched on before by White, but here it is of particular importance in an adequate explanation of the symbol of the Chariot. More immediately related to the principles of good-and-evil, however, and serving to lead up to the Chariot, is the image of the Shechinah, the indwelling of the godhead in the physical world. In "The Alienated Australian Intellectual," Jack Lindsay states that,

> In *Riders in the Chariot* White tries to overcome the rather crushing monotony of a vision of mere alienation by adding as sympathetic characters the few who by totally and voluntarily contracting out of a corrupted world achieve the vision of wholeness, of union with universal life . He comes closer here to communicating a genuine horror and to defining the existence of pure wells of feeling amid the socially demented scene; but the inability to deal with more than the hopelessly isolated individual deadens the impact. (57).

In many ways a development of Theodora Goodman, Miss. Hare, the most striking and brilliantly executed character in the novel, is the focal point of the first hundred pages. At the beginning of the story she is an epileptic living alone in the crumbling mansion, Xanadu, built by her father, an eccentric visionary who knew well the caverns measureless to man, and who never forgave his daughter for perceiving this knowledge. In many ways diametrically opposed to Miss. Hare is the figure of Mordecai Himmelfarb, who, burdened with the failure of intellect and the weight of guilt, represents an attempt on White's part to come to terms with the particular tragedy of the twentieth century. Unlike Miss Hare, who, as a thing of nature, is scarcely responsible for her own actions, and whose subtle changes and modulations are those of the natural world,

Himmelfarb the Jew is victim of his own consciousness. This emphasis on isolation from other individuals and from any shared body of thought fulfilled White's need to examine in its uttermost depths the mystery of the self.

In *Riders in the Chariot* Alf Dubbo grapples with the same problem of somehow representing in plastic form the common mystery of the four Riders. His own individual existence is of no consequence; it can be made significant only in so far as it can be translated into the forms of art. White's obvious concern with the nature and function of the artist receives its fullest expression in the depiction of the aboriginal half-caste, the fourth Rider, and the fourth and unrecognized figure in the Fiery Furnace, which is made the subject of one of his paintings.

As in the other three Riders, it is Dubbo's goal to break through to "the sparks of light imprisoned in the forms of wood and stone" (147). But the aboriginal must first translate his experience into other forms, the forms of painting. His function is analogous to White's own function as artist -the rendering of experience in the forms of words; but just as words themselves can imprison if the symbols and images they contain are not liberated from the page to assume their own independent reality, so must Dubbo break through the reality of pigment and created shapes to the reality of the expressed idea, which will then inform the whole, much as the idea of union expressed in the Chariot informs and contains all aspects of the novel.

In thus embodying his conception of the artist's function in a character in the novel, White runs the risk of explaining what is already implicit by virtue of the novel itself as a work of art. Not that Dubbo is in any way a mere cipher - he is as intensely realized as any of the other major characters. But in describing in detail the paintings themselves, White fails where others have failed before him, that is, in attempting to convey in a literal equivalent what is conceived and executed in another art form - a form which imposes its own laws and its own reality. Whether or not Dubbo is - a great, or even a good, artist, is beside the point; the result, however, of all this literal attention to the paintings themselves is to rob them of any real significance and divert the reader's attention from Dubbo himself. But this failed attempt at an impossible realization does not affect the importance of Dubbo as artist in the total pattern of the novel.

Thus is the detail made clear, the human reality shaped and controlled by the hand of the artist. Thus also, at the end of his last novel to date, White asserts a union arising from and overcoming a world of discord, chaos and horror; but the ultimate nature and purpose of this union constitutes a mystery. It is true that no artist is required to solve the problems he poses in his art, but in White's case the only final resolution must always entail more than can be encompassed by words. The reality beyond the forms must be recreated in the mind of the reader.

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